

SIDEWALK SAM

In Los Angeles, celebrities immortalize their names by placing their hands in wet cement at Grauman's Chinese Theater. In communities across New England, children immortalize their names, along with their visions for the world of tomorrow. "In times like these, when America is being challenged, we have to declare our faith in America and in each other," says Bob Guillemin, a popular New England artist known as Sidewalk Sam. "Who better to do this than our children? For they are our future."

Sidewalk Sam is a sort of Pied Piper who brings people of all ages together to create art that symbolizes the hopes and dreams of the entire community. For the Children's Community Monuments, he gives children a one-foot square of colored wet cement—and a mission. "Draw anything that expresses yourself," he tells them, "a message for the future, something your parents have taught you, something people can believe in." They write innocent, uplifting messages in the wet cement, and draw puppy dogs, flowers, and images that represent the ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity in their communities.

Then Sam and his group assemble the brightly colored red, white, and blue squares like patchwork in front of town halls, and in schoolyards, community parks, and city walkways, knowing these beautiful works may last for a hundred years.

Children's Community Monuments take three to six months to plan and a day or two to build. The entire community rallies around the

children, and all kinds of people get involved. Children, teachers, parents, school janitors, and masons work to install the monuments. Others chip in a dollar or two to cover the cost of the concrete squares.

Through this project, children become spokespeople for the spirit of their communities. “The children become community leaders, drawing the adults together,” says Sam. “Children of all faiths and backgrounds create these art monuments in their communities, where there are monuments to past wars but none for the future.”

People can see children’s artwork sites at the Mary Lyon School in Brighton, Massachusetts, or at Prairie College Elementary School in Canton, Ohio, where teacher Joyce Appleman said, “The students develop an understanding of other cultures and learn that we can get along with everyone around the world.”

Sidewalk Sam’s other community art projects are more ephemeral. Some wash away in a day or so, but they’re not forgotten. Chalk One Up for the Arts is an annual event that started in 1996 when Boston’s mayor, Thomas Menino, asked Sam to create a “celebration of goodness” for the city. Each year, hundreds of corporations send their employees outside during their lunch hour. They each get a block of sidewalk and a box of colored chalk. On a beautiful summer day in the third week of August, lawyers, bankers, accountants, and salespeople turned artists-for-an-hour, and drew the work of their imaginations in vibrant colors on the sidewalk. Pinstriped men and power-suited women crouching on the sidewalk are a sight to behold, and even more so are their sidewalk chalk designs, thousands of which, all over town, transform Boston’s pedestrian paths into banners proclaiming the city’s

goodness and sense of fun.

It is a major city celebration. As one of the featured summer festivals, Chalk One Up infuses Boston with art for a whole week from City Hall, Copley Plaza, and Faneuil Hall to the waterfront and the business district. Some companies hold friendly sidewalk art competitions, offering their employees small prizes. The city expects ten thousand people to participate in 2002, with 200,000 pedestrians watching. “Everyone is an artist,” says Sam. “I love to create new ways for people to express the beauty locked up inside them.”

Sidewalk Sam also invites seventy arts and cultural organizations to join in the celebration, as a way of thanking their audiences. Each year the prestigious Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and the Institute for Contemporary Art attend. “For years audiences have applauded the arts,” Sidewalk Sam said. “We thought it would be good to have the arts applaud their audiences, and thank them for their years of support.”

Sidewalk Sam is happiest when he’s in his work jeans and blue denim shirt, working on projects that bring the best of people out into their communities. “Art isn’t just for the wealthy and the privileged,” he says. “Art is for everyone.” He has been doing his unique brand of community-centered art for thirty-eight years, though he started out traditionally. He studied in Paris, Chicago, and Boston, and his work appeared in galleries and museums across the country. That was fun for a while, but he wanted to bring art out of the museums and into the streets, where it could enrich people’s daily lives.

“Sidewalks are a natural medium,” he thought. “I want to reach out to

everyone, rich or poor.” So Sidewalk Sam, as he became known, spent the next few years bent over city streets, a milk crate full of chalks beside him. He’s done a Sidewalk Mona Lisa and a Sidewalk Whistler’s Mother. “I love to go out early on a summer day, crouch down on the sidewalk for ten or twelve hours, and recreate a Van Gogh or a Rembrandt,” he says. “By the end of the day my back is sore, my knees hurt, and I feel as tired as a ditch digger, but I’m rewarded. People stop and enjoy the art. They get involved. They have wonderful things to say.”

Over the years, Sidewalk Sam has become a living legend. In the beginning, the city of Boston didn’t know quite what to do about him. He was accused of defacing public property with graffiti, and threatened with arrest. But once officials saw the entire community behind him, and then with him, they started inviting him to draw everywhere. For Earth Day in 1990, Boston authorities shut down Storrow Drive, and Sam, along with some sixty thousand helpers, painted the city’s busiest highway bright green. Participants took up their colored chalk to draw in honor of Mother Earth, so birds, flowers, and bumblebees appeared, and chalk children played in the fields.

For the last several years, Sidewalk Sam has been working on his biggest project ever, decorating a new highway. The Big Dig, as it is called, is a ten-year, \$16-billion construction project and the largest and most complicated highway project in the world. While the Dig rearranges the face of Boston, Sidewalk Sam is beautifying the construction zone and entertaining inconvenienced pedestrians with vivid murals covering the walls, benches of bright flowers, and overhead

beams transformed into a blue sky with puffy clouds complete with flying cherubs.

“We have been changing meadows into highways for decades,” says Sidewalk Sam. “I thought it would be nice if we could change a highway back into a meadow.”

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CHARLIE CHAPLIN

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