

MURAL, MAP & COMMUNITY HISTORY TOOLKIT



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



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*This work modeled on the Mural Map and Community History Toolkit, by Shel Neymark.
The toolkit was created in partnership with Springboard for the Arts via Creative Exchange.
www.springboardexchange.org*

Cover image: Detail, Map/mural of the Embudo Valley

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FOREWORD FROM SPRINGBOARD FOR THE ARTS

I am delighted to share this Mural Map & Community History Toolkit with you! Springboard for the Arts and Art of the Rural were inspired to commission a toolkit from an artist living and working in a rural place, as a way to bridge the Rural Generation Summit in May 2019, and the Rural Arts & Culture Summit in October 2019. This document is the result.

At the Rural Generation Summit in Jackson, Mississippi, we announced an open call for this commission, and were delighted to receive applications from artists all over the country, with projects of all shapes, sizes, and scales. What was evident in all of the applications, was the unique creativity, and how artists were using the resources of each place to make engaging, community-facing work.

What drew us to Shel Neymark's project is that yes, it is a mural map of the Embudo Valley, and yes, it is a technical ceramics project, but what became clear was that the process of making the mural map was a process of engaging a community in conversation about its history. The process of being in community, consulting with elders, deciding what histories to highlight, what was important to the town—these all come through in this toolkit. As you read it, I hope you see paths for your own community in there. Whether you wind up making informational signposts, or a community play, or painting murals, or replicating the ceramics process, artists play an active and critical role as the storytellers, preservationists, and welcomers to our towns.

It's an honor to be able to launch this toolkit at the Rural Arts & Culture Summit in Grand Rapids, MN. There are many people to thank, including Michele Anderson, Naomi Schliesman, Dominic Facio, and Nancy Xiáoróng Valentine for leading Springboard for the Arts' work from Fergus Falls, Minnesota; Hannah K. Holman for her work as the coordinator for the Rural Arts & Culture Summit; Matthew Fluharty and Savannah Barrett of Art of the Rural; Nicole Rupersburg for all of her Creative Exchange editorial work and for shepherding this toolkit along; and of course to Shel Neymark, for sharing his work and his love for the Embudo Valley. I hope that love and creativity inspires you in your place.

— Carl Atiya Swanson, Associate Director,
Springboard for the Arts

INTRODUCTION FROM THE ARTIST



"Barrancas Blancas," geological landmark in Embudo. **photo: Shel Neymark**

Seduced by her spectacular beauty, my love affair with Northern New Mexico's Embudo Valley began in 1979 when I purchased land here. The honeymoon commenced when I moved here permanently in 1983 and befriended some of the interesting, funny, intelligent, and caring folks: artists, farmers, hippies, and Hispanos, all living in our tiny rural valley of 1,400 people. My love continues to deepen as my beloved reveals more of her rich, complex, and subtle history.

Helping to found a library here seemed a perfect way to serve my generous community. We opened the Embudo Valley Library and Community Center in Dixon, New Mexico, in 1992 with donated books, volunteer librarians, and shelves crafted by local carpenters. We didn't have a plan for raising our \$200 monthly rent and didn't even know if anyone would actually use the library. We checked out 50 books the first day.

In 2015, I was library board president. I sat in the White House as Michelle Obama bestowed the Institute for Museum and Library Services award to us—one of five libraries nationally to receive the award that year.

As an artist, I cherish venues where my work is accessible to everyone. I am fortunate to have been awarded three large public art commissions in New Mexico, and they afforded me the opportunity to develop ideas about creating art spaces that foster community-building. I hoped to do a piece for my own Embudo Valley community someday, and I knew the library would be the perfect venue.

The library purchased the old Zellers General Store property in Dixon in 2002. It is now home to the library, a community center, a public park, and a food co-op. A driveway between the community center and the co-op struck me as a perfect location for an art piece and public gathering space.

I wanted the project to focus on acequia culture in our valley. Acequias—irrigation canals—have been the heart of Northern New Mexico culture for over 300 years. Introduced to Spain by the Moors and to New Mexico by the Spanish, this system of irrigation canals made it possible for Spaniards to settle here and grow food. The collaboration required to build and maintain acequias fosters a deep sense of community that endures today.

Acequias are elegant. Water is diverted from a river that flows through the middle of a valley. The resulting canals follow the contours of the land. I thought that the sinuous marks they make on the land would be a perfect aesthetic structure for an art piece.

Acequia culture is threatened: fewer people depend on the land for sustenance and it is difficult to engage young people in the work of maintenance and governance of the acequia system. I thought an art piece about acequias could be educational and foster pride in a living cultural heritage that deserves preservation.

I discussed the proposal with local historian Estevan Arellano. He was also interested in preserving ancient place names, and so the scope of the piece grew wider: it became a map that highlights not only acequias but the rich history of our valley.

It was important to involve local young people in the creation and installation of this project so they would learn about and develop pride in the place they live. Daija Fernandez, Mark Gonzales, John Salazar, and Brooklynn Sullivan were the teens who worked on this project with me. They could become ambassadors—educating others, and, we hope, maintaining these traditions as they get older.

Like most other places in the US, our community deals with issues of poverty, drug abuse, violence, and hopelessness. I wanted to work with youth confronting these issues in our community for the project. It was also important to pay them: the project provided work experience and brought money into their families.

It took a year to complete the map, then the driveway was paved and picnic tables installed so that it became the focal point of this new community gathering place. The piece is now a beloved source of pride in the community. Locals and visitors can often be seen studying the map, pointing out sites, and lingering in the space.

— **Shel Neymark, Embudo Valley artist and creator of the Mural Map Project**

VALUES & CORE PRINCIPLES

- People who are poor, disadvantaged, or poorly educated do not have less native intelligence or value than those who are more fortunate.
- People from different cultures have varying and valuable perspectives. If we are to solve the difficult problems we face, we must be open to diversity. It makes us stronger.
- Public space is endangered, partly due to car culture and the commercialization of so many aspects of our lives. Public art can create public space which, in turn, can foster community building.
- Community cohesion makes us happier and builds platforms for problem-solving. It enables us to better deal with major crises such as those caused by climate change. It facilitates us to help each other through personal crises.
- Historical perspective can teach us a lot about what direction in which we want our society to move, and what we should avoid.
- Appreciation and gratitude for natural and artistic beauty, wonder and awe at the complexity and mystery of the universe, and love for our fellow inhabitants of planet Earth will guide us to make the right decisions in our lives.
- Every place is unique. There is beauty everywhere. There are stories everywhere.

WHAT YOU NEED FOR THE PROJECT

COMMUNITY BUY-IN

I spoke with many people about the proposal, especially community leaders including teachers, business owners, those connected with churches, and others. I was open to suggestions and followed leads. My enthusiasm created excitement.

COMMUNITY PARTNERS

My situation was unique: I was the library board president and proposed a project on library property. The board had extensive discussions. I offered to resign from the board to avoid a conflict of interest but the board preferred that I not resign. They decided funding would not come directly from the library budget; I would be responsible for fundraising.

I had informal communication with others in the community. I was concerned that local other artists might feel there should have been a call or some other kind of formal selection process, but no one had a problem with it. We decided to move forward with the project, and I have had nothing but positive feedback to this day.

A proposal for a mural map or community history project could come from a variety of organizations: municipalities, libraries, schools, community centers, parks, private commercial interests, or, as in my case, from an individual artist.

LOCATION

I chose a spot that is visible and accessible to pedestrians: an outdoor area that could be converted to a place where people can gather and linger.

For others wanting to create a similar project, it could be indoors or out. The size of the map or project depends on the available space. It could be in relief, like mine, or a painted mural, or sidewalk pavers, or artist-designed informational signs. It could take the form of a three-dimensional maquette. People love scale models!

OTHER NEEDS

We needed a centralized studio space during the school year, as my studio is difficult for the students to access. The library's community center has a multi-purpose room, so we set up a studio there. I transported greenware and glazed ware back and forth to my studio for firing. During the summer, we worked in my studio.

FUNDING

Most funders don't give grants directly to individuals, but the library is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. Municipal entities can also usually accept grant money. Private or commercial funders have more flexibility. Felicity Fonseca is the library's executive director and bookkeeper, and she managed the money flow for this project.

Often funding for public art comes from "percent for art" programs, which designate funds for art from public infrastructure projects. The parameters for the type of art are usually set by the facilities receiving the art with technical support from public art agencies.

Rural areas have few public infrastructure projects, especially unincorporated towns like Dixon, New Mexico, where the Embudo Valley Library and Community Center is located. Consequently, opportunities for public art in rural areas are rare.

Artist-generated ideas for public art can be difficult to fund. There are national funding sources like the National Endowment for the Arts Our Town program, and Artplace America, as well as public art resources like Forecast Public Art, but I would like to see more opportunities for artists to unleash their creativity in the public arena.

Having written many grants for the library, I was familiar with local funders. Federal grants can be complicated, but many grants are relatively easy to write. Some simple rules for successful grant writing include:

- Apply to funders whose guidelines say they fund the type of project you want to do.
- Craft your narrative to respond to the questions they ask.
- Keep your language simple and to the point. Eliminate needless words: They have a lot to read.
- When possible, use stories in your narratives.

