

Entertainment & Life

Looking back, moving forward: NOTO artist completes five murals, aims to improve Topeka volunteerism

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Posted Dec 29, 2018 at 10:15 AM

Updated Dec 31, 2018 at 10:24 AM

At the beginning of last year, Jennifer Bohlander made a resolution: She was determined to paint five murals in the NOTO Arts and Entertainment District.

She began with “Greetings from Topeka,” a bright, postcard-inspired piece at the corner of N. Kansas Avenue and N.E. Gordon Street. The piece was well received, and Bohlander began receiving more and more recognition for her pieces across North Topeka.

“I said last year I wanted to paint those murals and start a revolution,” Bohlander said. “I’m still working on the revolution.”

Bohlander is the owner of Matryoshka Tattoo in NOTO and a co-owner of The Wheel Barrel. She is a fierce advocate driving the district forward and is known for her can-do attitude and commitment to the blossoming arts district.

In 2019, she is tackling a new project: increasing volunteerism and commitment in NOTO.

This goal was originally slated for 2018, but Bohlander said she is postponing it until the summer to have a volunteer fair and, hopefully, inspire people to commit to local organizations and collaborate on improving local communities.

“We’re calling it something along the lines of ‘resolve to get involved,’ ” she said. “We have a lot of people who throw money at things, but there’s no metric to show what kind of improvement that does to a community. That’s kind of how I feel about the murals — but I can feel it with the positive attitudes and see everyone coming down to check them out.”

When asked if she thought her murals were inspiring change, she paused for a long time.

“I think that it’s been positive,” she said. “But I think it’s for long-term gains, not just this year.”

Bohlander believes in hard work, and as involved as she is in the arts district, she said that at the end of the day, it’s the business owners’ responsibility to see their business succeed. No amount of colorful artwork will change that.

But, she admitted, positive additions are coming to the district — such as the ceramics studio and hair salon that opened at the end of 2018.

“You have to have that personal connection to improving your community,” Bohlander said. “If you are just born with the privilege of citizenship and the community you’re in, and you never contribute to it — that’s not fair. Those people are the freeloaders, in my opinion.”

Across the neighborhood, Bohlander’s art can also be found on the south side of Kaw River Rustics, 901 N. Kansas Ave.; the east side of Front Door Catering, 114 N.W. Laurent St.; the front-facing building at 904 N. Kansas Ave.; and in the alley behind the 900 block of N. Kansas Avenue, on the north side of 39 West Gallery at 909 N. Kansas Ave.

Bohlander said she is unable to pick a favorite piece, but she enjoys different aspects of each.

“I’m glad the elephants came off as well as it did because it was one of the first ideas I had,” she said, referring to the Kaw River Rustics mural. “The sunflowers were Nicole’s (DeGennard, co-owner of Front Door Catering) request, which I thought worked perfect on her building because the glass mosaic reflects on it and makes this really cool disco-ball effect whenever the sun goes down.”

Bohlander has a bit of a rebellious streak, and her ideas of revolution are often depicted in her art.

She said business owners supported her work, from letting her paint on their walls to donating storage space and scaffolding.

The most recent mural, which Bohlander called “Working Class Heroes,” shows a variety of laborers Bohlander wanted to highlight for their artistic contributions.

“I created that one because it’s the workers who get stuff done,” she said. “And, they’re also a different kind of artists, the ones I put on that wall. They’re people who might not realize what they do is art.”

That mural, at 904 N. Kansas Ave., was sponsored by Dave Cobler, longtime owner of Ace Plumbing, Heating and A/C in the arts district.

In 2019, Bohlander also will take on the challenge of moving her established tattoo studio and art gallery farther up the block. On Jan. 8, it will move into its new space at 918 N. Kansas Ave., the former Generations Antiques shop.

“I had to get over my emotional attachment to this space and look to the future,” she said. “Even though we’re moving into a space that was very well taken care of and fixed up, I’m going to do some crazy good stuff.”