

Public art promotes community health

By Amy Queen

“Kids Fridge”, artwork created by Terri Porta, will soon appear at 10th Street West and Avenue D.

“Funky Frames”, another brightly colored Porta sculpture coming this spring incorporates drawings by McKinley Elementary students. This sculpture has a concrete base inscribed with quotes from Montana artists.

Along the west edge of North Park, neighbors will see Mariah Gladstone’s sculpture celebrating the indigenous identity of many Billings residents.

All three of these sculptures are part of Mobilize the MAGIC (Making Art Grounded in Community). This initiative involves the City of Billings, Billings Arts Association, Healthy By Design and a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. I work with Healthy By Design, a community health promotion coalition of Billings Clinic, Intermountain Health and RiverStone Health.

Why are health organizations partnering in public art projects? Because research indicates that art promotes healthier communities. When artists actively contribute to community planning and design, they enhance economic development, road safety and neighborhood beautification.

Art in public spaces helps revitalize neighborhoods and foster social connections. People unite to plan and present art. They gather to discuss and appreciate art that all can share.

Incorporating art into healthcare environments has been found to reduce anxiety, alleviate pain and speed up recovery for patients.

Mobilize MAGIC

This spring, Mobilize the MAGIC is establishing these three art hubs along the city’s first neighborhood bikeway, which runs from North Park through Pioneer Park to Rose Park.

The city used traffic speed data to select locations for the art. At 10th Street West and Avenue D, the project included installing structures to improve safety and slow traffic speeds.

Porta’s sculptures highlight the positive changes for public safety. Kids Fridge includes art from students who worked on it at Highland Care Academy, the Saturday Live all-school carnival and the Yellowstone Art Museum.

For the sculpture being placed just west of McKinley Elementary, Porta, a Billings artist, worked closely with those elementary students. Both of Porta’s projects encourage youth to be creative and involved in their community.

Gladstone, the artist selected to create the North Park sculpture, describes herself as Blackfoot and Cherokee. She is active in cultural revitalization and promotion of healthy, indigenous foods.

Empowering neighbors

The 2023 Yellowstone County Community Health Needs Assessment conducted for Healthy By Design, found that most adults surveyed in Yellowstone County feel that they have at least some impact on making their community a better place to live. However, adults on the younger and older ends of the age spectrum are more likely to say they have “no impact” on improving life in their community.

The Community Health Needs Assessment also found that Yellowstone County residents have safety concerns. Among adults surveyed, 22.2% consider their own neighborhoods to be “slightly safe” or “not at all safe.”

Incorporating public art into neighborhood design can improve residents’ perceptions and experiences of safety. Safer neighborhoods can lower residents’ risk of exposure to violence and crime and attract new residents and businesses.

Input from residents, city departments and community agencies will help guide plans for future public arts projects.

All of us can actively support public art initiatives that enhance community well-being. Whether it’s beautifying your yard, collaborating with neighbors to paint a mural or engaging with local elementary students on an art project, every effort contributes to fostering a healthier and more connected environment for all.

By mobilizing the power of public art, Yellowstone County is building healthier and more vibrant communities. The intersection of art and public health will pave the way for a brighter future.

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