

FRIDLEY'S Best-KEPT Secret { Banfill-Locke CENTER for the ARTS }

The Walker Art Center has the Sculpture Garden and Loring Park just across Siah Armajani's Friendship Bridge—but also all those lanes of traffic. The Weisman Art Museum has the mighty Mississippi at its doorstep and a grand view of the Minneapolis skyline—but also the Washington Avenue Bridge and an off-ramp that wraps the building. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts has an Olmsted-designed park across the street—but it's tightly clustered with the Children's Theatre and the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. The Minnesota Museum of American Art used to overlook Rice Park, the best exterior public space in the Twin Cities—but in the absence of a skyway, the second floor is not the best place to be, and the Minnesota Museum moved.

The Banfill-Locke Center for the Arts in Fridley might well have the loveliest site of any Twin Cities arts institution—but have you ever been there? Ever heard of it? If you answered “No,” that would be no surprise.



photo by Suzie Hartley



photo by
Suzie Hartley

“People come in all the time who say, ‘I don’t know how many times I’ve driven right by this place, and I didn’t even know you were here,’” says Lia Rivamonte, executive director of Banfill-Locke. And she was talking about the locals.

It’s not hard to understand why. The arts center sits along a distinctly unpicturesque stretch of East River Road dominated by factories in the dull warehouse style, and nondescript apartments and ranch homes. Yet just off the road stands Banfill-Locke’s Greek Revival building with its bright white siding and shake roof. The spot is beautiful: the structure perches on one edge of Manomin Park, run by the Anoka County Recreation and Parks Board. A short walk along Rice Creek in one direction takes visitors past a picnic area, under the River Road to Locke Lake, ringed by large homes, and in the other direction through some magnificent woods to an attractive section of the Mississippi River.

A rich history draws a devoted membership

The building is on the National Register of Historic Places. Built in 1847 by John Banfill, the first state auditor, it served as an inn and tavern to accommodate soldiers and fur traders moving along the Red River Trail. Over the years it was a post office, a general store, and a community center. In 1912, the Locke family bought it and it became a dairy farm and summer home until the 1950s. The property was also used as a scout camp before being purchased in 1967 by Anoka County and turned into Manomin Park.

The site has history, and so does the arts organization that calls it home. Now in its 25th year, what was originally the North Suburban Center for the Arts started out in a basement space in Apache Plaza, the St. Anthony shopping center that was recently razed. The organization has survived because of a small nucleus of devoted members and a program of activities serving the entire northern tier of suburbs, where arts programs are rare.

The older generation of Fridley residents, the first suburbanites, are now seniors. With changing demographics and lifestyles, however, the audience for arts programs is expanding, whether that means children exploring new realms of self-expression, seniors searching for an engaging activity, or professionals looking for a creative outlet. Also, ethnic diversity has arrived in Fridley, and Banfill-Locke is beginning to address it. The arts center recently hosted an exhibition of work by African immigrants and an Asian-American Renaissance group show.

A city council member sits on the Banfill-Locke's board, and the mayor is supportive. Yet in Fridley art funding is neither a priority nor a tradition. Anoka County provides the center with \$40,000 per year, some of which funds the director's position, and the Parks and Recreation Department helps maintain the building and grounds. At Banfill-Locke, Rivamonte leads but volunteerism rules, as with "The Dirty Dozen," an enthusiastic group of garden volunteers who help maintain the splendid flower beds around the building.

Minimal funding, maximum commitment

With the slogan "A place to celebrate history, nature, and the arts," Banfill-Locke sponsors about 10 exhibitions a year. They include annual group shows featuring work by members and by children, as well as exhibitions by area artists such as one devoted to the photographs of Michael and Abigail Mouw and another that presented digital drawings by Bill Gorcica.

The program is modest in scope but produces a high level of concentrated activity, a testimony to what can be done with minimal funding but maximum commitment. Writers, musicians, and visual artists get together regularly in classes, readings, and groups, such as a figural drawing co-operative that has met for decades. Unlike most museums or galleries, the center stocks not only gifts and artworks in its small shop but also art supplies. An artist-in-residence program provides studio space to a writer and a visual artist for 12- to 18-month periods, concluding with a public reading and an exhibition. Artists are expected to be active with the board and the artistic community in addition to creating their own work. There are no plans to revive the tavern or add a Wolfgang Puck café; Banfill-Locke's next goal is a modest outbuilding for a pottery kiln.



photo courtesy of Banfill-Locke



Photo by Suzi Hartley

On a September midweek day, I was alone in the galleries and spotted only one other in the park. A few days later, on a glorious Saturday with the leaves just starting to turn, the "Art at Rice Creek" festival filled the house and grounds with people and

special attractions: storytelling, arts and crafts sales booths, readings, musical performances, artists setting up easels and painting. Inside, the galleries featured an

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exhibition of Craig Blacklock's North Shore photographs. For a raffle fundraiser, three volunteers created a quilt titled "Manomin Park" that presented a map of the area, complete with small representations of the center and a large silhouette of a heron, a frequent sight along Rice Creek.