Though this sounds like common sense, funders have told me they get many requests outside of their areas and narratives that don't address the information they've requested.

BUDGET

Budgeting is difficult. My original estimate was low. I budgeted \$18,000; the final cost was \$24,000. This was partly because we increased the scope of the project. Payment for my work was budgeted at \$9,000. Though I knew this would not provide me with a living wage for the amount of labor and time required, I was willing to donate time and energy to a project I believed in. However, I am not advocating for this model; I think artists should be paid well for their time.

We started creating the mural when funders pledged \$12,000. I don't recommend that others commence a project before the total funding is secured. My experience with the library was that we usually achieved seemingly impossible goals, but having faith that funding would come doesn't mean I expected it to fall from the sky. I worked hard to find it. Had we not received full funding, I still would have finished the project on my own.

See page 14 of the appendix for a breakdown of the final budget and all expenses.

TEENAGE PARTICIPANTS

I wanted to work with four teenagers. Two were recommended by their former teachers at Dixon Elementary, one I knew personally, and one was recommended by our librarian. Two were 14 years old, one 16, and one 17. All were born and raised here. Three are Hispano, one Caucasian. All had difficult home situations. All of them were paid for their time and labor.

OTHER PERSONNEL

Local historian (and my partner in this project) Estevan Arellano died three months into the project. Fortunately he had given me a lot of input, including a map on which he wrote historical place names. He had also visited the studio to discuss historical sites with the teens.

Local poet, historian, and architect Levi Romero helped fill the void left by Estevan's death.

The Arid Lands Institute of California was doing acequia research in Dixon. Their director, Peter Arnold, was enthusiastic about the mural map. The institute printed and donated scaled topographical maps of the area.

Some of the community elders we consulted with include:

- Jenny Ledoux: retired educator who wrote her thesis on the Dixon School Case, a New Mexico Supreme Court case about the church's role in public education that garnered national attention.
- Severin Fowles: professor of archeology at Columbia University and part-time Dixon resident.
- David Valdez: lifelong Dixon resident with knowledge about local buildings.
- Lebeo Martinez: lifelong Dixon resident and retired general store owner.
- Holly Haas: longtime Dixon resident and former bar owner.
- Charlotte Valdez: Presbyterian church elder with historic knowledge about the church and hospital.
- Julia Valdez: retired director of Dixon Senior Center.

Plus many more!

PROJECT STEPS

I'm not sure when I conceived the idea for a mural map on the side of the co-op building. I thought about it for a few years and discussed it many times with my friend and local historian Estevan Arellano and others. Everyone was enthusiastic. Around the beginning of 2014 I proposed it to the library board and began looking for funding. We started building the project in August 2014.

MAKING THE STAMPS

We first made upper- and lowercase clay stamps for each letter and number. Estevan recommended a font similar to one used in old Spanish documents.

We enlarged the font's size on a copier, then traced them through the paper onto wet clay. The teens and I carved the letters and numbers into the clay. We bisque-fired them, then pressed wet clay pieces into the carved, bisqued letters to create stamps. The stamps were then bisqued. Bisque-fired clay is porous so bisqued stamps don't stick when pressing them into wet clay.

DOCUMENTING THE SITES

Throughout the fall of 2014 we drew and photographed historic sites and buildings. Though we used photos enlarged on the copier to trace historic buildings onto the wet clay, drawing the sites served an important purpose. Drawing skills are important for visual artists. I wanted the teens to develop theirs. Drawing the sites helped us visually understand them in a way that photographs don't. We referred to our drawings frequently while creating the plaques, despite having photos.



"El Bosque Pueblo," wet clay plaque, 12th century abandoned pueblo site above Dixon, teen participant Mark Gonzales imagined how the buildings may have looked based on other, contemporaneous pueblos that still stand. **photo: Shel Neymark**



L-R Shel Neymark, John Salazar, Brooklynn Seebeck-Sullivan and Mark Gonzales hold section of topographical map before tracing it onto wet clay. **photo: Daija Fernandez**



"Presa" Diversion site of an acequia on the Embudo river. **photo: Tation Ullamcor**

CHOOSING THE SITES

Every place has a unique history. Choosing what to highlight in a map is subjective. Things to consider might include:

- **Is there anything from the ancient geological record you could highlight?** In hindsight, I regret that I didn't think to include the local site where a fossilized, extinct, 6- to 8-million-year-old three-toed horse skull was found by some children.
- **Are there natural landmarks of importance?** Some eroded sandstone hills here called Barrancas Blancas are iconic to the area. A natural passage into the wild Embudo Canyon called the Abrevadero is a personal favorite of mine.
- **Is there historic or continuing Native American activity?** Prior to commencing work on the map, archeologists confirmed there is a 12th-century pueblo site on the hills above Dixon. It was occupied for about 100 years. They found three shrines associated with the site. Based on pictures of intact ancient pueblos, one of the teens imagined what the pueblo might have looked like and carved it onto a plaque.
- **Are there older historic sites or events that happened in the area?** El Camino Real ("The Royal Road"), established in 1598, passed through what is now Dixon on its way between Mexico City and Taos, New Mexico. A local site is associated with the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, which drove the Spanish out of New Mexico for 19 years. The Battle of Embudo Pass, one of the few battles of the Mexican-American War, happened here in 1848. At the battle site, petroglyphs of crosses are carved into rocks commemorating the dead.
- **What more recent historical sites or events are important to the area?** Dixon hosted the first hospital in Northern New Mexico. Built by Presbyterian missionaries, people from a large geographical area, including the towns of Taos and Española, came here for their hospital care. Often older people from other parts of Northern New Mexico tell me they were born here.

- **What institutions or other entities are presently important to the area?** We decided to include our four churches as well as the school, library, community center, and post office.

- **Should commercial operations be included?** The teens were in favor of including our two wineries. I felt it was inappropriate to include private businesses. Other business would feel excluded such as the three local galleries. As businesses come and go, the mural would become out of date, and I didn't want it to resemble one of those ubiquitous chamber of commerce maps.

An exception was the Dixon Cooperative Market, a community enterprise in an historic building. It occupies the site of a general store that was established in the 1930s. A general/grocery store is integral to our town being a true community as opposed to a bedroom community.

The teens also lobbied to include the long-closed local bar and honky-tonk. I agreed: The history of the bar is woven into the history of the community. It had been a de facto community center—kids ran around while adults drank and gossiped. Hispanos and hippies socialized there. A couple of murders happened at the bar. A local heroin kingpin was arrested there after terrorizing the town for years. Not coincidentally, I got to know my wife there, dancing to local rock and roll bands that, 35 years later, still play around town.

The fourteen local acequias were the primary subject for organizing the map. Where an acequia is diverted from a river it is called a presa; where it flows back into a river is called a desague. We made "legend tiles" for each presa and desague, as well as for the three cemeteries and three prehistoric Native American shrine sites.

CREATING THE PIECES OF THE MAP

In our studio at the library's community center we made 30 round tile plaques commemorating the various chosen sites. We rolled out slabs of clay between two boards to achieve an even thickness. Using a compass, we scribed circles of differing sizes and cut them out with a fettling knife. After tracing images from photos onto the clay, we built up the images in relief, referring to our photos and drawings to refine the details.

No one plaque was made by one person; we all worked on different aspects of each one. A couple of the teens were adept artists. I assigned them complex details, while the others carved foliage and simpler things. They all improved as the months passed and could do a wider range of tasks.

I was specific about how each plaque should be made, how buildings should be carved, etc. I wanted the style to be cohesive. I had them redo areas that didn't meet my criteria. We stamped the name of the site into each plaque.

I brought the pieces to my studio to be fired. This was no easy task. Because I live down a long, rough dirt road, I usually access my home and studio by canoeing across the Rio Grande. Fragile greenware was packed into boxes with bubble wrap, driven to our boat dock, carried down funky stone stairs to be loaded into the canoe, paddled across the river, then loaded into a wheelbarrow for the trip to my studio.

After bisque firing, transport was done in reverse. We painted the plaques with glaze, then took them back to my studio to be fired again.

I worked with a ceramic engineer to formulate my clay body. It has an absorption rate of less than 3% at cone 02, making it freeze-thaw resistant. At this relatively low temperature, I can achieve a wide color range. The body contains lot of frit, which makes it expensive. It's a great body for handbuilding. It shrinks 7.5%. See page 19 of the appendix for recipes for the clay and my glazes.

For multiples of the smaller legend tiles, we made plaster molds from original carved plaques while they were damp. Wet clay was hand-pressed into the molds. We made number tiles for each plaque corresponding to numbers on the map that marked each site.

In January 2015 we finished the plaques and received the 40-foot-long print of a topographic map of the valley. We used the topo map as a guide to build our ceramic relief map. The shape of the map was determined by the contours of the valley. I drew the boundaries on the topo map and divided it into sections sized to fit into my kiln.

We built the map section by section, tracing details such as roads, acequias, hills, arroyos, and rivers onto wet clay slabs that were rolled out on a slab roller in my studio and transported to the community center. Each section was built next to the previous one so they would match up. Thicker areas, such as hills, were hollowed out from underneath when each section had partially dried (leather-hard). They would have been too thick to fire otherwise.



We consulted satellite images from Google Maps as we carved the details. A number for each site was stamped into the map. Place names and acequia names were also stamped into the damp clay as we built the map.

