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Something exciting is happening in downtown LaPorte.

Driving along Lincolnway, a large mural is developing, one that illustrates stories and history of the city. Colorful, complex, narrative, this 108-foot-long painting captures the attention, enticing one to discover Plaza 618, a small pocket park with tables, bright umbrellas, a splash pad, Joyful Noise Musical Instrument Sculpture and, of course, the mural.

“Collectively, the idea of a mural has been talked about for a long time,” according to Laura Krentz, an artist/art educator and wife of Mayor Mark Krentz. “It was the dream of the city planner, Beth Shrader. When planning the plaza originally, it was always a hope to have a mural.”

This is the story of dedication, determination, generosity and great design.

Dedication, Design, Determination

“Art can bridge a community with such positivity.”

Thaddeus Cutler

by Linda Weigel

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Billy Pozzo (left) and Tom Torluemke work on the Plaza 618 mural.



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Dedication

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Plaza Development

LaPorte has a long history of supporting music and theater. LaPorte County Symphony Orchestra, LaPorte Little Theatre Club, Arts in the Park and summer concerts provide great entertainment not just for city residents, but also the county. Public art, visual art, however, have not been a prominent factor. What a delight, then, for the city to achieve a high quality mural, and in such a relatively short time span.

The process began in early 2014 when the city determined the former Woolworth building at Lincolnway and Monroe Street needed to come down.

“It was a safety issue,” Shrader says, “and it was purchased and then demolished with the help of the Development Commission and the Urban Enterprise Association. They joined forces, took the building down, had to demo a bit more underneath because there had been a basement, and then prepped the site for a plaza.

“We had kind of vetted a number of things that could go there. We talked about if whether we wanted another building there so it could house a business and be on the tax rolls. Some folks talked

about parking.”

Later, questions of insufficient parking space were determined to be “more of a perception problem than an availability problem,” Shrader said, and not an issue. Also under consideration was an enclosed structure of some kind to house various businesses. However, those costs were prohibitive, she said. In the end, it was determined an open-air plaza was the best use: a place for citizens to congregate, take a lunch break, meet up, let children play and enrich the city’s cultural life.

The next step involved raising money to fund the plaza and develop a feasible design. Then-Mayor Blair Milo appointed Bert Cook and John Salisbury as the main team charged with going out into the community seeking large donations. Cook is LaPorte Economic Advancement Partnership’s executive director. Salisbury is an Edward Jones investment advisor and community member. The two proved successful, especially with IU Health LaPorte Hospital, which provided a large seed donation. The city also received a substantial grant from the Office of Community and Rural Affairs in partnership with the Indiana Office of Tourism Development through its Placed Based Investment Fund. These state-funding agencies are used by cities for

community and economic development. What they could not raise through large business donations or grants was accomplished with smaller donations by people throughout the community. A GoFundMe page, for example, was set up.

Secondly, the city needed an illustrated design for the project — critical for going forward. Don Bowman, a local, retired landscape architect, had been meeting with the committee during the initial stages. Now that a plaza had been approved, he came up with the design. In fact, Bowman’s portrait is included in one of the mural’s painted frames.

The plaza was under construction during the summer and then fall of 2016, culminating in work on the splash pad. It opened in earnest summer 2017. The mural was not part of the initial development plan.

Significantly included in the plaza was the Joyful Noise Musical Instrument Sculpture, located dead center along the 108’ long back wall.

“The Joyful Noise project spearheaded the idea that we could do large-scale, creative projects within the city,” says artist Thaddeus Cutler, who served on the committee for the plaza development.

“These instruments get played and are now located all over the city in various parks. All the different sponsoring groups such as Kiwanis, Rotary, American Licorice Company and, again, LaPorte Enterprise Association sponsored this idea.”

The beauty of the Plaza 618 instrument is that it is interactive, fun and sits dead center to the long back wall. It is not uncommon to see children visiting the splash pad and running back and forth between the two, playing a few notes at the instrument before returning to the fountain.

“When it was done,” Cutler says, “I think we all



The Joyful Noise Musical Instrument Sculpture.

just breathed a collective sigh of relief and were like, ‘OK, I don’t want to think about the plaza for at least a year.’ It’s been nothing but the plaza.”

Obviously, a time out was much needed to recharge and rethink the next step forward.

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The Plaza 618 mural in progress on Lincolnway in downtown LaPorte.

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"We always wanted, or I always envisioned, a nice big mural there."