The art festival is the high point of the Banfill-Locke program year, offering a demonstration of what the place can be—a true community center and a model of art at the grassroots level with a lively, welcoming spirit. But it would be nice to go from being "a little-known treasure" to having a more visible role, not only in Fridley and nearby suburbs, but in the Cities as well.

Banfill-Locke really is only 10 minutes from downtown Minneapolis. There it is, if you are looking for it.

Robert Silberman is a member of the art history department at the University of Minnesota.

Banfill-Locke Center for the Arts
6666 East River Road, Fridley
www.banfill-locke.org

A Community's Values Writ LARGE Eden Prairie Murals!

Several years ago, Eden Prairie Schools sought to raise awareness of the five virtues—respect, caring, trust, honesty, and integrity—that are cited in its organizational values statement. In 1999, they found their answer in Eden Prairie Murals!—an elaborate community art project produced by more than 200 K–12 students and adults and guided by the Fresco Community Outreach Program.

Eden Prairie Murals! is one of three artistic partnerships developed in the past few years by the Fresco Community Outreach Program, which was founded by Deborah Boldt. All three partnerships—Community of Peace Academy, St. Louis Park High School, and Eden Prairie Schools—paired professional artists with K–12 students to paint site-specific murals inspired by the values they considered essential for a strong community.

Boldt was the creator of a documentary film, *Fresco*, which captured muralist Mark Balma's creation of a contemporary fresco based on the seven virtues of St. Thomas Aquinas, for the University of St. Thomas in Minneapolis. Encouraged by the film's ability to inspire discussion, Boldt founded the outreach program.



photo by H. Navarrette.



photo by Heather Olson.

From the beginning of Eden Prairie Murals! there was agreement that the finished product would:

- be mobile;
- take the form of a pentateuch—five panels that fit together like a puzzle but can each be exhibited alone;
- be created by a multigenerational and multicultural group of students, parents, and seniors; and
- divide responsibility for project funding and control equally between Eden Prairie Schools and the outreach program.

Community buy-in before the first brush stroke

Eden Prairie residents had a sense of ownership in the project long before the first brush strokes were applied to canvas. Teacher support was crucial, with art instructors in particular needed to strengthen outreach program organizers' efforts. Such a catalyst was found in high school art teacher Melanie Ebert. Before she had ever heard about the outreach program, Ebert had used Boldt's documentary film to stimulate class discussions around Aquinas's seven virtues. Indeed, she had encouraged her students to lie on the floor while painting on paper taped under their desks to simulate the experience of painting ceiling frescoes.

A steering committee of the outreach program and school administrators, teachers, and volunteers formed in the spring of 2000. With her strong organizational and graphic design skills, Heather Olson, an Eden Prairie parent, became the EPM! community coordinator. Under her leadership, parents volunteered their diverse expertise, from marketing and carpentry to digital photography and henna painting. Thus began a yearlong "fermentation" period as student interest blossomed districtwide.

This was a project that engaged many parts of the community. One hundred twenty-eight thousand dollars in cash contributions came from the school district, Fresco Community Outreach Program, Familink, Optimist Club, Lutheran Brotherhood, Eden Prairie Foundation, General Growth Properties, Barnes & Noble, Target, and several others. Meanwhile, in-kind contributions totaling \$66,000 were offered by teachers and staff, local nonprofits, businesses, and individuals.

In the winter of 2001, public events started to get the word out. Eden Prairie High School's Center for Performing Arts hosted a presentation for parents and students complete with prize-drawings, art displays, and performances. The late mayor Jean Harris pledged her support. Eden Prairie City Center held an exhibition called "Art on City Walls." At a public ceremony called "First Brush Strokes," co-sponsored by Barnes & Noble, children and adults applied symbolic brush strokes to empty canvases the size of the actual mural while youth drummers provided rhythmic inspiration, adapting muralist Ta-coumba Aiken's spirit-drawing process. Later, attendees participated in book discussions with local writers David Mura and Marcie Rendon.