We added little surprises to make the map playful. The teens carved a spaceship landing in a field, Sasquatch taking a nap, and tiny detailed vehicles. One teen, who's nickname is "Speed Bump," carved speed bumps into the road near her house. I made a Grim Reaper lurking in the hills above town.

Different glaze colors were chosen for major and minor roads, acequias, and rivers so we could create a legend. We made a compass tile to indicate directions, and plaques to honor the donors, sign our names, and dedicate the map to Estevan's memory.

"Abrevadero Plaque" Geological landmark, an opening through the rocks through which a trail leads to the Embudo River Canyon above Dixon.



(L-R) Shel Neymark, Mark Gonzales and Daija Fernandez installing Map/Mural. **photo: Brooklyn Seebeck-Sullivan**



Detail Map/Mural showing relief. **photo: Shel Neymark**



Completed Map/Mural and gathering area with picnic tables. **photo: Shel Neymark**

INSTALLATION

The pieces were fired and ready to install in July 2015. We made a paper template of the completed map and drew an outline with markers on the co-op wall. We borrowed scaffolding from a local builder.

I use a Mapei-brand thinset for all of my installations. It is waterproof, very strong, and has a good working consistency. I mix their “Kerabond” powder with their “Keralastic” liquid. I like to mix it thick enough that doesn’t slide off your trowel. We troweled thinset onto each piece, aiming at getting at least 90% coverage between the ceramic and the wall. We cut boards to support each section until it was set (a couple of hours). The thinset needs to be cleaned off quickly, as it is difficult to remove once it dries.

We used El Rey-brand sanded and latex-modified grout between the sections, pushing it in by hand, wearing rubber gloves. We also grouted between the wall and the ceramic pieces. I tried to match the grout to the background glaze color to visually minimize divisions between the sections.

The installation was completed in August 2015, exactly a year after we started the project. I hired professionals to plaster the wall. We used a green color for contrast. We dyed the white plaster with chromium oxide.

TRANSFORMING THE PUBLIC SPACE

It was nearly another year before we found the money to transform the driveway into a courtyard with picnic tables. A bequest from a library patron who had passed away and a grant from New Mexico Mainstreet allowed us to do the cement work and purchase the tables. I volunteered the design work and supervision time. It cost about \$8,500.

PLANS FOR A BOOKLET

I had planned to self-publish a booklet with historical information about each site, which would have been available in the library and co-op. The idea was for the teens and I to write various sections. We also wanted to create a QR code to be placed next to the mural that would send people to a website with historical information.

In the end, the teens were resistant to writing, even if they would get paid for it. We wrote several sections, but ran out of funding. That part of the project was never completed. The information is stored. Someday it may get done: There is a lot of interest in local history here.

EVALUATION

We did no formal evaluation of the mural map project. Informal observation suggests that the mural map and courtyard are a beloved and well-used community space. Three gatherings honoring locals who died have been held there. People eat, meet, and use the library’s free WiFi at the picnic tables. People bring their guests to see the map and folks can regularly be seen studying it and pointing out sites.

APPENDIX

ABOUT THE FUNDERS AND SAMPLE NARRATIVES

The Sheila Fortune Foundation

The Sheila Fortune Foundation funds art programs for at-risk youth within the states of Colorado, Indiana, Pennsylvania, and New Mexico. They were our first successful application and granted us \$3,000. They funded us the following year with \$3,500.

They hadn't funded library programs previously. I had heard about grants they gave to a youth theater workshop in Dixon and Moving Arts Española, who provides youth art workshops in the nearby city of Española. Networking with other nonprofits about funding sources is invaluable. Be open about sharing your sources with others: We are all working to make a better world.

For Our Futures Fund

This is a "Donor Advised Fund" at the Santa Fe Community Foundation. A private fund, the donor is local and a major funder for our library. I went directly to them to ask for money. They donated \$9,000.

Northern Rio Grande National Heritage Area

The Northern Rio Grande National Heritage Area's mission is to help sustain the communities, languages, cultures, traditions, heritage, and environment of Northern New Mexico. Their funding is federal, so the grant is more complicated. I was fortunate to have the help of our library director Felicity Fonseca, as she has more experience with federal grants than I do. She was especially helpful with the financial aspects of the application.

They funded the project with \$3,000. At the time I questioned whether the work involved for that amount was worth the time. I decided I had to pursue every option. It turned out well. They have since supported other library projects. They are proud to have supported the mural and often bring visitors to see it. The strong partnership we've developed with them is invaluable.

McCune Foundation

McCune is a longtime supporter of the library. They supported the project with one of their "mini-grants" of \$2,500. Unlike their major grant cycles, you can apply for these any time of the year and the process is relatively simple.

The Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program

The Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program provides technical and financial assistance to non-Federal landowners to improve fish and wildlife habitats for Federal trust (endangered) species. The library was in the process of applying to them for a grant to create a pollinator garden in our park. As the mural map would promote acequia preservation, which in turn supports wildlife habitats, we were able to piggy-back onto the grant that was being developed. They funded \$2,000 for the mural.

Quail Roost Foundation

Quail Roost Foundation makes national and international grants in the areas of animal welfare, education, emergency relief, health, home community (Taos County, New Mexico, and surrounding areas), justice, and sustainability.

Dixon has an annual well-attended artists' studio tour. I stationed the teens in the community center studio to explain our project to visitors—I wanted them to be able to articulate the project to the public. The director of the Quail Roost Foundation saw what we were doing and they contributed \$1,000.

SAMPLE PROPOSAL AND BUDGET TO THE SHEILA FORTUNE FOUNDATION

The Embudo Valley Library And Dixon Community

The Embudo Valley Library and Community Center in Dixon New Mexico is a 501(c)(3) organization. We were founded in 1992 by a group of local citizens. We are one of five libraries nationally to win the 2015 National Medal for Library Service.

In addition to library services, we run a low-power FM radio station, KLDK; a public park where our annual fiestas happen; and we sponsor a seasonal farmers' market and cultural programming for the community. Many of our children's programs are art-based. We recently moved into a new 3,000-square-foot facility, more than two-thirds of which was paid for with local fundraising.

We are open six days a week and have a circulating collection of 12,700 books, audio books, electronic media, and free high-speed Internet access on eight patron computers. We serve communities from Velarde to Vadito, New Mexico, a population base of roughly 8,500 people. Last fiscal year we had 16,645 patron visits to the library. Twice a week during the school year we have the ¡Ahora! after school program for grades K-6. The Caterpillar Club, our Pre-K early literacy program, meets every Wednesday and serves children from infancy to age five who attend with their parents, grandparents, or caregivers. Our annual summer reading program helps prevent summer learning loss for children.

Dixon is a traditional Northern New Mexico village; about 85 percent Hispano. Over the last 50 years there has been an influx of residents from other parts of the country. Many are artists and Dixon is proud of having a rich arts scene with a well-known annual artists' studio tour. A mix of traditional Hispanic and contemporary visual arts, literature, and music thrive here.

There is also a strong tradition of farming. With the interest in organic and locally grown foods, the farming scene has been rejuvenated. Many local farmers use a blend of traditional and modern farming methods. The acequia system (acequias are irrigation ditches) in Northern New Mexico is the oldest form of government in the United States. Dixon has become a center of acequia culture. An annual acequia conference is held here sponsored by the Arid Lands Institute.

Despite the vitality of the arts and farming, Dixon remains a poor community. Our county, Rio Arriba, has had the highest per capita overdose rate in the nation for many years. About 34 percent of county adults have less than a 12th-grade education, and 19.7 percent live below the poverty level. Our town has not escaped the plagues of methamphetamine and heroin use and their co-morbid crime. There are many at-risk youth here.

The Tile Mural Project

We hired four teenagers aged 14–17 to work along with ceramic artist (and library board president) Shel Neymark to create a tile mural for the side of the Dixon Cooperative Market building, which is owned by the library and leased to the co-op. We pay each teen \$8.50 per hour.

The teens are 16-year-old Daija Fernandez, 17-year-old Mark Gonzales, 14-year-old John Salazar, and 14-year-old Brooklynn Sullivan. All were born and raised in Dixon, New Mexico and have difficult family situations. They often bring a friend or sibling (unpaid) to help work on the project, so more than just these four are impacted. Additionally, 15-year-old Liam Silverman has begun a project videotaping our process.

The mural is a map of the area highlighting acequias, ancient place names, and historical, anthropological, and geological sites.

Throughout the fall of 2014 we made upper and lowercase stamps for each letter and number, photographed and drew local historical sites and buildings, and made tile plaques of the sites. The teens learned to create relief tiles out of wet clay, glaze them, and make plaster molds.

Starting in January 2015 we began to build a ceramic relief map of the valley using a 40-foot-long topo map as a guide. Each historical site will be numbered on the map. Each number will correspond to a plaque.

We began the project working with local historian Estevan Arellano. We met with him a few times, but unfortunately he died unexpectedly in the fall. Other community elders have stepped forward to help. As part of the project we will write a booklet explaining the historical significance of the sites we have highlighted.

