



Photo: Murray DeBoer (detail)

## ***Wellington Flats Mural:*** **Using art to represent the lives, legacies and possibilities revealed in the study of one city block in Sarnia, Ontario, Canada**

MARY ABMA

This is the remarkable story of an interdisciplinary, community-based school project that was transformed by circumstances and creative energy into an exercise in expecting the unexpected, coping with crises and persevering in difficult circumstances. It demonstrates in exceptional ways the capacity that art has to reach across generations and to tell stories that are at once personal and universal. The narrative account of the creation of a mural for Wellington Flats, an affordable housing facility for seniors (connected with Vision Nursing and Rest Home in Sarnia, hereafter referred to as Vision), is interwoven with excerpts from various documents (in italics) outlining the project and other resources collected during its creation.

*Project-based learning (PBL) is a teaching strategy that gives students agency over their own learning. They engage in the creation or development of a real-life project and carry it out to a very high standard. In order for PBL to be meaningful, students work with professionals, engage the broader community, and give a public presentation of their work. I am proposing that this year's Grade 7/8 class from Sarnia Christian School undertake a PBL project*

*that incorporates visual art, the humanities, and the language arts and that culminates in the creation of a significant artwork (a mural) to be installed in the entryway of Wellington Flats.*

(From a proposal sent to the Board of Directors, Vision, 2019)

In the summer of 2019, I toured the facility with Heather Martin, Vision's CEO. Up and down the hallways, the story of Vision was on display in framed objects, photographs and artworks. On one wall, there were tributes to war veterans who had lived in the facility. One collection of medals caught my eye. Heather told me that they were found when Vision first built on the site, but that they did not know to whom they had belonged. They had labelled him "the unknown soldier." I was moved by this humble display. As we walked along the corridors, we discussed the storied history of the block of land on which Vision stands. It is in a part of the city that has its own identity – a kind of village within the city. Its residents are very proud of its unique flavour and history. Sarnia's oldest high school, recently vacated (a controversial decision), sits on the adjacent property. This piece of land, where so many

residents of our city live out their final days, is a place with a story to tell. This story would be represented by the mural.

## AUTUMN 2019

*Students worked with a variety of materials, including the soil from the block, found objects, paint, and photographic transfer techniques to work up several proofs of concept for the mural. Working from a rough sketch developed by them in the classroom, they devised plans for creating a mural which depicted the history, the stories, and the sense of identity that defined a community. Designed to mimic the layers in a landscape, with three focal points created by the placement of three antique barrel hoops, the mural would represent the complex story of this unique city block.*

(Mary Abma, Project description)



It was the kind of November cold that feels like a foreshadowing, the wind at the cusp of a Canadian winter cutting through the thin jackets of those dressed for fashion instead of practicality. This was the case for most of my

class of grade 7 and 8 students who stood shivering in the neglected, grassy courtyard, clipboards in hand, watching the dig. I love this kind of adventure, but it was clear that a good two-thirds of my students needed convincing. The eager ones, who were not necessarily the top academics in the class, but who thrived when given a hands-on, gritty learning experience, gathered around Kees Kooy, a retired geotechnical engineer, who used his rather archaic equipment to dig down into the layers of earth, extracting soil with the joy and anticipation of a prospector. He spoke to the students with a twinkle in his eye and invited them into his world of silt and loam, glacial till and bedrock, giving those who wanted it the opportunity to help dig the borehole and bring its treasured contents to the surface.

An important element of PBL is collaboration with professionals in the community. This aspect of the project, led by Mr. Kooy, put the students in touch with the land itself. They had prepared for the dig by poring over fire maps and old aerial photographs to find an area of land on the Vision block that had not been disturbed by building. Once they found it, they learned about soil types and the pre-colonial and settlement history of the land. And now they were apprentice soil engineers, extracting a core of soil so that they could see, feel and study the soil itself.