Beth Shrader

The Mural Project

As Laura Cutler watched the progress made in the plaza — plants growing, tables and umbrellas installed — she recalled a recent conversation.

"Beth (Shrader) secured these colored umbrellas, and the kids were using the splash pad, and all these things were happening," she said. "Thaddeus and I kept walking (by the plaza) and when we started talking, I said that when I worked for The Center for Visual and Performing Arts under John Cain, I met a lot of mural artists over there. Could we possibly start looking to see what it would cost, and just on our own let's start vetting some."



Thaddeus and Laura Cutler

Laura Cutler had the contacts for mural artists and, most importantly, wanted to secure an Indiana artist for the job. In a bit of serendipity, she was contacted by Donna Catalano of South Shore Arts Association to serve as a grant panelist for the Tippecanoe Arts Federation Grant.

"So, I got tapped and who did I sit next to? Linda Dorman, Tom Torluemke's wife. And I didn't know her, but I knew of him. I knew of his mural on the NIPSCO Substation No. 9 in Hammond because I used to manage the gallery there. It's a huge two-story mural that he did about 20 years ago. I was familiar with him as an artist and his work. I knew his name."

While talking during their

lunch break, Cutler discovered how busy Torluemke was and feared he would be out of their reach. He was in demand. He was highly successful, making what later developed simply miraculous. Fortunately, Dorman contacted the Cutlers, and they in turn invited them both to visit LaPorte. At the time, Thaddeus was downtown director for the Main Street Association, and there were three different building sites where owners said they would welcome a mural. After walking around, Torluemke was particularly struck by the plaza and the possibilities there.

That was the fall of 2017. By spring of 2018, things began to accelerate.

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"Hey, let's create a group of all like-minded people. You know, who want to focus on visual arts, and let's just get people with all these different talents together and let's just see if we can do this, make this happen."

Laura Cutler

Meanwhile, the Visual Arts Council formed under the umbrella of Greater LaPorte Economic Development Corp., which has since been absorbed into LaPorte Economic Advancement Partnership. This made it possible for the council to utilize a 501(c)(3) tax status, making it eligible for grants and donations: the key component to raising the necessary funds for wall preparation and artists' fee.

"Because Thaddeus and I know there's a lot of art support here, people who support the gallery (she and Thaddeus own Thaddeus C Gallery on Lincolnway), people who are wanting some public art here, we thought that with all our connections, why don't we just start something, get a few like-minded people and also people who have some education behind them in terms of public arts and private art," Cutler said.



Don Bowman's original design for the plaza.

Consequently, the VAC features six professional members:

- A mayor sympathetic to, and enthusiastic for, a mural: Krentz is a former art business owner.
- A city planner, Shrader, who knew the developmental background, understood where the project was headed and was familiar with grant applications.
- Professional artistic voices: Gregg Hertzlieb, a city resident and director of Valparaiso University's Brauer Museum of Art; Laura Krentz, artist/art educator and art-business owner; and the Cutlers. Laura also serves as a LaPorte city councilwoman.

Seeking a professional muralist was next. The artist commissioned to create LaPorte's mural must be someone who could do a job that fit well with the city. Since this was going to be a first of its kind in LaPorte, it needed to be someone with a unique voice and a vision, as well as a track record for successful results.


"As it turned out, we looked at all these different artists, and Tom (Torluemke) made the best sense because, historically, he goes into a community, meets people, researches, just dives in and gets to know the community taking all of that information and creating a story of his own," Laura Cutler says.

"He gets inspired, but we don't mess with the


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A child enjoys the splash pad at Plaza 618.



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inspiration. He gets to use what inspires him and then comes back with the design.”

Once hired, the mayor’s office provided the seed money for Torluemke to complete the mural design. He agreed to “do his research over three or four months, come back with a design that we could review and approve, and then from there we would fund raise what it would take to have the mural,” Cutler said.

