

Syracuse art mocks work while creating jobs in high-poverty neighborhood



Morgan Williams, Ian Funderburg, Patty Ortiz, Dwight Hobart, Mary Anne McClusky and Brian Hammons stand in front of one of the artworks they made at the SALTQuarters as part of the "Work Won't Kill You" exhibit by Ortiz.

Syracuse, N.Y. -- The crew at the [SALTQuarters](#) on Syracuse's Near West Side looked like doctors, all lined up in white coats with their names stitched in. But they are artists.

The handful of community members employed by SALTQuarters Artist in Residence Patty Ortiz were simply people who needed a job a few

weeks ago. They saw her ad and answered it, having little idea of what they would have to do.

The ad explained: They would wear a uniform, they would punch a clock, they would get paid. And they would create art.

The exhibit, "Work Won't Kill You," is based on a saying Ortiz's father, now 94, still utters.

She'd come home from something as a kid, fling herself on the couch, and say she was too tired to do any more. "Work won't kill you," he'd tell her. Laziness would, though.

Ortiz's father, who is still alive and still known to get up on his own roof to fix something, began as a migrant worker in San Antonio. He became a welder who always held down a second job so his kids could have extras like music lessons.

Ortiz wanted to use art and real workers to examine what work means to people -- how they do it and how it makes them feel.

Ortiz, whose work has been exhibited around the globe, first did the "Work Won't Kill You" exhibit in San Antonio, where she is from. There, she hired workers who took apart uniforms and stitched them back together as a shelter for themselves.

In Syracuse, Ortiz's workers went out into the streets of the Near West Side to talk to people about their neighborhood and what it means to them. They took pictures of art and people. Then they put them together as a display piece, attached to a map, in the SALTQuarters on Wyoming Street.

In doing their work, they met people and talked about community. And they realized that change for their community only comes from working together, Ortiz said. They met artists in the community, including a man who had painted "WHY" on a wall near one of the poorest housing projects in the city. One worker, Ian Funderburg, even broke up a fight between two boys while they were out taking pictures.

None of the workers had steady jobs before coming to art project. Most were interested in the offer of higher-than-minimum-wage pay for making some kind of art. But each will take away something different when their temporary jobs end.

Morgan Williams helps his wife with her daycare business during the day. The WWKY project offered him the chance to make a little extra money while getting some, well, peace, he said.

Mary Anne McClusky just moved to the Near West Side from Cincinnati. She needed work, but working has often made her anxious in the past. This examination of work through art has helped her feel more confident about working elsewhere in the future, she said. And she's learned lots

about her new neighborhood by being in the streets, talking to people.

Brian Hammons is 59. He was hoping for a break from the usually physical jobs he often takes. "I was doing back-breaking work," he said. He thought this might be more of the same, building things or installing them. But instead he found himself wandering the Near West Side, talking to people, taking their pictures, and thinking about how he and the others could turn their findings into art.

"I was pleasantly surprised," Hammons said.

When they started, the exhibit space at the SALTQuarters was empty and white. Now it is full of life and color. Art. "It was beautiful to watch this flower bloom," Hammons said.

The group was working to glue colored dots onto a giant print that combines the heroines from "The Wiz" and "The Wizard of Oz."

In some ways, Ortiz's work series mocks the silliness of some jobs and work structures.

People, she said, often become so wrapped up in keeping their jobs that they forget the purpose of their work. Giving workers the task of gluing dots on a wall became a metaphor for some of that mindlessness, but it becomes its own thing as the team of people, mostly from two impoverished neighborhoods of Syracuse, work together to make something of sense and beauty.

"Then it became something meaningful," Ortiz said.

The "Work Won't Kill You" exhibit is open at the SALTQuarters through June 17. The gallery, at 301 Wyoming St. in Syracuse, is open Tuesday through Saturday from 1 p.m. to 6 p.m.

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