The teens are learning about working in clay, which includes math skills, organization, tile installation, drawing, and sculpture. They are developing a knowledge of the history of their community and will interview community elders and help write the booklet. They are developing job skills: they are expected to show up on time, do the required work, and work as a team. They have learned to speak with the public to explain the project. They already have pride in contributing to a permanent piece of public art.

The project began in August 2014. We work approximately five hours a week: two hours after school on Tuesdays and three hours each Saturday morning. When school is out, we will work three to four full days a week.

REQUEST FROM SHEILA FORTUNE FOUNDATION \$4,500

BUDGET EXPENSES

Item	Cost
Teen salaries, four teens at \$8.50/hr x 125 hours.....	\$4,250
Consultant fee for Estevan Arellano	\$1,500
Cartography, printing, etc.	\$1,200
Materials for 150-square-foot mural:	
• Clay.....	\$700
• Firing.....	\$300
• Glaze.....	\$250
• Setting materials.....	\$300
Library administrative fees	\$500
Managing artist fee for Shel Neymark	\$9,000
Total cost	\$18,000

Please note, Shel Neymark would typically charge \$200 per square foot for a mural like this, for a total of \$30,000 for a 150-square-foot mural. This proposal represents a lot of donated time and energy on his part. The project would commence in the fall of 2014 and would be completed no later than April 2015.

Mission Statement

The mission of the Embudo Valley Library and Community Center is to provide high-quality educational opportunities and support for area residents of all ages. Our services focus on self-directed education, creative and instructive programming, and research assistance and instruction. We endeavor to build community by providing a safe, welcoming space and educational resources.

Expertise of Key Personnel

Shel Neymark, artist and Embudo Valley Library Board president, has been a full-time artist working primarily in clay and glass since 1974. He has created three large public art pieces in New Mexico, each of which took two years to complete. He has done tile installations throughout the United States. Shel's teaching and mentoring experiences include teaching workshops nationwide, ceramic classes at Northern New Mexico College, and teaching many apprentices over the years, including teens. [I attached my resume to this submitted proposal.]

Felicity Fonseca is the executive director of the Embudo Valley Library. She holds a BA in Women's Studies and Studio Art from Oberlin College, and has worked at the library for over 10 years, holding various titles. As executive director, she successfully shepherded the new library building project to completion. She is a skilled bookkeeper and farmer, and has worked in small business and nonprofit financial management for over 16 years. She has applied for and administered several federal grants: a USDA Rural Development Community Facilities Grant and Loan and a USDA RBEG grant for the Embudo Valley Library. She was the local Girl Scout troop leader for four years (Troop 10044), focusing on food, farming, arts and crafts projects, and outdoor education. Under her leadership, the Embudo Valley Library held a micaceous clay pottery class as part of its 2013 Summer Reading Program, and for the 2014 Summer Reading Program, we are planning a baile folklorico session. She is committed to art as a successful way to enrich our library and community. A strong agricultural advocate, she ran a small market garden and 25-member CSA for five years, worked as the Espanola Farmers' Market manager for three years, served on the board of the Santa Fe Farmers' Market for two years, and currently has a small family farm. [Felicity's resume was also attached.]

Levi Romero has offered to step in and help fill the vacuum left by the death of Estevan Arellano. Levi is a poet, historian, and architect. Born and raised in Dixon, he currently is a professor at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque.

Some of the community elders and resources that we have consulted with or will consult with include: Jenny Ledoux, retired educator who wrote her thesis on the Dixon School Case; Severin Fowles, professor of archeology at Columbia University and part-time Dixon resident; Peter Arnold, head of the Arid Lands Institute, who helped with cartography; David Valdez, life-long Dixon resident with knowledge about local buildings; Lebeo Martinez, life-long Dixon resident and retired general store owner; Holly Haas, long-time Dixon resident and former bar owner; and Julia Valdez, retired director of the Dixon Senior Center. Plus many more.

FINAL BUDGET AND EXPENSES

INCOME

Source	Amount
Sheila Fortune Foundation 2014	\$3,000
Sheila Fortune Foundation 2015	\$3,500
McCune Foundation	\$2,500
Partners for Fish and Wildlife	\$2,000
Quail Roost Foundation	\$1,000
Northern Rio Grande National Heritage Area.....	\$3,000
For Our Future Fund	\$9,100
Miscellaneous cash donations	\$158
Total	\$24,258

EXPENSE

Source	Amount
Labor, four teenagers.....	\$10,000
Labor, Shel Neymark	\$9,000
Clay glaze firing	\$1,500
Estevan Arellano consulting fee	\$300
Creation of booklet	\$300
Plastering	\$1,500
New bulletin board.....	\$850
Tile-setting materials.....	\$750
Total	\$24,200

CLAY AND GLAZE RECIPES

O2 FROSTPROOF CLAY RECIPE FROM JEFF ZAMEK

• Hawthorn clay	20
• EPK.....	12
• Gold Art clay	20
• OM 4 clay.....	11
• Nepheline Syenite.....	14
• Talc	10
• Grog 35.....	35
• Frit 3269	9

Bisque to 010, glaze to 02 in a ten-hour firing.

4/9" GLOSSY GLAZE, O2

• Frit 3195	13
• Wolastonite	4.2
• Flint	4.2
• Frit 3124	64
• EPK.....	17.6
• CMC	0.75
• Vee gum T.....	0.75

Mix CMC and Vee gum T with hot water and add to glaze. Screen twice.

O2 MATT GLAZE

• Neph Sy.....	33
• Dolomite.....	8.5
• Whiting.....	6.5
• Zinc.....	2
• Frit 3195	13
• EPK.....	15
• Wollastonite.....	1.5
• Flint	6
• Frit 3124	29
• CMC	0.75
• Vee Gum T.....	0.75

Mix Vee gum T and CMC as above.

NOTES ON GLAZES:

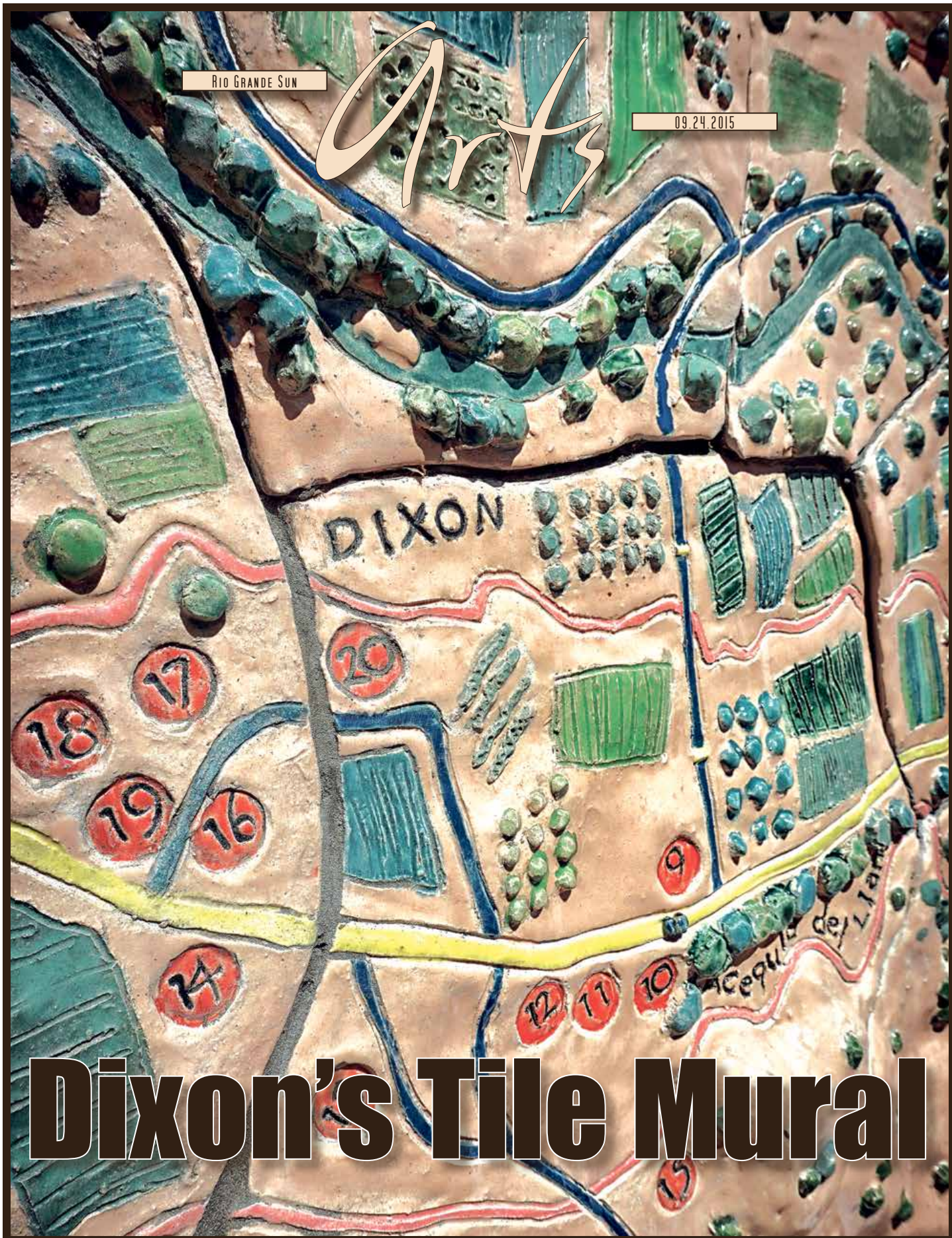
- Stains and oxides may be added to above glazes from 1% to 13%
- Blues and greens use less stain: 1–7%; pinks, oranges, and purples use more: 5–13%
- Yellows use 4–9%
- I use 9% zircopax to opacify my glossy glaze
- I use Mapei Corp Keralastic plus Kerabond Thinset for setting outdoor tiles, especially fountains

RIO GRANDE SUN

Arts

09.24.2015

Dixon's Tile Mural



Dixon's Tile Mural



Deija Fernandez (foreground) attaches one of the final pieces to the Dixon tile mural before grouting. Mark Gonzales works alongside while Shel Neymark (left) surveys progress.

