

Farm Crisis Mosaic Mural designer shares her story

The following story comes directly from Elaine Wallis, lead artist and designer of the farm crisis Mosaic mural that is now displayed in Corydon on the north wall of the Redeemed: A Second Change Boutique. We wanted to share this piece with our readers:

I've never cried so much over paint.

Hearing about Michael's passing on Wednesday and then the reactions to our mural, it has been the most emotional project I've ever done so it's taken me some time to collect my thoughts and share them here.

I'll start with the back story:

Nancy Bennett was really inspired after seeing photos of the mosaic mural that I had created for Niagara's Serbian Culture in my home town.

She cornered me in Australia last November while I was still basking in a Walldog afterglow and asked me, "would you do something like that for the Iowa walldogs?" I immediately said, "No way, that would be impossible"

But my inside voice said "Are you out of your f****ing mind?!"

But then she told me her story.

And she broke me.

Dan and Nancy lost their farm to the bank 40 years ago. They were one of many farmers that had to start over from nothing. They lost everything, moved to town and had to work their way out of a deep hole. Nancy painted signs. Dan said, "That's not going to be enough" and they started a company called Danco Inc. supplying uniforms and sports equipment. (That became a very successful business still operating today)

One of their very first orders was to supply the ball caps for the 'Iowa Farm Unity Coalition'. These caps were worn as a symbol of solidarity by so many suffering from this farm crisis in Iowa and Willie Nelson wore the cap throughout the Farm Aid Concert Tour.

Wow...there's the money shot! My brain was already spinning.

But how the heck could we do a complex pictorial mosaic mural in three days?

More importantly, how do I say NO to Nancy Bennett?... Damn it, I don't think she's ever taken No for an answer.

So I had to lay down

some conditions (Ok, she might have called them 'demands').

(Walldog Friends, you guys are going to hate me right now, so if you want to delete your beautiful comments I totally understand but I screen shot them all to show my Mom)

1. I could only work with a select team. Noella Cotnam, Loraine Lamb Lalonde and Joy Kjer. These amazing women get me and they paint fast and loose, just like me.

2. I would need to paint the original maquette at 25 percent, photograph each painting and have them direct printed onto individual six ml. dybond panels. We would paint on top of the print with nova paint in our own expressive styles while maintaining the light, shadow and shapes of the printed image. (The adhesion was great just in case anyone is wondering.)

3. I wanted a space away from too much foot traffic so we could stay focused.

4. I wanted to be indoors.

5. with air conditioning.

6. Five chairs and five easels...I thought I needed 5 artists. (I was forbidden to ask Christine Brunk-De-shazo and Mace Marx was unable to make it.)

7. and of course a Wash-room ... with washout sink

8. Barista Coffee.

9. Wet bar would be nice.

Ok 8 & 9 got axed but we survived.

Lee brought his Espresso machine serving us amazing coffee every day and he even made the best celebratory Old Fashion Cocktails complete with his homemade cherries when we finished! HELL YA!

But here's some of the rest of the story:

Just about every person that dropped by to see the work shared their story of loss and hardship, all with tears in their eyes. This happened 40 YEARS ago and it is still so raw!

One woman tells me "That's my Dad in front of the SOLD tractor. Not long ago he found a tractor just like the one that got auctioned off in 1985. He didn't need a tractor but he wanted the one he lost. He bought it."

It's a walldog tradition to hold a community dinner auction on the Saturday night as a fund raiser for the event. Project leaders donate their maquettes or a piece of original art to be auctioned off and the money raised goes towards the upkeep of these public

art displays. The auctioneer, Don Wagner hadn't seen my maquette so he popped by our work site on Saturday morning to get an idea of what he was going to be selling. He had to sit down, he was so moved and then with tears in his eyes he told me that he was the auctioneer for Dan and Nancy's farm in 1983 and for Dan's brother's farm the next week. I asked him if he would talk about that at the auction tonight. Through tears he said, 'I can never talk about that'.

That night my maquette sold for \$7,100.00 and is being donated to the Wayne County museum. Nancy Bennett bought it. When she went to pay for it, someone had already paid her bill.

The man with the yellow knitted toque (Top panel, far right). He's from Corydon (Pronounced Kor-din if you're from here). His name is Ross Blount and he was the fellow who started planting a white cross on the lawn in front of city hall every time someone lost their farm to the bank.

On Saturday night at the dinner auction, a young man named Duncan sought me out, he's actually crying while thanking me for this mural and then says, 'I want you to meet my Grandpa.' I met and hugged a tearful Grandpa Ross.

The crosses remained in place for several months until he was ordered to remove them but he couldn't get rid of them. As a child Duncan remembered seeing them stacked in the barn and Grandpa told him the story. Duncan used the Farm Crisis as his subject for school projects and he would bring one of the crosses to school as part of the presentation.

Ross told me, "the only good thing that came out of that was that we were the only county in Iowa without a suicide because we supported each other. Those crosses held the community together."

And last but not least, I don't believe Walldogs would exist and we wouldn't be here today if not for Nancy and Dan's loss. And that homemade sign in the centre of the mural truly delivers the message of this work of art, "Tough Times Never Last, Tough People Do!" and I don't know anyone tougher than my friend Nancy Bennett.

How could I ever say NO?



This closeup image shows the great detail portrayed within the Farm Crisis Mosaic Mural.



Lead designer Elaine Wallis, fourth from left, poses for a quick photo with Wayne County's Sara Wampler, far left and original Walldog Nancy Bennett, second from right and fellow artists that contributed to the beautiful Farm Crisis Mosaic Mural. [Walldog image]



The maquette model of the Farm Crisis mural that Nancy Bennett bought during the auction held on Saturday evening of the Walldog Festival. Bennett donated the piece to the Prairie Trails Museum where it will proudly be on display for many years to come. [Walldog image]



Pictured of left: Elaine Wallis posed for a photo with our own Ross Blount, middle and his grandson Duncan. Ross was the person that began placing crosses within the Wayne County Courthouse yard after each farm was lost. [Walldog image]

Pictured on right: Jim Oskam lead the way for installation of not only the Farm Crisis Mosaic Mural, but also all murals that were hung across Wayne County. [Walldog image]

"The object of art is not to reproduce reality, but to create a reality of the same intensity."

