

# PUBLIC ART Transforms A Community

## VisionPerry empowers youth through summer program



"Modified Trash Cans" were created by Artist Doug St. John, with help from the art staff.

Cheyenne Thornton had never thought much about public art until she became involved in VisionPerry last summer. The 19-year-old graduate of Perry County High School credits the program for increasing her interest and understanding of art, and how art can be used to improve the quality of life in her community. Working along side nationally-recognized artists, Thornton and 20 other students were involved in creating 11 public art projects that have been permanently placed throughout the City of Linden.

Thornton, who now works full-time as art director for VisionPerry, is excited about the program and what it has accomplished. "I had one art class in my freshman year in high school, but I had never considered the impact art could have on a community," says Thornton. "I have always enjoyed public art, but had never made the connection between art and economic development. It's a great way to build the economy and bring in more people and more money. I know that public art has brought about a tremendous change in my hometown. People have more respect for the community and knowledge of what they can do for their town."

It's obvious the program has made a strong impression on Thornton. She plans to take the ACT soon and attend Austin Peay State University in May, where she will study art. Although she will be a university art student soon, she hopes to stay involved in the VisionPerry program.

"I want to stay involved in this program," adds Thornton. "This program has provided me with more of a reason to go into art. I have learned so much from my involvement, working with different artists and different mediums. I have enjoyed working with a team and working for the community." Thornton encourages other students to become involved. A resident of Linden since she was six-years-old, Thornton has seen the change that has taken place. "It's a different place now, with a different look. People have a different response to where they live. I'll go away to college, but I would like to return to live in Linden."



Left: County Mayor John Campbell helps out on the "Freedom of Expression" mural.  
Below: Linden Mayor Jim Azbill works on a mural.



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- Michael Dumont



The VisionPerry staff working on a downtown mural.

## HARD TIMES BRING CREATIVE SOLUTIONS

In January of 2009, Perry County's unemployment rate peaked at 27 percent, with the loss of over 1,000 automotive-related jobs. In a rural county with one of the nation's highest unemployment rates, an aggressive approach was needed to bring about positive change. VisionPerry was created as an economic revitalization and youth empowerment program designed to address and conquer the severe economic issues of Perry County. Although the program is part of a detailed economic development plan, there is a strong art component at work.

"Our team is attempting to energize the youth in the county by involving them in the reconstruction of their county's culture while they discover their historic roots," says Michael Dumont, director of VisionPerry and owner of the Commodore

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-Linden Mayor Jim Azbill

Hotel Linden. "We are doing our best to design the foundation for the next generation, develop tourism, and make it easier for people to assimilate into Perry County's business districts. And the arts are playing a major role in this plan."

According to Dumont, nationally the nonprofit arts and cultural industry generates \$166.2 billion in economic activity every year - \$63.1 billion in spending by organizations and an additional \$103.1 billion in event-related spending by their audiences. These related events include gas, lodging, entertainment, and food. Dumont wants to see Perry County capitalize on these figures. He provides a compelling argument for arts-based tourism and overall economic development for Perry County.

Dumont and his wife relocated to Perry County from Rhode Island when they purchased the historic Commodore Hotel Linden two years ago. "We bought into this place because of the appreciation of the natural beauty of the area. And one of the best things about Perry County is the friendly people and their hospitality. It's a great place to call home."

Previously a real estate developer, Dumont has worked with arts districts with some success. "Having worked with arts districts in the past, I have seen how the arts can revitalize an area," says Dumont. "I have seen neglected areas with high unemployment, and once they become arts districts, they become highly-desirable areas where people want to live and work."



"The Land Between the Rivers" is part of an international project called "Global Rivers Art Exchange," an online exhibition aimed at using art to educate people all over the world about the preciousness of rivers and waterways. The piece honors Perry County's unique position between the Tennessee and Buffalo Rivers, two of only four rivers in the world which flow north. Artist Bernice Davis worked with the staff in creating this piece.



"Forest Abstract (detail)" is a stylized representation of the hills and rivers that define Perry County. The piece was created using everyday found objects including broken glass and mirror, woodchips and glue, and can tops. Artist Ashley O'Guin help the young staff create this piece.



The White River (detail shown) is a group of tiles made from clay and slip. Working with artist Patrick Green, the young workers made two-dimensional and three-dimensional tiles using cabbage leaves for vein-like imprints on the clay.

Linden Mayor Jim Azbill is pleased with the success of the VisionPerry program, and feels more optimistic about his community. "With unemployment at 27 and 24 percent, people didn't have a lot to smile about before, but everyone now seems more relaxed and positive. It has made a definite impact on the citizens of Linden."



Michael Dumont, director of VisionPerry and owner of the Commodore Hotel Linden, sees a lot of potential for Perry County. He believes the program has already improved the community's image and created economic development opportunities

Funded by Governor Phil Bredesen through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, VisionPerry has created opportunities and offered the residents of Perry County hope for a brighter future.

to produce a map for a downtown walking tour.

"Our community as a whole has benefited from the program," adds Azbill. "We are respecting our heritage, honoring our deep rooted values, and allowing those values to guide our direction."

## THE WORK CONTINUES

Almost everyone in Perry County wants to see the VisionPerry program continue. There are many challenges ahead, but much progress has been made. Plans call for another summer youth program this year, although it may be scaled back slightly due to the lack of stimulus funds, and the Blooming Arts Festival is scheduled for March. The festival will feature 35 artists and their work, along with a variety of performances.

"I see nothing but potential in the future," says Dumont. "I would like to see more artists relocate to the area, as we are currently establishing



"Freedom of Expression" is a mural painted on the side of a building that's home to Linden's welcome center and the Chamber of Commerce. Artist Katherine Fowler facilitated a collaborative design process in which art staff explored the authentic meaning of "Freedom of Expression." The staff was asked to develop personal symbols of freedom, and then empowered with the task of integrating their symbols into a culminating design concept.

Similar to President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration (part of the New Deal of 1935), government funds have been directly appropriated by the government for artists-for-hire to create public art. And it has taken place in Perry County in a big way. Although the stimulus funds have expired, officials hope to continue the program.

"The program has been beneficial to young people in our community," adds Mayor Azbill. "They have been given an opportunity to do things they had never attempted before. They feel they belong, and are more a part of the community."

Although he says the community has a long way to go, Mayor Azbill has also seen positive results in the area of economic development. "Everything has been very positive. We had 13 empty store fronts when we started. We now have only four. There has been a lot of progress made." As for tourism, the Mayor has also noticed a dramatic change taking place. "This program has created a lot of interest with tourists coming into town to see the murals. This is especially true in the summer months when tourists are seen exploring the downtown area with their cameras." According to Mayor Azbill, there is a new visitor's center opening downtown, and plans are underway

an artist's co-op. We are encouraging artists of all mediums to capitalize on the low utility and rent costs available to them. Linden's charming downtown is not only ideal for retail business, but also for artist's studios and galleries. Perry County hopes to emerge as a destination for many artists, and we hope these artists will take up residence in the county" VisionPerry has set progress in motion, and the results can be seen throughout Perry County. The program continues to support the business districts, improve the cultural environment, and support the development of a diversified community.

"We hope future generations will benefit from this sustainable economic and community development plan," adds Dumont. "Perry County must keep the momentum going if we want to truly revitalize our community, and VisionPerry will provide the support to keep moving forward."

For more information on VisionPerry, visit their Web site: [www.visionperry.com](http://www.visionperry.com)

Photos by VisionPerry