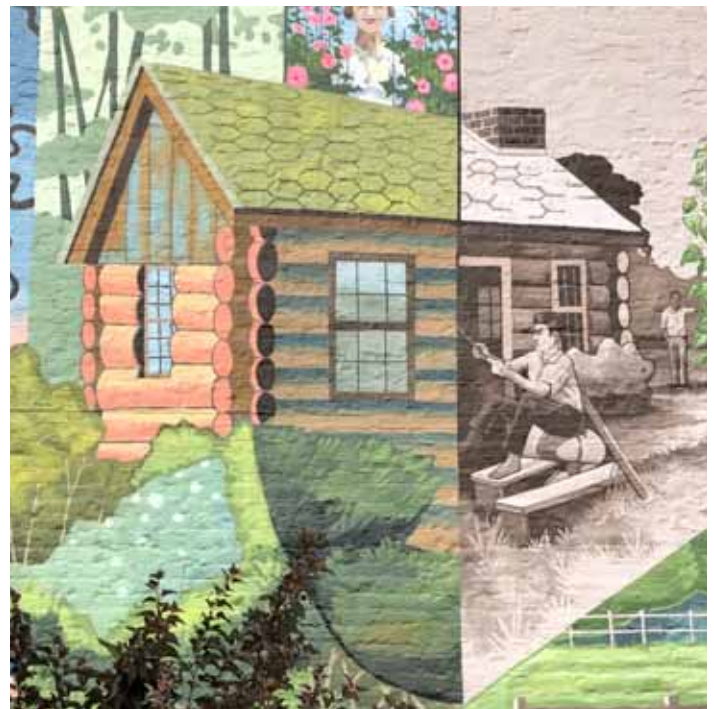
Finally, the actual execution of the mural project could begin. First up was taking a closer look at the brick wall upon which the mural was to be painted. It needed to be carefully inspected to make any necessary repairs before priming. The lesson here was, expect the unexpected.

At first, the wall appeared to be in fairly good condition. After priming, and upon another inspection, it became obvious additional work was needed due to reoccurring leaks. There was no point in hiring professionals to paint the mural if the foundation upon which it was resting was not in top condition. Multiple bids were submitted, with Shrader overseeing the process. In the meantime, contact was made with the UEA, a statewide organization granting monies to urban enterprise zones. Its 80/20 grant program made it possible to finish the final repairs. Harvey Adams of AA Rain-Tite Roofing completed the work, and now the artists were ready to begin.

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The Artists

Torluemke was, indeed, a superb choice for the project. Well-versed in all aspects from design to execution, his track record included: University Of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics in Cedar Rapids, Iowa; Indianapolis-Marion County Central Library; Indiana State University Booker T. Washington Community Center, Terre Haute; Unity Plaza in East



The portion of the mural that features an early cabin on the left and Don Bowman’s father constructing his cabin to the right.

Chicago, Ind; West Lafayette mural; and Substation No. 9 in Hammond.

His credentials were outstanding.

Upon accepting the commission to design the mural, Torluemke immersed himself in LaPorte history and lore. He visited and spent time at LaPorte County Historical Society Museum. He attended the Mayor’s Ball, talking to residents, interviewing and absorbing stories. He continued researching. He looked at thousands of photos and created drawings of the people, places and stories he heard. County Historian Fern Eddy, considered a “living historical encyclopedia of LaPorte,” was a valued resource. The experience of meeting her, with all the images of significant citizens circling his imagination, re-

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Tom Torluemke’s presentation on the final design for the mural during an event for donors. Photos courtesy of Linda Dorman

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sulted in incorporating a collage of framed faces being tossed into the air by Fern herself. Along the way, he discovered that Bowman, the designer of Plaza 618, had a father who built a log cabin, which he maintained for years. Bowman's father also was a local letter carrier. He included him in the mural on the left-hand side. On the right side, he included a very tall letter carrier discovered in his photographic research.

After several months of research, he distilled his vision to seven principal stories with 40 narratives and three major concepts. He then began loosely drawing on tracing paper, which eventually became large with complicated narratives, later selecting the strongest story and reworking his design. The overall structural theme for the mural was lakes, water and nature, linking everything together.

Once the research and design were completed, a donor unveiling and presentation was held at Thaddeus C Gallery, with Torluemke presenting his original design illustration while relaying the story of the mural. The response was so strong that afterwards, several donors expressed the desire to be notified for the next project.

"Another great takeaway from that night was the gentleman, who is the mailman – tallest figure in the mural – in real life he is actually one of the tallest people in LaPorte, nearing 7' and a twin'," Thaddeus Cutler said. "What was interesting was, I've known him for a long time. He's a good friend, and when he came in to deliver our mail one day, we

had all the donation info out for VAC and he says, 'What are you raising money for?' I said, 'Oh, we're going to get a mural.' He goes, 'How much do I have to give to get on the list?' I replied, 'Well, like \$50 would be fine.' He replied, 'How about \$100.' He wrote us a \$100 check right there. Gave it to us and I thought, 'That's so generous of him!'

