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'WYANDOT ECHOES' | New downtown mural: Artwork is a link to the past, a bridge to the future

Native Americans say mural celebrates their heritage and represents a hope for healing.

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Special to The Star

"We want this mural to be a symbol of healing. We want it to teach others that fear can only lead to arrogance, broken relationships and a broken community."

Jan English, the principal chief of the Wyandot Nation of Kansas

James Gilliford, a Native American and Kansas City, Kan., native, remembers as a child walking through Huron Indian Cemetery, located near the corner of North Seventh Street and Minnesota Avenue.

But at the time, he said, he knew little of the cemetery's cultural significance or his own Wyandot Nation heritage.

In the past, Gilliford said, Native Americans living in Kansas City, Kan., were afforded few opportunities to freely and proudly express their cultural heritage.

"At one time in this community, it wasn't wise to tell others you were Native American," said Gilliford, who now serves as second chief of the Wyandot Nation of Kansas.

"Now, another door has opened, and we must use the time to make the best of that opportunity."

Gilliford made his remarks Sunday in praise of a work of art that local Native Americans and a church organization hope will not only beautify the community but also will serve as a historical symbol and heal old prejudices and misunderstandings.

"Wyandot Echoes," a 24-foot high by 60-foot long mural depicting the history of the Wyandot Nation in Kansas City, Kan., was sponsored by City Vision Ministries, a nonprofit community development agency located at 726 Armstrong Ave.

Agency officials originally hoped to dedicate the assembled mural on the west wall of the Mercy & Truth Medical Missions administration building, 636 Minnesota Ave., across the street from the Huron Indian Cemetery.

However, windy weather and scheduling delays with a construction crane needed to assemble the mural's 4-by-12 foot metal panels caused agency

officials to move the mural's dedication ceremony indoors and set back its final installation until sometime next month.

Approximately 50 people attended the ceremony held at City Vision's warehouse, 734 Armstrong Ave.

Taking almost two years to research, design and complete, "Wyandot Echoes" is the agency's seventh mural in downtown Kansas City, Kan., and the first one dedicated to the Wyandot Nation of Kansas.

The Wyandot Nation of Kansas is one of four members of the Wendat Confederacy, which represents Native Americans in Canada and the United States. The self-identified Wendat were also named "Hurons" by early French explorers in Quebec, Canada, and "Wyandots" by English speakers.

Attending Sunday's dedication were representatives from the Wyandot Nation of Kansas and the Wyandotte Nation of Oklahoma.

As part of the dedication, a traditional African welcome song was performed by Bird Fleming's West African drum ensemble. Two traditional Native American dances were performed by Jay Mule and Toni Tsatoke.

A representative of Joe Reardon, mayor of the Unified Government of Wyandotte County/Kansas City, Kan., read a proclamation celebrating the mural's creation.

City Vision Ministries received private donations as well as a grant from the Kansas Arts Commission to complete the mural, which cost about \$10,000 to paint and assemble.

The mural was painted by Kansas City, Kan., artists Joe Faus and Alisha Gambino with the assistance of Duane Dudley, a Native American artist who attended Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence.

According to Faus, the mural, with its orange, blue, green and white coloring and its depictions of bears, turtles, deer, fish and birds, contains Native American imagery, both universal and unique to the Wendat Confederacy.

"It represents the Wyandots' physical and spiritual journeys to Kansas and Oklahoma from Michigan, Ohio and Canada," he said. "We used the Native American tradition of creation as well as local historical figures to complete an eternal circle."

Two of the people represented on the mural are Eliza B. "Lyda" and Helena Conley, two Wyandot Nation sisters who, at the turn of the 20th century, lived in a caretaker's shack at the Huron Indian Cemetery and padlocked its iron gates to prevent the cemetery from being destroyed.

Jan English, the principal chief of the Wyandot Nation of Kansas, sang a

traditional Wyandot-language blessing at the conclusion of the dedication program.

To English, the creation of the mural is symbolic of a new era of appreciation and understanding between Wyandotte County and the local Native American people it was named for.

“We want this mural to be a symbol of healing,” English said. “We want it to teach others that fear can only lead to arrogance, broken relationships and a broken community.”