

Summer work for 6 teens brightens Spokane underpasses

Tom Sowa

The Spokesman-Review

Tags: public art Spokane Arts Commission Worksource Spokane



Mitch Osorno stands at the underpass south of First Avenue and Monroe Street where he helped produce the colorful murals that line both walls.

Mitch Osorno was struggling earlier this summer to land a job. That changed several weeks ago when the 17-year-old became part of a team of young workers painting downtown murals.

"It's a cool way to get experience. Plus maybe this will help me find other jobs, even painting houses," Osorno said.

He is one of six students involved in a summer mural project organized through the Spokane City Arts Commission and WorkSource Spokane. It's the first mural project in many years between the city and WorkSource, a state-funded group that matches workers with employers. And the collaboration comes at a time when teen joblessness nationally is 25 percent, three times Washington's overall unemployment rate.

The ongoing recession is complicating the usual challenge many teens face finding good jobs.

"One-third of the jobs we've lost (locally) are in the categories teens usually turn to," said Doug Tweedy, regional labor economist with Washington's Department of Employment Security. Those include retail and leisure and hospitality, he said.

The Spokane murals project produced five multicolored walls on three separate underpasses – at Fourth Avenue under Sunset Boulevard; on Monroe Street between First and Second avenues; and along Lincoln Street between First and Second avenues.

Four of the six teens who painted the murals are enrolled in the Next Generation Zone, developed through WorkSource. That program provides training for more than 400 Spokane-area youths, ages 16 to 21, helping them develop job skills or discover career options.

Using a variety of funding sources, the painters spent six weeks on the murals, earning the \$8.55 per hour minimum wage. Two other students worked as volunteers, said Spokane artist Melissa Cole, who was hired to supervise the murals.

When Osorno first met with Cole, she asked him why he wanted to take on the work.

"Because it's cool to be able to see my paintings on a wall for the next few years," he told her.

Heidi Peterson, youth services manager for the Next Generation Zone, said the murals were a solution for young residents who want to find a job related to the visual arts.

Apart from spending money, the program provides job search benefits, she said.

"They learn how to take responsibility for a project, show up regularly at a job site, take feedback and directions, and get tasks done in a timely manner," Peterson said.