"Well, how strange the universe is, especially with art and how everything is connected," Cutler said. "He donates before there is ever a design. Tom is sifting through photographs online of LaPorte people, comes across him and says, 'I want to put that tall mailman in it. There's something about that guy.' They don't even know each other. Later at the unveiling, there's the tall mailman standing at the bar and Tom's like, 'What are you doing here? I didn't know they invite the people I put in the mural.' And he goes, 'I gave money.' It was great!"

Unexplainable, unexpected connections such as this make the intimacy and revelations of the mural even more impactful and special, reiterating that the artists selected to create this art installation not only were the most talented, but also the best for the job.

Interestingly, Laura Cutler relayed a heartfelt story with special connections to the mural.

Julie West Schroder and her foundation Play for Jake was founded in memory of her son, who had a heart attack and died on the high school football field. Currently on the right side of the mural is a sketched-out scene based on a photo of the Slicer football team charging through a torn banner. Julie lives nearby and had been watching with fascination the development of the mural. One day, she stopped by, and it was just Torluemke painting,



The mural begins with a representation of Native Americans



Prominent manufacturers represented in the mural include: Herbert W. Fox, Fox Woolen Mills; Edward A. Rumley, Rumely Co.; and Hallett H. Kessler, Kessler Furniture Store.



Note the Door Prairie barn in the background of the mural.

and she asked if he would like a cold drink. She returned with an espresso for him, and he began to relay the stories in the mural. She was fascinated.

“He starts showing her that, well, down here it’s just drawn in and not painted,” Cutler said. “But now, this is the neat, energized drawing of these teams smashing through...and she just stops and gets chills and she touches him and says, “That was the game in honor of my son where the two teams came together and held the smashed sign that said Play for Jake, and it’s on the mural. My son is now forever on this mural!”

Again, unexpected connections make this public artwork personal and momentous. Call it intuition or divine intervention, such revelations can be an unexplainable moment of recognition, and somehow Torluemke had locked into that.

Weather always is a factor in working outdoors, and frequent rains held things off for a while, but eventually the skies cleared and work began.

Torluemke arrives early in the morning to begin working, usually around 5:30 a.m., and stops by noon when the sun shifts and illuminates the space such that it is now too bright to work. The changes in light affect the ability to match colors accurately. Torluemke’s assistant, Billy Pozzo, arrives a bit later and continues on past noon for a while. Five days a week, weather permitting, the colorful images slowly emerge: strikingly beautiful and exciting at the same time. I have driven past the plaza numerous times just for the joy of discovery and the unveiling of new figures, designs and backgrounds. The overlapping forms and transitions between one scene and the next are wonderful. The marching band is an example of strong perspective as it recedes into space, giving the viewer a true sense of the passage of time. The aerial view of the downtown is another highlight and again emphasizes distance, space and time.

Read the mural from left to right as you link past to present. The story of LaPorte begins with the early Native Peoples and progresses from there. Take a moment to note that directly behind the Joyful Noise instrument is a large conductor, placed as though he is conducting the “story” of the mural. As you stand there, you, the viewer, becomes part of the story itself.

I feel fortunate to have watched both these artists at work. Pozzo, a successful artist in his own right, has been with Torluemke, painting side-by-side for



Agriculture factors into the mural’s narrative.

28 years, and what struck me while watching them work together is how complementary their painting styles are. Two painters seamlessly matching up their brush strokes; color mixing and more is not common or an easy thing to achieve. In this case, you cannot discern where one artist stops and the other starts, which is simply amazing. Depending on the weather, the mural will be completed soon or some time mid-September. Twenty-four hours after the final stroke, the mural will be sealed with UV protecting clear coats.

This entire project was a community effort on many levels and a triumph. Not surprisingly, plans are being made to create a video about the mural and its stories, which will be available

online. Lesson plans for educators are on the horizon: a wonderful teaching tool for history, community pride and the cultural life of LaPorte.



Billy Pozzo (left) and Tom Torluemke, the two artists working on the mural.

During the course of my research and many visits to Plaza 618, I was never alone. LaPorte’s downtown is mere blocks from residential housing. This pocket park is a strong attraction for those who live nearby and those working downtown.

Plaza 618 and the mural are a real gift to the City of LaPorte and its citizens.

