

Downtown Coordinating Council

INNOVATION

Project Hope, Unity and Compassion was truly about making lemonade out of lemons for our team. While we didn't expect to be thrown into the national spotlight with less than two weeks notice, we wanted to make the most of the experience and capitalize on the opportunity to unite our downtown stakeholders.

As the rally weekend approached, there was a fear the event would become a flashpoint of conflict and violence. Based on that very real possibility, business owners began making plans to board up their establishments. On Wednesday, one business planned to board up their windows. By Thursday and into Friday, many businesses followed suit to secure their storefronts to avoid potential damage. The project's innovation existed in the tight timeline and ever-changing dynamics. Every element of the mural project was designed and executed on the fly, from assigning artists, hiring a photographer to document the murals in place and partnering with a videographer working with PBS American Portrait to capture the historic event in our community.

Ultimately, the presidential rally drew a crowd far smaller than had been anticipated. We had no reported incidents of damage to businesses or properties in our downtown. Instead of conflict and violence, the community ended the night dancing in the streets of the Historic Greenwood District in downtown Tulsa. While the event sparked a range of emotions for our community during a tough time, it ended full of hope, unity and compassion.

OUTCOME

While the murals were in place on storefronts for a short period of time, in most cases less than 72 hours, the impact of the project was far deeper. Not only did the artwork serve as a strong message to a large media audience, it also served as an important reminder for Tulsans of the pride they have in their own community. The artwork was featured extensively through traditional and social media helping bring positive attention to our downtown, the businesses, property owners, and the artists who worked quickly to help us transform downtown.

Due to the overwhelming interest and community support of the project, we planned a gallery show in partnership with the artists that was held in January 2021. As we embarked on the 100-year commemoration of the Tulsa Race Massacre, the gallery show served as another important reminder of all we can overcome together. We sold prints of the art and auctioned the murals to help raise funds for the newly-formed Main Street organization in Historic Greenwood, the site of the Tulsa Race Massacre. Nearly \$2,000 was donated to help the organization preserve the historic character of the district while achieving economic revitalization reflective of the historically African-American entrepreneurship that has existed in the district for over a century.

More than 250 people attended the gallery show and many more interacted with the virtual show content. While we hope the exact political climate won't repeat itself, we are confident about our downtown community's eagerness to respond collectively.

EXECUTION

Project Hope, Unity, Compassion was a pop-up project completed on a tight timeframe. In order to best reach diverse artists in the community, we partnered with our local Arts & Humanities Council to promote the call to artists. Thanks to the generosity of an anonymous donor, we were able to offer a stipend for the participating artists to help compensate them for their time, talent and supplies. Within hours, more than 300 artists responded from five different states and a dozen were selected and assigned locations. The first artist began painting less than five hours after the call for artists was announced. Each mural was completed within 24 hours and remained in place through the rally weekend.

As businesses reopened the following week, we coordinated to collect the murals to store until future plans were solidified. In the following months, we coordinated with Living Arts of Tulsa, a nonprofit art gallery in downtown, and the artists on the gallery show that was held in January.

Despite the quick timeframe to launch the project, the community and our downtown partners were eager to offer support and ultimately played a big role in the project's overall success.

REPRESENTATION

Given the dynamics at play in our community, especially coinciding with Juneteenth weekend, ensuring diverse artists had the opportunity to participate in the project was of utmost importance. Too often urgency is the enemy of equity. But despite the project coming together quickly, more than half the artists involved were artists of color and women. We provided additional opportunities for the artists of color to share their unique perspective through a video series, podcast and artist panel virtual event. Additionally, we partnered with a local Black artist to help curate the gallery show.

While the Downtown Coordinating Council staff took the lead on organizing the project details, the execution became a community endeavor. Two downtown arts organizations helped with critical pieces of the project, a corporate partner helped provide funding, a multitude of business and property owners granted permission and a diverse group of Tulsans visited the gallery show and purchased art.

REPLICATION

Downtowns throughout the country have responded to big challenges in unique ways this year. We are proud this project can serve as an example of how to overcome unprecedented interruptions and help drive the community narrative during divisive events. Downtowns are designed to be welcoming, inclusive places for the community to gather. But sometimes, due to elements beyond our control, they might not feel that way. This project helped prove the viability of temporary activations to help create a large impact. The support from the community was overwhelming and served as an opportunity for us to build and strengthen relationships with our partners throughout downtown. Oftentimes, art—even when temporary—has a unique ability to help spark conversation and begin to close the divide.

Project Hope, Unity and Compassion came together quickly, was executed on a minimal budget and left a lasting impact. The tenets of this installation could easily be adapted to overcome a multitude of challenges regardless of geography or event.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

At its core, Project Hope, Unity and Compassion was a straight-forward endeavor – commissioning a dozen artists to paint temporary murals throughout downtown Tulsa. What made the project more complex was the short timeline, tense political climate and ongoing global pandemic. But it also provided a great outlet for our staff to channel energy into a project that grew larger than we could have imagined.

We had no way to anticipate the number of businesses who would board up their storefronts for the weekend. We managed a list of interested and available artists and a list of confirmed locations. We kept in near-constant communication with our artists to ensure they were able to safely complete their mural and encouraged artists to wear face coverings while painting and watch their distance to help mitigate any spread of COVID-19.

Despite the obstacles, the project was what our community needed during an uncertain time and helped reaffirm the core values of downtown Tulsa in a highly visible, impactful way.