

What do all those new murals around Stevens Point mean? For the artists, the work amplifies voices and celebrates women



A mural of the late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg is seen on Thursday, October 14, 2021, at Specialized Computer Systems in Stevens Point, Wis. Tork Mason/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin
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MELISSA SIEGLER | STEVENS POINT JOURNAL | 19 hours ago



STEVENS POINT – Taking in the mural, your eyes might first stop on the brightly colored



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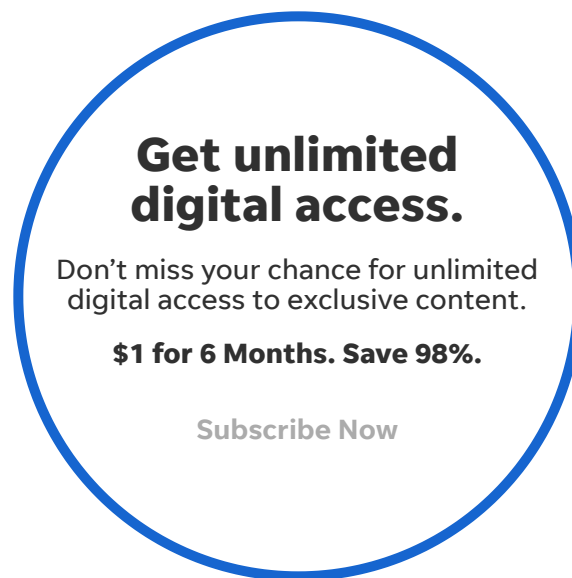
But as your gaze lingers, you begin to notice the smaller intricacies and symbols in the mural. The crown on Ginsburg's head, the words emblazoned on her collar, the smaller painted scene off to the side.

The mural, painted by Stevens Point artist [Jessie Fritsch](#), is nestled between Mid-State Technical College and Sunset Point Winery in downtown Stevens Point. It's one of many murals that have gone up within the last year, each with its own imagery and deeper meaning hiding within the bigger scene.

Murals have decorated walls throughout Stevens Point for decades. Well-known pieces, such as the downtown ["Rivermen" mural](#), which was painted in 2004 and depicts the early days of logging in Stevens Point, and the ["Market Square" mural](#), which was painted in 2006 and shows what common activity would have been like on the square in the early 1900s, have become a part of the the city's charm.



Thirteen new murals throughout Stevens Point, Rosholt, Junction City, Almond and Amherst were brought to life recently through [CREATE Portage County's Paint the County! program](#). Their aim is similar to the Works Progress Administration's New Deal programming started by the U.S. government during the Great Depression. Artists were tasked with creating work that captured what it was like to live during that moment in time.



Greg Wright, executive director of CREATE, said the group paid about \$5,000 per mural, although some projects varied based on their size. In all, they contracted with artists for over \$85,000. The money came from the Wisconsin Economic Development Corp., Arts Wisconsin, the Wisconsin Arts Boards, Arts Midwest, Women's Suffrage Centennial Commission and individual donors.

The mural program evolved from a way to support artists during a pandemic in which their occupation was one of the hardest hit, to also celebrating the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment guaranteeing women the right to vote and amplifying underrepresented voices in the community.

"With this project, it really was important to us to celebrate the diversity that is already in Portage County and share people and perspectives that are not visible in public art," Wright said. "Ideally, anybody growing up in Portage County can see themselves and feel represented."



RELATED: Stevens Point's population declined through the 2010s and grew more diverse as Portage County stagnates

Celebrating women, diversity through art

To celebrate the 19th Amendment, eight of the new murals feature quotes from women who come from marginalized backgrounds. Organizers chose the women and the quotes that would be featured and then put out a call for artists to submit designs earlier this year.

Fritsch, 40, was commissioned to paint the mural of Ginsburg. Fritsch has built a career on creating paintings in encaustic, a beeswax-based paint, but this is the first time she's led the charge on a public mural.

Set against a background of colorful blocks is a profile portrait of Ginsburg, who died last year after 27 years on the Supreme Court. Her famous words "Women belong in all places where decisions are being made" are painted within her lace collar, which was a **famously symbolic** part of her official wardrobe.



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Artist Jessie Fritsch poses for a portrait in front of her mural of the late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg on Friday, October 8, 2021, in downtown Stevens Point, Wis. Tork Mason/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin
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A crown, shaped like a crowd of protesters to reference the women's rights marches that have taken place throughout the country, sits on her head. The crown itself is a [reference to the popular comparisons made between late rapper The Notorious B.I.G. and Ginsburg](#), who earned the nickname "The Notorious RBG."

As a way to honor the 19th Amendment itself, the mural also includes a quote from Alice Paul, one of the main leaders in the fight to allow women to vote. The quote says, "I always feel the movement is a sort of mosaic. Each of us puts in one little stone ..."

Surrounding the quote are multi-colored stones and the names of 101 influential women, one for each year since the amendment was ratified. Though 2020 was the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment, an additional name was added for 2021 since that's when the mural was completed.

Fritsch said that in addition to a few women who were mentors to her, names also include women from across the U.S. and Portage County. She plans to add a new name each year.



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At Point Market & Vietnamese Restaurant, a mural by [St. Paul-based artist Xee Reiter](#) decorates the side of the Church Street building. A quote by [Kao Kalia Yang](#) reads, "Lasting change cannot be forced, only inspired." Yang is a Hmong-American writer who has written memoirs and children's books, one of which features Reiter's illustrations.

