



**SURE BEATS GRAFFITI.** This mural on the wall of the National Guard Armory on downtown hides a graffiti-covered surface. Many murals are the result of a Parks Department program.

## Parks Program Is Painting The Town

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The Long Beach Department of Parks and Recreation is painting the town. Painting over the town's graffiti, that is.

Parks and Recreation uses money allotted to the Community Development Department by the government to cover graffiti. Murals are painted over walls that are often hit with graffiti. Painting murals over graffiti covered walls often prevents further desecration of walls.

"We want the community to accept the mural as their own and many times that does

involve bringing youth from the community that have some interest in art," said Steve Blancarte, superintendent of the Long Beach Department of Parks and Recreation. "It takes months for a mural to evolve from an idea, and a selection site - we go to any site that we have to."

When Ray Jackson needed a summer job in 1988 he filled out several applications and received no response. He realized that there was very little opportunity for youth to work back then and possibly less now.

Jackson did receive one call that summer from the Dep-

ment of Parks and Recreation. It was an opportunity to work in the department's Summer Youth Employment Program, painting murals over graffiti.

"I was just sitting at home that summer lifting weights until they called," Jackson said. "I was worried about how I was going to get money for school clothes and supplies. It's hard to get jobs."

The Summer Youth Employment Program is one of three programs that works with members of the community and artists to help cover graffiti with mural art. Two professional artists work with 22 youths during the eight week summer program.

"I think the program helps a lot. It gives kids a chance to make money legally," Jackson said. "It also helps the parents when the kids make money. It's hard to find money for bills and school supplies."

The Community Development Department funds Parks and Recreation with graffiti abatement money from the state. The search for locations is a long and tiring process, Blan-

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## Murals

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carte said. Parks and Recreation does not limit its program to certain neighborhoods, walls or buildings.

"We try and get to the areas that are infested with graffiti the most, that's the bottom line. We don't look at the jurisdiction of who owns that wall or that building, we look at the need," he added. "It may be school property, it may be private property, it may be city property, it may even be military property. We had to run through that bureaucracy (military), which was an experience in itself, but a very good one."

The military property in trouble with graffiti was the California National Guard Armory on Seventh Street. Massive amounts of graffiti were covered up with a mural entitled, "Oil, Life and Ecology," by artist Eva Cockroft, who is also a professor at Cal State Long Beach.

"I think the mural has worked out really well for us. There's been no graffiti at all since we put it up there. Before the mural that wall got hit with graffiti at least once a week," said retired Colonel Carl Williams. "I hope we can do more, if we can stop graffiti it helps not only us but the community."

The design of "Oil, Life and Ecology" incorporated themes often associated with the city of Long Beach. It also gives timely advice to the community and world about alternative fuel sources.

"Oil was crucial to the development of Long Beach. The mural incorporates ecological problems and consequences of oil," Cockroft said. "I wanted to raise the issue of alternative fuel sources."

Cockroft, added that the issues raised by "Oil, Life and Ecology" could not be more current because of the Gulf War and President Bush's new energy plan, which dictates a development of wildlife reserves in Alaska in return for oil drilling rights.

Cockroft also had four youth apprentices on "Oil, Life and Ecology," which was dedicated

last October. They were part of the Parks and Recreation's second mural program, the Mural Mentor Project. An artist will design a mural and be assisted by three or four apprentices. Jackson was among the interns working with and learning from Cockroft.

"I think the program is terrific. I had four apprentices. The Mentor Program is very positive. They (apprentices) have an opportunity to work with a professional artist and apply the knowledge they learn to their own work," Cockroft said.

"I worked on 'Oil, Life and Ecology' in the Youth Mentor Project after I was involved with Summer Youth Employment. After that a friend of mine and I finally worked on our own mural," Jackson said.

The mural program has been supervised by Parks and Recreation since 1984 and has put up nearly 30 murals. Along with community murals, there is also a Murals in Schools program, which paints over graffiti covered walls in Long Beach schools. The mural program is budgeted for three to four murals a year, but that number will probably rise to seven next year.

"If they (Community Development) double our program next year, we can specifically target communities and neighborhoods that are essentially at risk, and with high incidence of crime," said Heather Green, mural coordinator for Parks and Recreation.

The Parks and Recreation Program targets what Blancarte calls, "youth at risk" for their projects. These children are often made up of, but not limited to, lower-income youths who may have trouble finding work elsewhere. Some are former graffiti artists, but the program looks for youth with artistic talent, Blancarte said.

"You'll find in the youth-at-risk these days that a lot of them do have artistic ability — those that use spray cans to tag and do graffiti will do it as an outlet for a frustration or family problem, but a lot of them do have great artistic ability," he said.

Blancarte made it clear that the Parks and Recreation pro-

gram does not look for former graffiti artists to work on their murals. Other programs like Homeland in Long Beach work with former graffiti artists to develop their skills and talent.

"The mural that we have done recently that I'm most proud of is the mural at Belmont Shore because of the area it's in and the visibility that it gets, Blancarte said. "The fact that 26 youths and two local artists put in a mural that was beautiful and fit right into the environment was just incredible."

The mural is located on the Marine Bureau wall is near the Belmont Plaza Pool. Belmont Shore is not usually thought of as a community with a graffiti problem, but the wall at the Marine Bureau was often targeted. Now it is hardly marked up at all.

It is a rarity for a mural to be hit with graffiti, Green said. A city-wide respect for the work and the community often keeps the graffiti artists from vandalizing the wall, she added.

The mural programs offer children an opportunity to make money, learn a great deal about art and improve the Long Beach environment.

"These kids normally wouldn't get an opportunity to go up on the wall and contribute something to their city — they're finding out that they're doing something that's lasting, something that means something," Green said.