A broad palette of artists

The challenge of forming a team whose members would work together for the first time and who came from diverse disciplines, artistic styles, and cultural sensibilities presented an opportunity to model the core values the artists were to portray visually.

Marilyn Lindstrom, a veteran of outreach program collaborations who is known for her strong devotion to community art, was the mural project's artistic director. Lao-American artist Malichansouk Kouanchao, or Mali, served as associate artistic director. The two led the selection of four culturally diverse artists with international credentials: Ta-coumba Aiken, Douglas Padilla, Aziz Osman, and Erica Zaffarano. Rendon conducted writing workshops, inspiring poems and stories that served as creative fodder for the young artists.

For inspiration, "Miss M" (the students' nickname for Lindstrom) brought books about murals for students to peruse. She and Mali also used exercises to coax out

ideas and cultural symbols. Occasionally, the muralists met offsite at the Eden Prairie Historical Museum, where Rendon led storytelling exercises based on the memories of community elders who recalled the days when this affluent suburb was farmlands and fields.

Mural-making at the mall

The after-school project took place over eight weeks in late 2002, with separate sessions held four days a week for elementary, intermediate, and high school students. Eden Prairie Center, a shopping mall undergoing major renovations, became EPM! Central. It was the perfect locale for the large-scale production. Because the building was under construction, however, adult volunteers took turns pumping water into buckets and carrying them into the workshop space.

The final images for the mural were culled from about 500 sketches of hands, faces, cultural symbols, and nature. Some were whimsical and honest, such as a kindergartner's stick drawing of "Mom and me." Others were symbolic and polished—a pastel scene of a woman sitting quietly by a tamed tiger. Students from Somalia and India rendered henna designs with crayons.



Sketch for "Caring"
photo by Charissa Nemura



photo by Charissa Nemura

With Miss M's deft eye and Mali's sisterly guidance, this happy confusion came together into five visually eloquent panels showcasing the five community virtues:

- Integrity—an overarching panel that sits above the other four showing a horizon of hot colors punctuated by a human figure moving toward a central point of light
- Caring—a mother cradling a young girl's face
- Honesty—a girl in a wheelchair viewing her mirror reflection and reaching out beyond the canvas
- Respect—one hand offering energy while another is accepting a flower
- Trust—two hands holding a Ukrainian egg, symbolizing one of the many cultures of Eden Prairie

Dedicating 'our Sistine Chapel'

In March 2002, hundreds gathered at Eden Prairie Center to unveil EPM! and celebrate its completion. An exhibition showed the evolution of the murals, while Kogen Taiko Japanese drummers, Raagini Dance Center, and the Eden Prairie High School Advanced Dance Class performed the core values with dance and drums. Later, each panel was displayed individually in Eden Prairie schools, focusing discussion on one core value at a time.

That May, the mural was permanently installed in the “commons” area of Eden Prairie High School. Photographs of the panels (enlarged to the size of the original art) continued to be exhibited at other sites.

In a 2002 interview with the *Eden Prairie News*, Eden Prairie High School student Sara Tibebu said of the mural, “It shows the respect we have for each other. You can see what Eden Prairie is made of. This is our Sistine Chapel.”

Having been through the mural-making process, Eden Prairie Murals! offers this advice to other communities interested in undertaking similar projects:

- Devote ample time to research and development, reflection, planning, and conceptualization.
- Keep parents well informed of the time and creative commitment required of their student.
- Provide or assign a school district liaison to serve as co-coordinator.
- Develop buy-in from school administrators and parents before the project gets rolling.
- Create a separate committee devoted to fundraising.
- Most important, have clear mutual expectations between the artists and the art administrators regarding the degree of artistic decisions to be made by the lead artists and artist mentors. Community art is to be defined and created by, for, and about the community members, not the artistic team. The artistic team is there to guide and inspire.

The challenge of forming a team from diverse disciplines, artistic styles, and cultural sensibilities was an opportunity to model the core values they had been asked to portray.



photo by H. Navarrette.

Marlina Gonzalez was the local program director for Fresco Community Outreach Program. An arts administrator, curator, and programmer who has worked at all levels of arts programming, from conceptualization to exhibition, she has worked as consultant for organizations such as Pangea World Theater, Teatro del Pueblo, In Progress, and the Minnesota State Arts Board. She is currently the digital community development manager for Intermedia Arts.



photo by H. Navarrette.

Eden Prairie Murals!
Eden Prairie High School
17185 Valley View Road
Eden Prairie