Telling A Village History With Public Art

It's not often you can go to your local co-op to do some shopping and end up learning a lot about history, but for those who live in Dixon, or for that matter those who are just visiting, the east wall of the co-op features an almost completed tile mural that depicts the history of Dixon and a lot of the Embudo Valley.

Created by artist Shel Neymark and four teens: Mark Gonzales, Deija Fernandez, John Salazar and Brooklyn Seebeck-Sullivan, the multi-faceted tile mural is an eloquent and unique testament to the vast history that lives in the area.

Two teens were recommended by teachers they had had at Dixon Elementary, one was recommended by the librarian and one Neymark knew from St. Anthony's Church.

"I had this idea about doing a mural here," Neymark says as he points to the tile mural on the side of the co-op bldg. "Estevan Arellano (author of *Enduring Acequias*) was really interested in ancient place names. After I told him about my concept of using a map that would show where all the acequias are, we both got interested in adding some place names and then we started thinking about historical and important sites and the project got

bigger and bigger as Estevan and I had discussions about it."

Neymark says as he looked at the side of the co-op building, he decided it was a perfect place for a large-scale mural, and the idea of portraying the history of the area appealed to him greatly.

"I'm the president of the library board and the library owns this building. There were lots of discussions about it. I proposed it to the board — I didn't make the decision (unilaterally) — and everyone said, 'Yeah, that sounds good, let's do it.'"

Neymark says he's familiar with topographical maps and the idea of using one as a starting point — an aerial view of the valley — seemed apropos.

"Peter Arnold from Arid Lands printed out a huge topo map of the area for us," Neymark explains. "We then drew the borders of the valley and drew out shapes of tiles that would fit my kiln shelf, which is about 24 inches octagonal. We then rolled out slabs of clay and laid the map on the clay and traced where these hills and valleys are onto the clay."

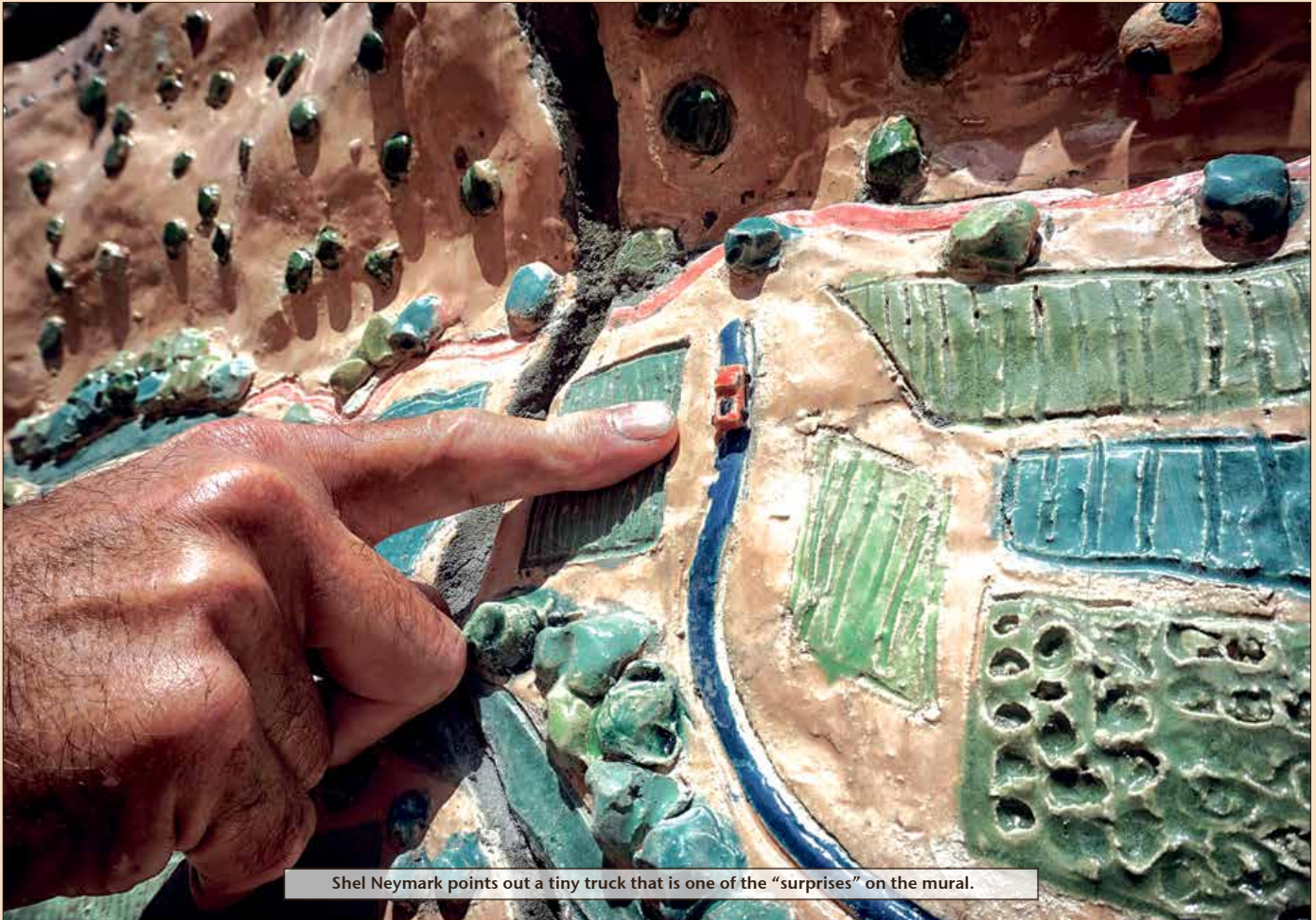


Shel Newmark compares topo map to the actual tile mural



Shel Neymark (left), Mark Gonzales and Deija Fernandez put final touches on the Dixon tile mural

Dixon's Tile Mural



Shel Neymark points out a tiny truck that is one of the "surprises" on the mural.

When Neymark says "we," he is referring to the four teens who were instrumental in the project, which has now taken a little over a year and is waiting for a final coat of plaster.

"We got six or seven different small grants," Neymark says when asked how the project was funded. "The first people we applied to were the Sheila Fortune Foundation in Boulder, Colo., who fund projects with kids in Colorado and New Mexico. They did some funding for Roger Montoya. They gave us the first — I call it the seed money — a year ago June. The seed money was the first and it got us started looking for more."

The original budget was \$18,000 but it ended up growing to \$22,000 or \$23,000, Neymark said. The Sheila Fortune Foundation gave them \$3,000 and then

they started looking elsewhere for the remaining funding.

"McCune Foundation gave us some funding," Neymark says as he lists other sources of money for the project. "Partners for Fish and Wildlife supplied some funding. The Northern New Mexico Heritage Foundation gave us some. The For Our Future Fund of the Santa Fe Foundation supplied some funds. There were a bunch."

He admits that his initial estimate was low because he miscalculated just how much time the project was going to take. As it got more complicated and added more information to the mural planning, the time involved increased.

"We've been working a year on it," Neymark said as he watched Gonzales and

Fernandez attach some of the final plaques to the wall in anticipation of grouting and the final plastering. "We started last August. We worked at the school Tuesdays and Thursdays in the mornings. From August until December we made all the plaques. The five of us would go and draw the buildings and photograph them and then come back here to the community center to make the plaques. Then we got the map in January and started making the map pieces and then when summer hit, we started working four days a week doing the map pieces in my studio.

"We finished that in July and we started putting it up last Tuesday. We've spent three and a half days so far. It's gone really fast. I thought this would take two weeks to put up, so this is the only thing that has been quicker than I thought it would be." Fernandez, who was applying some

adhesive to the back of a plaque was asked what was the most enjoyable part of the project for her.

"Learning about what happened in our community and seeing all the different things, like the battle site," she said and then added, "And learning how to make tiles. I had done some ceramic work in elementary school, but nothing like these big tiles."

Fernandez points to one tile and explains that all the tiles were cooperatively made by all the artists.

