The intersection of art and policing

POLICE BREAK DOWN BARRIERS AS OFFICERS CREATE ART WITH YOUTH

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About two years after the Graffiti Gallery opened its doors in a former pickle factory on Higgins Avenue, the police showed up. They were there to see the artwork — at least, that's what they told Stephen Wilson, the gallery's executive director.

It was 11 a.m. on a Thursday, and the gallery was running a class for about 10 youth, many of whom felt uncomfortable around police. So when Winnipeg Police Service officers showed up — in uniform, albeit without weapons — Wilson was taken aback.

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"Everywhere you looked, there was a police officer," he says of that day in 2000. Officers looked in closets, around corners, under the staircase. "There's no artwork there," Wilson recalls saying.

It turned out police were in the neighbourhood for a meeting with business owners who were concerned about illegal graffiti. They were there to see the art — and also the artists.

At that point, what the gallery was doing was still novel: using art as a tool to change communities, spraying paint on canvas rather than garage doors. So last year, when Const. Tracy Patterson proposed a six-month program in which officers would meet monthly to create artwork with youth involved in the gallery's programming, Wilson was thrilled.

Marriott was a skeptic, but is more open-minded now.

Patterson, 42, works in the WPS community relations department.

'We need a police service that will be strong. But we also need a police service that has compassion'

— Stephen Wilson

An avid artist, she'd noticed the police had no outreach programs centred around art and aimed at young adults. It seemed an obvious step to approach Wilson.

At the first meeting Jan. 9, cops outnumbered participants 12 to three. Jean Borbridge, 26, the assistant manager of Studio 393 — a Graffiti Art Programming initiative with music, art and dance programs — felt nervous. She was tasked with facilitating the meetings, and she sensed participants were hesitant.

Making art requires vulnerability. Achieving that with police and participants side by side was tough. Everybody was welcoming, but both the police and the youth participants weren't sure what to expect.

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Artists Tracy Patterson (from left), Brian Hunter, Bria Fernandes, Shaunna Neufeld and Rene Marriott will have their work shown in the Graffiti Gallery's new exhibit, Intersections.

Osani Balkarain, a 19-year-old Indigenous-Guyanese rapper from the West End, dialled 911 frequently while growing up. His experiences with police have shaped the way he conducts himself, so he couldn't help but feel anxious.

Rene Marriott, 23, got into graffiti as a teen, but early on saw that police frowned upon it. He was skeptical of the project at first, but didn't want to judge the officers before getting to know them.

Many of the youth involved in the gallery's programming have complex relationships with police. Some have witnessed crime, others have difficulty trusting cops. Patterson understood this, as did Wilson and Borbridge. So officers didn't wear uniforms when the group met at the Graffiti Gallery.

Patrol Sgt. Supervisor Shaunna Neufeld, 48, has been a member of the police force since 1994. She describes her artistic ability as virtually non-existent. She was self-conscious to be working with the youth, many of whom had phenomenal skills.

Neufeld saw the program as a way to build relationships and challenge people's perceptions of police officers (a goal of Patterson, as well).

Among those who inspire him, Const. Brian Hunter lists Willem de Kooning, not Frank Serpico. De Kooning was a Dutch abstract expressionist, while Serpico is a former New York City police officer who blew the whistle on corruption in the force.

Hunter, 33, graduated from Concordia University with a degree in fine arts in 2007 and joined the WPS last February, only a few months removed from winning the $25,000 RBC Canadian Painting Competition. He's currently on holiday from the force, doing a two-week residency at the Plug In gallery in downtown Winnipeg.

In May, two of his co-workers helped set up an exhibition of his works after their shift ended. One piece was a sculpture made of interlocking doors, which represented the feeling of entering a person's home as a cop. Another was a painting of police notebooks, which Hunter filmed himself creating in full uniform, narrating each brush stroke — Bob Ross with a badge.

Police work is his day job, but art remains his primary passion. When he heard about Patterson's project, he jumped at it. "It was the first opportunity that's presented itself from the police where my art is an asset," he says.

He was excited to explore policing through the lens of art, but understood it could be difficult to connect with participants given the general perception of officers. "Through the art, we get to peel away those layers."

The project culminates today with an exhibition at Portage Place's Edmonton Court. In total, about six WPS officers and seven youth produced final pieces.

Two of the youngest participants, a pair of 14-year-old girls, wrote a comic book abointeractions with police. Marriott made a timeline of his relationship with the police, illustrated through a painted alleyway.

Balkarain wrote and produced a rap, featuring sirens and re-enacted phone calls with officers. His song doesn't have a title and it's not mastered. It's imperfect, which Balkarain says is purposeful.

Hunter made a painting of a collage the participants helped to create. Patterson drew an officer after a long shift, called *Yearning to Forget*.

Neufeld, who spent years on child-abuse and missing-persons units, took photos of places that represented difficult situations officers are often in.

Wilson hopes the project helped dispel myths police may have about the youth who go to the gallery, and challenged the perception some youth may have about police. It's not about suppressing crime, he says. It's about connecting people and breaking a cycle of mistrust, something the police have been working to do for years.

"We need a police service that will be strong," he says. "But we also need a police service that has compassion. The fact that the police have people like (Hunter, Neufeld and Patterson) gives me great hope."

During the project, Marriott, who is Indigenous, became less skeptical.

"(The officers) don't act like police, they act like citizens," he says. "These certain officers, if they saw me on the street, they wouldn't be prejudiced, because they got to know me without their uniform."

"I'd never had an experience like that in my life," says Balkarain, who works as a behaviour manager at Studio 393. "Being in the same room as them was definitely a step in a better direction."

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