For murals like Reiter's that feature cultural messages, Wright said CREATE worked with locals in those communities to identify artists whom they wanted to participate. Organizers advertised the opportunity through art partners across the U.S. to make sure artists knew about the program.

A mural by Xee Reiter is seen on Thursday, October 14, 2021, at Point Market in Stevens Point, Wis. The mural features a quote from Hmong-American writer Kao Kalia Yang. Tork Mason/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin

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Reiter, 37, a first-generation Hmong American, said that while public art is common in communities, it doesn't always reflect the people who live there. When CREATE reached out to her to submit designs, she said she felt a sense of pride.

Once she knew that Yang would be the featured woman for the market site, Reiter knew that was the mural she wanted to create.



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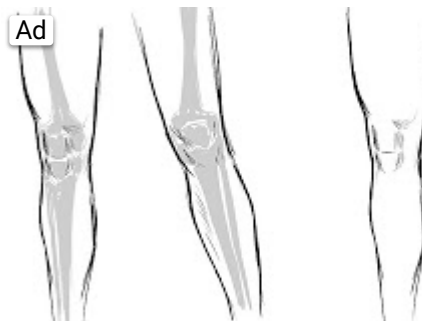
Reiter said she wanted to depict the story of Hmong people in the mural. Along with Yang's quote, it features Hmong families. She noted that the people in the mural are facing the same direction, but you don't know if they're coming or going.

"No matter where they are, where the Hmong people have ended up, that's where we call home," Reiter said.

She dedicated the mural to the Hmong families of Portage County.

Erin LaBonte, 38, painted the mural on the side of Falcon One Stop in Amherst. The mural features a quote from **Pakistani activist Malala Yousafzai**, who is known for fighting for the rights of young girls in the Middle East to receive an education. **Yousafzai** became the youngest person to receive the Nobel Peace Prize at age 17.

LaBonte, a University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point graduate, is an assistant lecturer at the UW-Green Bay campus in Sheboygan and owns an art studio in Algoma named **Yonder**.



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The mural reads, "When the whole world is silent, even one voice becomes powerful."

Malala's famous words are painted inside the shape of a bird, which LaBonte said she chose to represent a sense of freedom.

A mural by Erin LaBonte is seen on Monday, October 18, 2021, at Falcon One Stop in Amherst, Wis. The mural features a quote from Pakistani activist Malala Yousafzai. Tork Mason/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin

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Public art teaches, and supports local business

A lone biker riding the Westside Loop of the [Green Circle Trail](#) stopped on a warm fall Friday to take a photo of his bike with the mural that is tucked away under a bridge along Portage County HH.

"I had to get a picture of this," he said.

[Kristin Thielking, 52, and Keven Brunett, 54](#), along with their 15-year-old daughter, Rowen, are the painters behind the mural of [Cuban-American-French writer Anais Nin](#). The artists

said a lot of people stopped to admire the mural while they were painting it.

Nin's words — "I must be a mermaid, I have no fear of depth and great fear of shallow living" — are painted among images of floating dandelion seeds that cascade across the mural, the underside of the bridge and the surrounding rocks. Appropriately, the image of the mural reflects perfectly in the water below.

Brunett said public art like their mural reaches a different type of audience, almost by accident. Thielking added that coming across a mural, especially one that's more hidden, is memorable and can cause people to think more about the ideas being presented.

A mural of Cuban-American-French writer Anais Nin painted by Kristin Thielking, Keven Brunett and their 15-year-old daughter Rowen. The mural is located along the Green Circle Trail under the County HH Bridge in Stevens Point.

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That notion is something the artists incorporated into their mural of Nin.

"You never know how far a word or an idea is going to go once it's put out into the world," Thielking said. "These particular dandelion seeds, they go far. They just go, and so we thought that was a really good, kind of, connection or metaphor for what Anais did with her writing."

LaBonte, too, said people who came across her mural were immediately interested in learning about Malala.

"When we were painting it, there were people Googling Malala on their phones and there were conversations about her while we were there," LaBonte said.



Prairiebrooke

PRAIRIE BROOKE Prairiebrooke Arts

Fritsch said she also had people come up to her and express emotion over the mural and how much Ginsburg means to them. She said community members' reactions drove her to learn more about the late Supreme Court justice so she could engage more in conversations.

"When people bring their young kids and are teaching them, that's what gets me," Fritsch said.

The Ginsburg mural has become a must-see in downtown Stevens Point and an opportunity for everybody to learn more about influential women. Fritsch created [a website for the mural](#), which people can visit to see photos and information about the 101 women whose names are featured on the mural. People who visit the website also can buy merchandise featuring images of the mural.

Aside from the beautification and the political and social awareness the murals create, they can also have an economic impact. The murals are believed to have drawn more people into nearby stores and restaurants.

"People who have never spent time in some of the rural communities are going there and seeing those (murals)," Wright said. "Typically, when they are there, they are going to get a beer at MC Z's (in Rosholt) or stop for a pizza night at Adelante (in Almond)."

People can look forward to more public art in the future.

CREATE members have committed to another round of murals next year. They're still finalizing a theme and plan to put out another call for artists soon.

"One of the things that I love about public art is that it is seen by everybody," Wright said. "You don't have to feel comfortable walking into an art space. You see it every day on your way to work. It's truly owned by the people."

A mural by IT-RA Icons is seen on Monday, October 18, 2021, at Adelante Café in Almond, Wis. Tork Mason/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin
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Contact USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin reporter Melissa Siegler at msiegler@gannett.com. Follow her on Twitter at @Marie2Melissa.

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