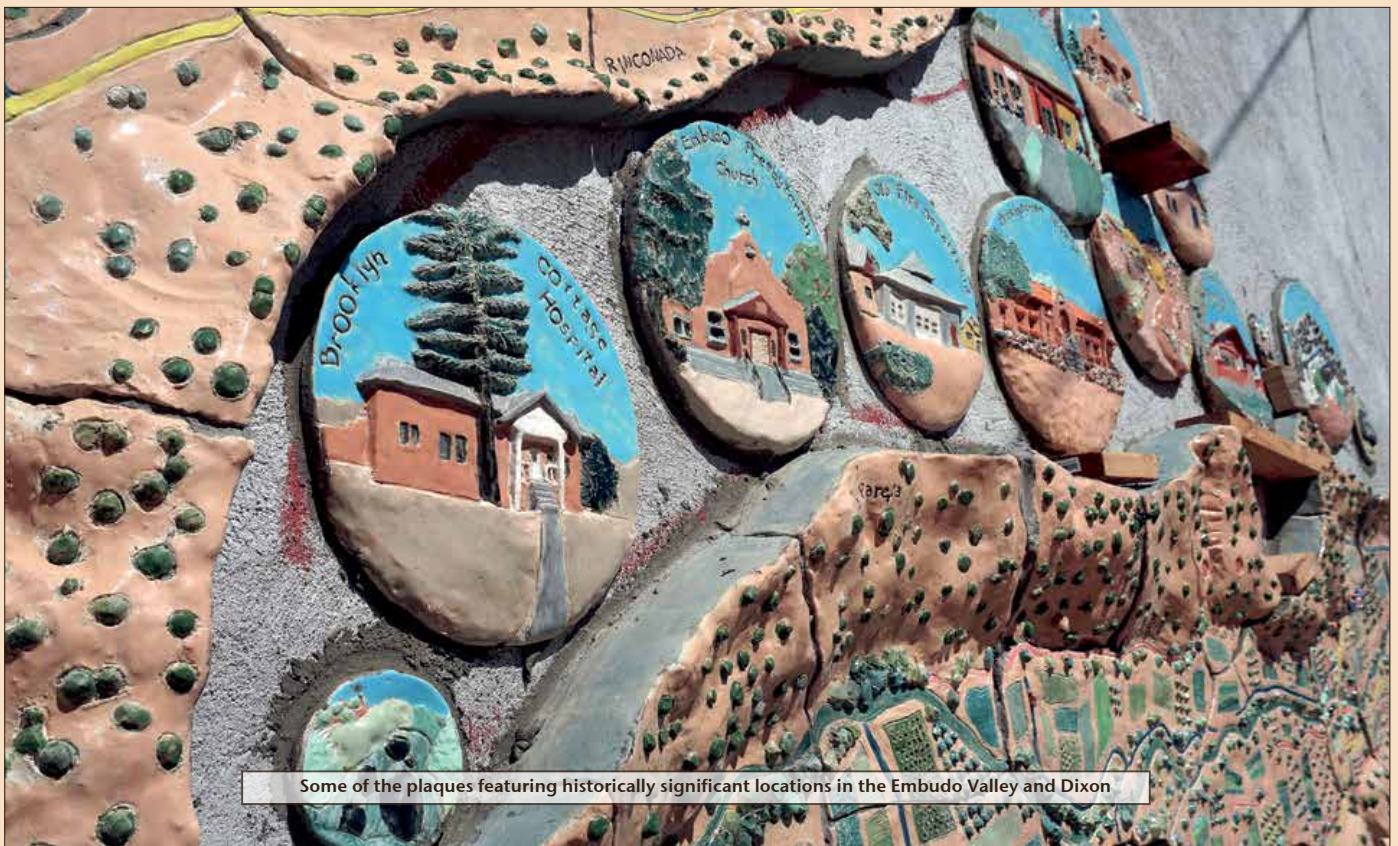
And then she talked about the hardest part.

"Tracing the map onto the clay because it was hard to see the lines," she admitted. "Which one was the road, which one was the railroad. Forming it was also hard

Dixon's Mural continued on page 6 >



A small, personalized flying saucer adds a surprise for visitors of the tile mural in Dixon



Some of the plaques featuring historically significant locations in the Embudo Valley and Dixon

Dixon Tile Mural

because you had to make it like it was on the map.”

Like the contours and what they meant in terms of highs and lows in the terrain).

Gonzales said one of the most enjoyable portions of the project for him was “The hikes we went on to visit the various historical places. We went to them and sketched them in our sketch books and also photographed them and then we came back to the workshop...”

And the most difficult aspect according to the Gonzales?

“To get everything to look like it was supposed to and to get the pieces to line up. It all went pretty smoothly except for a couple of pieces. This piece here, it was really top heavy so when we put it up we had to use a couple of boards and duct tape to it to support it while it adhered to the wall.”

Neymark chimes in at this moment with evident pride in his voice, “We didn’t break one piece.”

Which was important because they made the pieces by hand and made them in order. If one had broken it would have been difficult to match it to the other pieces.

He describes how they made the individual pieces.

“I could fire about five pieces at a time in my kiln. We started on that end where the Embudo Station is. We were working both in my studio and in the community center here in Dixon. We actually started from the other direction in the community center — starting with Apodaca and the Box Canyon.”

Asked what part of the project he enjoyed most, Neymark paused and then answered, “Gosh, it’s hard to say. I love the Embudo Box part. I love where it gets really complicated in here where all the acequias come together. What was really great was realizing how rich the life is here. It goes from the Pueblo on the mesa there in the 1300s to the Camino Real to the site where the Pueblos gathered during the Pueblo Revolt. That’s the battle of Embudo site. The location where the Chicano activists were printing up stuff in the ‘70s. That’s the exciting part for me, all the history. There’s just so much here.”

Neymark also said they had some fun and added some individualized “surprises” to the mural.

“We had some fun with it, too,” Neymark said as he walked over to the wall and pointed to several places. “We have a lot of little surprises in it like this one. Deija’s nickname is ‘Speed bump’ so here is a speed bump with a speed bump sign. Brooklyn did this little space ship. Mark did Sasquatch. John did these wonderful little cars and a little truck. I did the Grim Reaper sitting here. There are more surprises hidden around.”

Another final aspect they were working on that day was the legend, just like one you would find on a map explaining what various numbers a viewer would find on the mural meant.

“Every plaque has a number that goes with it,” Neymark says as he points to an example. “And for every *acequia* we have a ‘presa’ and a ‘desague.’ (numbers 2 and 3 respectively). There are 14 *acequias* and they are this coral, so everywhere an *acequia* ends, there is what is called a *desague*, which is where the water flows back into the river. Everywhere the *acequia* starts, and that’s a *presa*, where the water from the river enters the *acequia*.”

A fellow who had just done some shopping at the co-op stops by and tells them it is turning out so much better than he had ever thought it would and it contains so much information.

“It’s going to be a thing that people come to see. People will come to see just this.”

Another visitor stops and offers similar praise and encouragement with, “This is goose bump material, keep it up!”

After the second visitor leaves, Neymark talks a bit about the reception the tile mural has gotten.

“People here are interested in local history,” Neymark says. “Library talks this summer on the archeology of the area, the Dixon Case that went to the state supreme court, Father Koppers who was a priest

here for about 40 years, a geology of the area talk and others were all well attended, sometimes with over 100 people.

“For the kids growing up here to know the history will hopefully give them a sense of the richness of this place and a sense of their place in time. It will also help kids with map reading skills.

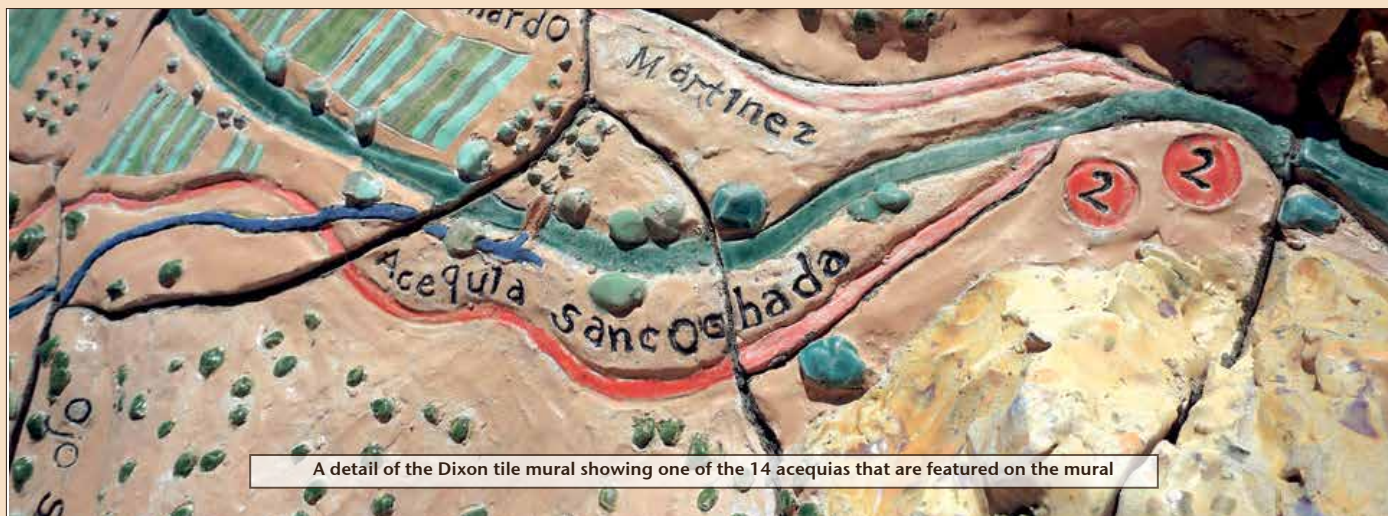
“People are interested in the lay of the land, often surprised that the Rio Embudo actually parallels the Rio Grande because when you turn into Dixon it feels like they are at right angles.