## WINTER 2019–2020

The last day of school before the March break had arrived and the bottom layer of the mural stretched across the length of the chalkboard ledge at the front of the classroom. The landscape was taking shape, the geology represented by little tiles made of soil from our dig; the watershed represented by pieces of blue stained glass. I was impressed by the work the students had done so far. For the past six months, the back of the classroom had been a workshop where students could work on elements of the mural, and arrange and glue objects onto designated panels. In art class, they had learned many skills that they were able to use in the creation of the piece: how to safely cut glass and apply the adhesive, for example. Their outing with Mr. Kooy had brought their science lessons out of the books and into the real world. And now they were applying not only their knowledge, but the materials gathered on the dig site to the artwork.

All the research, curricular connections and preparatory art lessons had been completed. One student even tracked down the identity of the unknown soldier! (He had fought in WW I and had been a teacher at the high school that now stood empty next to Vision.) After the March break, the students would apply all their skills and knowledge to finish the mural. We were on target to complete and install it by the end of the school year. Little did we know, the world was about to shift on its axis. It was March 2020 and COVID-19 was about to change everything.

*These are anxious and uncertain times for all of us. Please know that our greatest hope and expectation for every family is that you find some peace in all of this. Teachers will continue to provide online opportunities to meet with their students individually and with the class.*

(From a school letter to parents, March 2020)





Bottom layer of the mural

## SPRING 2020

Early May brought beautiful weather and I was headed out for a drive. Online schooling had finished for the day and I had deliveries to make. It was six weeks into emergency remote learning. The mural project had been shelved out of necessity, but nine of my students were willing to help to move it forward. The task of completing the project in this way was so daunting: I decided to take it one step at a time, suspend all expectations, and trust the process. The first task was to paint the background colours that had been selected by the class onto the panels not yet covered by the soil and stained glass. I made each student a kit with the paint colours and brushes needed, along with the panels they were assigned. My husband, dog and I drove around the county, delivering the materials. I placed the kits on porches, rang doorbells and stepped back. The small, socially-distanced encounters with the students that followed were a much-needed balm – moments of meaningful interaction. More often than not, the students came to the door with their siblings, all of whom were anxious to say “Hi.” It felt like I was delivering connection.

In addition to teaching online and planning student involvement in the mural, I undertook to make one of the layers myself, using a very large collection of buttons

I had procured in a local online auction. If we had been at school, the



students could have applied them to the mural under supervision – this was not something that could be done at home. While working on the layer, I kept in contact with the students who were able to offer input. The button section of the mural also included game pieces, jewellery and other small objects that had passed through people’s lives over the years. Later in the process, participants in the mural creation brought some of their own objects to include in the layer. The completion of this part of the mural was essential because it helped the students to visualize the final product, and to see that it would be completed.

*These are daunting times and this crisis has hit our Vision family hard – we are taking this extremely seriously. We are doing everything in our power to stop the spread of COVID-19 in our facility and amongst our workers. The safety and wellbeing of those in our care, and those who work here, is our utmost priority.*

(From a community update, Vision Nursing and Rest Home, May 2020)

Outbreak – it was the word everyone dreaded and it hit Vision hard. My heart broke each time I heard of a death at the facility. The school year was winding down and despite the perseverance of my dedicated group of students, the mural would clearly not be completed that year. Of the nine students who had continued the work, five were in grade 8 and would be graduating. And with the dark shadow of COVID striking the nursing home, it seemed

insensitive to worry about an artwork’s completion: Lives had been lost to the pandemic. However, I felt strongly that the work should continue and that this new story needed to be

incorporated into the mural. Over Zoom, we discussed symbols that could represent residents of Vision who had lost their lives to COVID, eventually settling on using the metal strip that pinches medical face masks to the wearer's nose. They could be extracted from masks and formed into spirals, which were often used historically to symbolize eternity. In the end, we attached thirteen spirals to the mural.