“For visitors, it is good for them to know that this place has a rich history too. People come through Dixon wondering if anything happens here. This will let them know that it does, and has for a long time.

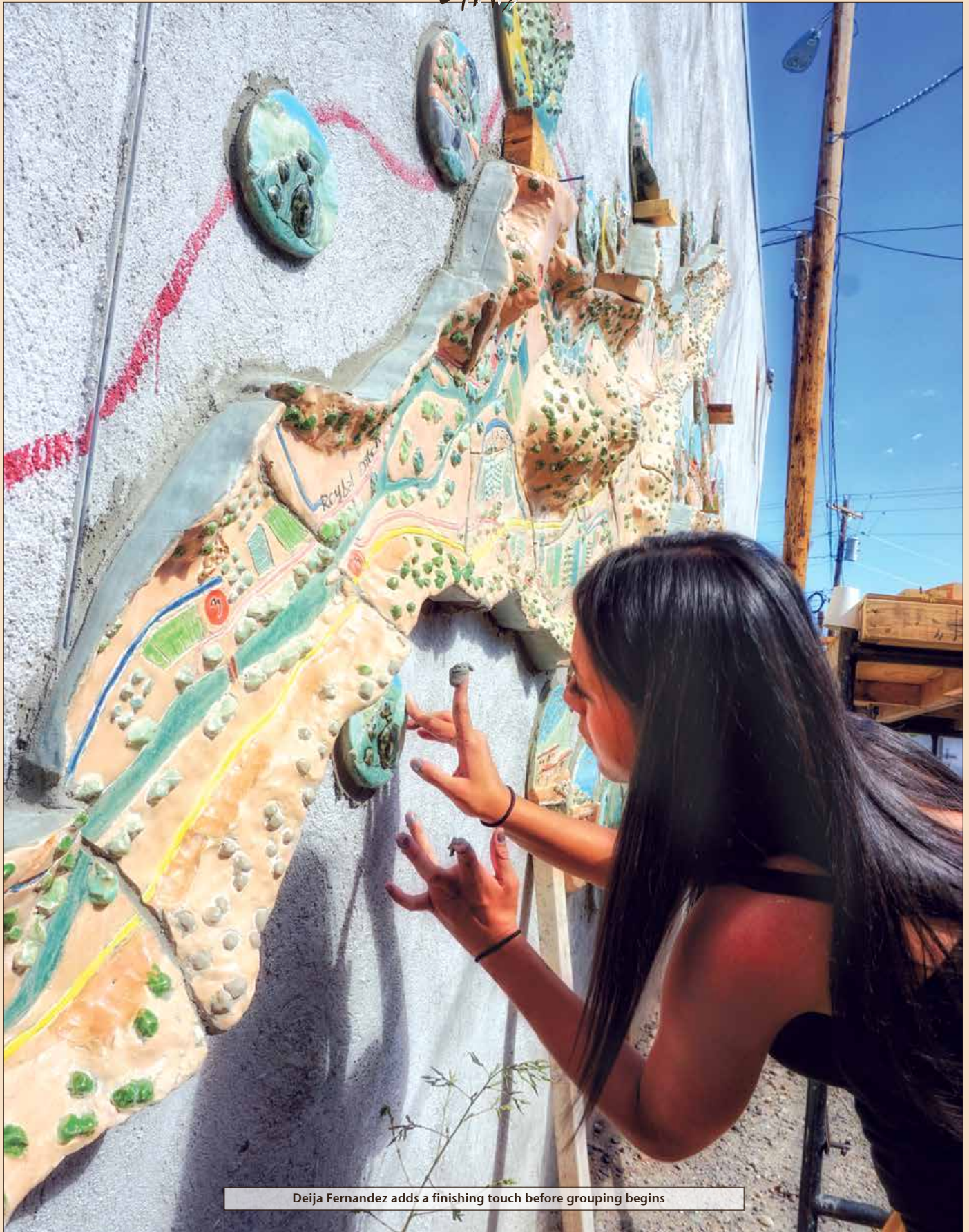
“The response has been great. Every time I go to Dixon several people come up and thank me. Almost always someone is studying it.”

The Dixon tile mural isn’t just pretty art, it’s a valuable lesson in history. It shows how public art can be used in a most positive manner.

You’ll definitely want to take a look.



A detail of the Dixon tile mural showing one of the 14 acequias that are featured on the mural



Deija Fernandez adds a finishing touch before grouping begins

RIVERS RUN THROUGH IT: SHEL NEYMARK'S MURAL, MAP & COMMUNITY HISTORY PROJECT IN RURAL NEW MEXICO

By Nicole Rupersburg | Published on Creative Exchange | www.springboardexchange.org/shel-neymark

Shel Neymark was born and raised in Chicago, near Oak Park. He remembers there were 52 Frank Lloyd Wright houses within biking distance of where he lived as a kid and he was “fascinated” by them.

“I would ride around and sneak into people’s backyards,” he recalls. “That was a really big influence on my interest in art and architecture.”

Neymark is a ceramic artist, and has done “architectural ceramics” for most of his life—tile work, murals, custom sinks, etc. He also does pottery and sculpture, and more recently has been working with glass, but the architectural ceramic work is what has primarily sustained him.

After graduating from Washington University in St. Louis with a degree in ceramics in 1974, Neymark moved to Missouri where he taught ceramics at the University of Missouri Craft Studio. He also plays violin, and was in several area bands. A band mate from one of those bands moved to Santa Fe and told the other members that he had plenty of gigs for them; they just had to move to Santa Fe, too. So Neymark loaded up his Volkswagen van and moved to Santa Fe on a whim, a place he had never even visited before, in 1976.

“Everything fell into place for me there,” he says. “We had lots of music gigs. I found a shared studio right away. It just felt like a good fit for me there in the art community.”

But even in 1976, it was already difficult for an artist to buy a house in Santa Fe. A few years after he moved, he bought some land about an hour north of the city in Embudo, New Mexico, a village where some of his artist friends also lived. He and his wife Liz still live there to this day, and he often canoes to and from his home and studio rather than travel down the two-mile-long dirt road.

“There are a lot of artists here. I think a lot of hippies moved here in the ’60s because land was cheap in those days,” he laughs.

The current population of Embudo is 454; the neighboring town of Dixon, where Neymark has done a great deal of community-building work for which he has been honored, is about 847.

Neymark absolutely adores it. Dixon is located on the Embudo River, which flows into the Rio Grande, and Embudo is located on the Rio Grande. The area is physically beautiful: a lush, green river valley full of rich farmland, surrounded by 13,000-foot peaks and dramatic mesas.

“On so many levels, this is a magical place to be for me,” he says. “It really worked out! Politically, being kind of a socialist radical is the norm here, so I feel really comfortable in that way, too, though maybe I’m in some kind of a bubble. There are artists and writers and farmers and builders here, and it’s great!”

Building a Library

In the late ’80s, some friends of his in Dixon casually mentioned, “Wouldn’t it be great if we had a library here?” Neymark certainly thought so; at the time, Dixon was a struggling city but it had always been “a wonderful community.” The local bar was closing, and that had always been the local gathering place (it’s where Neymark met Liz). The general store was closing. The gas station had already closed. It was becoming a bedroom community with no businesses, and yet it was still full of artists—the annual Dixon Studio Tour of artists’ studios, always held the first weekend of November, had already been running successfully for several years and is now one of the oldest continuously run studio tours in the state, bringing in thousands of people each year.

Neymark and his fellow citizens felt that a library could be a community center and gathering place for the whole Embudo Valley and beyond.

“We just felt like we needed something like that here,” he said. “There were a core group of about eight people who would gather once a month and say, ‘Okay, how are we going to start a library?’”

They found a place to rent for \$200 a month. They didn’t know how they would get the rent money but they jumped in and rented in anyway. Then an article ran in a Santa Fe newspaper about this group trying to start a library in Dixon, and book donations started pouring in. “Suddenly we were to the ceiling with books!” A volunteer who had studied library sciences stepped in and helped organize the whole thing, and the Embudo Valley Library & Community Center opened in May 1992.

“We had no idea if it would be successful or not or if people would even use it,” Neymark recalls. “But from the very start, it was wildly successful.”

In the first few years, the library introduced children’s programming and started hosting author readings and events in the evenings. Neymark started as treasurer and then learned how to write grants, which allowed the library to actually hire librarians (all were volunteers initially). After 10 years it became obvious they had outgrown their rented space and wanted a space of their own. The general store had been closed for over a decade by then, so they set their sights on purchasing the building. A generous donor in the community offered them \$200,000 if they could raise \$50,000 on their own; they managed to raise it in six weeks.

“In this very poor community people were pledging \$500 when I knew they couldn’t even buy their groceries,” Neymark says, underscoring just how much this library meant to the community. Two months after they decided to buy the property, they moved in. The acre-and-a-half parcel of land included the old general store with and an Arts and Crafts-style house. The general store was used as the community center and the house as the library.

After a couple of years some folks in the community got together and said they wanted to start a food co-op. Dixon didn’t have a single grocery store, and even the general store (back when it was open) had only sold things like chips and canned goods. So the library leased out two-thirds of the general store building to the Dixon Cooperative Market in 2005, and it has thrived ever since.

“The first time I walked in and saw organic broccoli I was almost in tears,” Neymark laughs. The library ultimately wanted to build a new building next to the Arts and Crafts house, and in 2014 they were able to move into their brand-new, 3,000-square-foot space, renting the remainder of the general store to the co-op.

Today the library serves about 8,500 people in rural communities spanning from Taos to Española, offering 15,000 books, movies, and audio books; public access computers with Wi-Fi; print, copy, fax, and notary services; a variety of children’s educational program including a “fabulous” STEM program in partnership with Northern New Mexico College and a 3D printing and robotics program; a low-frequency radio station; a weekly farmers market in the summer; a heritage orchard with heirloom apples; a park; and a community center that is free to use.

The impact of the library’s educational programs cannot be overstated: In a state that performs notoriously low on student test scores—20 percent math proficiency statewide, and 17 percent in the Rio Arriba County, which encompasses Dixon and Embudo—students in the fourth grade class at Dixon Elementary School, which the library has partnered with, are testing at over 90 percent math proficiency.

The library has won several awards over the years for its work in civil service and community engagement, including most recently the Institute of Museum and Library Services’ National Medal for Museum and Library Service in 2015, for which they got to travel to the White House and receive the award from Michelle Obama.

“They gave us this award because we do incredible work,” Neymark says. “We’re just really a vibrant organization. This library has transformed the community. There is so much cohesiveness here that just wasn’t here before it opened, and part of that was creating spaces for people to gather.”

Mapping Local History

For him, the Mural Map & Community History project was a very logical next step because people were interested in the history of the area.

He had done a few ceramic-based public art projects throughout New Mexico previously, several of which involved a fair amount of historical research and all of them involving the design of public spaces. He always thought it was unfortunate that unincorporated communities, like Dixon and Embudo, never really get the chance to have public art funded by major granting agencies because these things tend to be tied to infrastructure that unincorporated communities simply don’t have.

“I thought it would be really great to do something in my own hometown,” he says. He thought about the area’s acequias—communal irrigation canals designed to preserve and share scarce desert water throughout New Mexico. The acequia design in Spanish is origin, and some of the acequias in New Mexico are more than 300 years old, initially built by Spanish colonists. Not only are they important to the area’s agricultural history (still to this day), but they are also an important part of the area’s cultural history and heritage, too: Hispanos comprise more than 70 percent of the population of Rio Arriba County, with many families having roots in the area going back several generations.

“I started thinking about our acequias and how they would look [in a mural], just this little channel of water,” he says. “There are these wonderful, gorgeous microclimates that happen around the acequias. I just wanted to see what the pattern of them would look like. I thought the way they follow the contours of the hills would make beautiful lines. And of course they’re really important to the history of the valley, but part of this idea came about just from aesthetic curiosity.”

The Mural Map & Community History project was born out of the combination of Neymark’s desire to create a public art project in Dixon, the historical and educational aspects of it tying into the library’s own mission, and its potential to serve as a focal point in a public place where the community can gather.

“Any way that we can do community building just makes us stronger; it makes us face the issues we have here because are getting together and talking about them,” Neymark says. “I’ve always felt public space are an opportunity for people to interact with each other.”

He partnered with local historian and author Estevan Arellano on the project. Arellano was a huge advocate of the acequias and acequia culture (which has a lot to do with community cooperation and collective action; it is a culture that has been dying out in recent decades) and had even written a book on those in the area. He was also interested in ancient place names and thought that the ancient Spanish names were being lost, so he advocated for place names being part of mural. They would see each other around town and talk about their ideas for this mural, and as it coalesced Neymark said, “Okay, let’s do it, I’ll get you some money and we’ll work with teens because they’re the future of this place.”

Neymark was good on his word and they were able to hire on four at-risk local teens for nearly a year to assist with the research, design, creation, and installation of the ceramic mural map. The 40-foot mural was placed on an exterior wall of the co-op in July 2015, and the little alley that the wall faces was transformed into an outdoor gathering place with plenty of picnic tables and the mural as the focal point.

“It deepens a sense of place for local inhabitants and visitors,” Neymark wrote in his initial response to Springboard’s call for rural arts toolkits. “Every place humans live has a rich history and unique sites. The more you know about the place you live, the stronger your connection. As rural towns lose population and struggle economically, that sense

of connection particularly important and impels people to stay and work on making their towns more viable. Local gathering places where people connect, and perhaps share food, strengthens a sense of community and fosters interpersonal relationships. This is particularly important in small towns where there are few services and people have to take care of each other.”

Sadly, Arellano didn’t live to see it completed; he passed away in October 2014, three months into the project. He had already written down the names of the places and had spoken with the teens a few times already, sharing the stories of the various places of historical importance around town. Neymark has fond memories of the man, with whom he had become very close friends over the years. “I respected him incredibly.”

On the Brain

With the mural map completed, Neymark is interested in creating more public art pieces and sculptures. He has most recently been interested in the human body, and especially the brain. He has made several interactive sculptural pieces in partnership with an engineer friend of his that explore ideas around the human brain and how it functions.

“I think the brain is a fascinating organ; it’s so complex and mysterious,” he says. “What is the relationship between who we are and our brains? Are we our brains? Are we how we control our brains? I feel like as I’m getting older—I’m going to be 68 soon—that I might as well explore the difficult questions like, ‘What is life? What’s the point of all of this? What’s the mystery of life?’ Understanding what our own brains are is one of the things we least understand. We’re learning a lot about how neurotransmitters work and how synapses fire off and where thoughts develop, but actual consciousness and what drives it all—we don’t know anything about it.”

One interactive sculpture called “Brain Waves” involved putting a band with electrodes on a person’s head, measuring their alpha waves that would manifest as drops of water in a pool. Another called “Heart Drum” involved a sensor on a person’s ear that would play bass and snare drums in rhythm with their heartbeat. He included a pair of bongo drums so people could play along with their own heartbeats. “You have to pay attention to your own internal rhythm in order to play a duet with yourself because your heartbeat always changing.”

He has a few more brain-related pieces he wants to create: some wordplay pieces on “brain cell” and “synapse/sin apps,” and an interactive piece called “Synesthesia” that will translate sound into color.

Additionally, Neymark still plays in bands. The one he plays in now is called the Placebo Effect, and they play jazz, old standards, and a little bebop.

Neymark loves his community and loves that he is able to make a tangible impact through his various projects.

“If I had stayed in Santa Fe I don’t think I could have had the kind of impact on my community as I had here,” he reflects. “In a small community you can make an impact in a way that’s really gratifying.”

“It’s not perfect,” he continues. “There are problems here, just like everywhere else. But it’s kind of nice walking into the post office and the co-op and knowing everybody there. I like that. I find that to be really rich. I’ve been here 35 years and have been coming here for 40 years. I feel like I’ve been to so many weddings and funerals I could never leave these deep connections. Being part of that is so rich. The people here are so interesting. I’m so lucky to have found this community.”

Get the Mural Map & Community History Toolkit here:

www.springboardexchange.org/mural-map-community-history-toolkit/

All photos provided by Shel Neymark.

CREATIVE EXCHANGE

FIVE QUESTIONS

1. How do you like to collaborate?

When I'm making a piece, I like to be the one who is designing it. I like for it to be my piece and I will take input from people and consider it, and even solicit input, but I like to be the boss on my artwork.

2. How do you start a project?

I'm lucky in that I always have inspiration. Ideas just come from different places, and they always seem to come to me, so I'm fortunate in that. I hike every day, so once an idea comes to my head, usually when I'm hiking, I just kind of roll it around in my head and think about how I want to do it. Sometimes I'll think about it for years before I actually do it; sometimes I'll go into my studio and start on it the next day.

3. How do you talk about your value?

For me the biggest value is that I get to create to live. In my life, I've never had a job outside of my art. I get to do whatever I want all the time. That is a huge value to me; it's much more valuable than money, although like everybody else in society I need money to pay my electric bill. Looking at the kind of money I make and that most other artists make, I wish artists were paid more like professionals in society, but that's just not the way it works. That's capitalism. But I do consider myself a professional.

4. How do you define success?

There are so many different levels to that. Getting something out of the kiln that's just so beautiful I can't stop staring at it; that's success. Going to the co-op and seeing a bunch of people studying the map and pointing out different sites; that's success. I don't make a lot of money, but as far as in my life, I have to be one of the top .0001% happiest and luckiest people in the world, and I would say that's a definition of success!

5. How do you fund your work?

I have a pretty simple life. I don't require lots of stuff. I've owned my house and land for 20 years so I don't have a mortgage. I have enough to buy all the organic food I want. I have a really good life. I get to travel. We have solar heat in the floor so we have no heat bill. We have a well so there's no water bill. Because my expenses are low, when I make money, I'm able put it back into my work. I do commissioned work, and that has really sustained me—sinks, tiles, light fixtures. Then after I do that, I get to sit in my studio and make a sculpture, and when I sell that one, I say, "Okay, great, now I get to make two more."

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