### **SUMMER 2020**

Three of my seventh graders wanted to continue working on the mural over the summer. By the time summer holidays began, the piece was starting to take shape. If we were going to complete it, however, I knew that it would have to transform from a school project to a different kind of collaborative work – one which would allow interested students to keep working on it while opening up the project to some of the seniors living at Wellington Flats.

I put out a call for interest at Wellington Flats and three women came forward who were eager to help. During the summer of 2020, I facilitated several sessions where my three students worked alongside the three residents on site. Diane, Nancy and Elena were excited to join the project. Each of them brought a unique personality and perspective to the task at hand. A former art teacher, Diane was game for any challenge and always dived in with joy and abandon. Nancy, who had grown up on the block, had a careful demeanour and approached the project with an almost reverent air of gratitude. Elena enjoyed giving us a running commentary on her progress, always with self-deprecating humour and salty language. The group of six was the perfect size for the workspace we were given. With proper distancing protocols in place, we filled the spacious room. At first, I worried that the students might feel intimidated to work with seniors, but all six quickly fell into an ease of companionship that made the sessions enjoyable and productive.

One day we took on the sky. We had five people working on the mural that day and they dived into the task. Each panel had an undercoat, painted by a student, as

a guide the hue of the foreground. I gave instructions about approaching the painting process and they dipped eagerly into the tubes of paint I had laid out for them. These panels were to be the only ones that were not collaged. I had imagined that once the skies were painted,



I would blend them to flow seamlessly from left to right across the top of the artwork. Things did not go to plan. Each person had thrown her own personality enthusiastically into her panel of the sky and when I lined them up, I realized that I could not unify them without destroying their unique energy. I also realized that they were perfect just as they were, as five interpretations of the sky.

### **AUTUMN 2020**

The school year started with in-person classes. After the disruption to learning in spring, and because of COVID rules and restrictions, school was

to be very different than it had been in the past. I had a new grade 7/8 class. Only a few of the students had been involved in the mural project the previous year. Project-based learning was not feasible this year; however, I returned parts of the mural to the school for the students to work on from time to time. I also introduced writing exercises which were to be included in the mural. One such project required each student to write a biography. The three students who had continued to work on the mural during the summer, each wrote a biography of one of the seniors who had worked alongside them. These biographies were collaged into the mural by the students. Another writing assignment was "Letters to the Future" written by each student and transcribed onto the mural.

Meanwhile, I continued to provide mural workshops to the three residents of Wellington Flats. Once a week, they painted, collaged, and brought in collected items for the mural. We chatted while we worked, and got to know one another. We heard stories about Nancy's family, who had lived on that block throughout the twentieth century. Her stories brought into sharp focus how the land itself had changed and how urbanization had replaced fields and a river with buildings and concrete. This mural was telling personal stories.





Photo: Murray DeBoer

## OCTOBER 2021

The mural was completed by the spring of 2021, but not installed until it was safe to hold a public gathering. On October 8th of that year, the community was invited to the official opening of Wellington Flats (also delayed due to the pandemic) and the unveiling of the mural. Some of my students, by then all in high school, attended the opening. It was moving to see them interact with this artwork that had defined and inspired their learning for so long and that represented generosity of spirit, friendship across generations, a long journey from vision to completion, and the perseverance, determination and optimism that kept these young people engaged enough to fulfil a goal we had set two years before – two difficult years when an ambitious school project helped to mark their passage from elementary school to high school, from the pre-pandemic to the post-pandemic world, and from fear and uncertainty to self-assurance and growth.

*Mary Abma, resident in Bright's Grove, Ontario, is a science-based, transdisciplinary artist whose laboratories range from her suburban yard to the streets and forests of larger, diverse communities we inhabit and construct. Through the lens of her work, she offers points of entry into the ecosystems that weave all living beings together and sustain life. A qualified teacher, Abma specializes in facilitating community-engaged artworks. All photographs by the author, unless specified otherwise.*

*For more about Mary, see The Big Picture 07. For more about the project, visit <https://rb.gy/ugzo8> or <https://maryabma.com/we-live-here>.*