

Putting a Face on a Center's Fight against Addiction

by Bart Bettiga, NTCA Executive Director

When Elder C.W. Harris and his wife Amelia co-founded Martha's Place in Baltimore, Maryland, they wanted the transitional home to give hope to women recovering from drug and alcohol abuse. Now, thanks to a collaborative community effort, they've given hope a face.

Artists Julie Stovall and Leslie Furlong recently completed a 17'x19' mural, which took almost three years to finish. Holland Tile, owned by NTCA Sectional Director Davis Leichsenring, installed the work of art, which was unveiled in September 2003.

Made up of more than 3,000 one-inch-square porcelain tiles generously assembled and created by ColorCo of Merrimack, New Hampshire, the mural was created around the image of Deborah Tolson, one of the first to graduate from the six-month program in 2001. In the mural, she is dressed in a white suit and is reaching her arms to the heavens with the horizon of the city to her back. The idea for the mural originated when Stovall, who was attending art school, approached C.W. Harris about developing a public art project. Furlong, a fellow graduate student, joined Stovall a few months later. Jim Burnard of ColorCo spent countless hours with the artists working on the project.

Before the construction could take place, Stovall and Furlong had to raise funds (the project was financed with \$18,000 in grants and donated material and labor) and create the individual tiles; things they had never done. Tile was chosen as the most practical and durable product to be used in this process.

The Challenges

The mural was to be installed on an old brick wall with soft, loose mortar on a house several decades old. Leichsenring and his crew were also anxiously watching the news of Tropical Storm Isabel, as it appeared severe weather may be approaching. They had approximately two weeks to finish the installation. The mosaic sheets were constructed in 12"x24" sheets of clear contact plastic mounted mosaics.

The Installation

Scaffolding was raised and the façade was covered with a tarp to protect the installation from rain and direct sunrays on a southern exposure wall. Bumps were ground because in some places, the wall bowed out for approximately 1/2" on a 6' radius. Loose brick and mortar was removed. Voids were packed in and screeded over the entire surface using MAPEI KER Glass Block Mortar for optimal bonding. Thickness varied from 1/8" to 1/2" over the bricks, with greater depth where filling in wall voids.

Next, utilizing MAPEI KER 130 Granirapid White mixed with KER 318 liquid, the entire surface was screeded over to obtain a smooth, flat plane. There was up to a 3/16" variation in thickness, so a second layer was applied in those sections. The mosaics, supplied by Dal Tile and assembled by ColorCo, were face mounted with clear contact plastic. The plastic was not removed until the installation was completed.

Prior to grouting with MAPEI KER 700 Ultra Color Gray, the plastic was removed and the grout was tapered on an angle on the perimeter to meet the surrounding brick and mortar wall. The surface was then thoroughly washed.

Conservation Outlook

Julie Stovall is planning to apply for a public art conservation grant, for the conservation of the mural over the next few decades. A year or so from now, a ledger may be built at the roof edge above the mural, to help with water flowing down into it. At that time, a movement joint will be created vertically and horizontally to allow for expansion and contraction. The movement joints will be created by sawing the grout and replacing it with Urethane sealer to match the color.

Isabel Provides a Scare

The installation was set. September 15th and 16th the wall was prepared for installation. The top four feet was left undone because of the unevenness of the wall and a shortage of supplies. On the 17th the tile was set, starting from the bottom up. An area 5' high by 19' wide was completed.

On the 18th the edges were grouted without removing the contact plastic in preparation for the approaching hurricane. The scaffolding company refused to tear down and reinstall the structure; therefore ropes were brought in and tied to the walking boards and metal frames. Wood blocks were placed between the frame and the mural to prevent impact. The scaffolding structure was tied around the entire building, as there was no other place to tie the rope.

The next two days was an anxious waiting period as the storm hit the area. Thankfully, the eye missed Baltimore, leaving only significant rainfall and high winds. There was no damage to the mural or scaffolding.

On Saturday, September 20th, the community lent a hand for support to the project. With some handrails and ladders securely installed, some 30 adults and numerous children were welcomed with disposable gloves, buckets of water, sponges and grout floats. It was grout time big time! Holland Tile installers Oscar Argueta, Mario Argueta, and Agustin Sanchez patiently assisted the volunteers to achieve a successful grout installation.

The installation is completed just in time for the Tuesday deadline, with the crews working overtime to achieve its goal.

A Just Cause

“The bravery and perseverance of the women at Martha’s Place to overcome addiction is an inspiration,” says artist Julie Stovall. Todd Marcus, the program developer at Martha’s Place, said of the project, “It has taken incredible commitment and hard work to bring this mural to completion and reminds me of similar work and passion that went into building Martha’s Place and which the residents put into their recovery every day. A tremendous amount of collaboration between the artists, the community, donors and vendors has been necessary in order to complete this Herculean effort.”

About Martha’s Place

Founded in July of 2000, the facility is an affiliate of Newborn Holistic Ministries and serves women in the community who have completed a month long detox treatment program. Its success rate up to now is more than double the average-like program. The program lasts six months and assists graduates in employment as well as support services.

Deborah Tolson, the individual with her arms to the heavens, is now 49 and has been drug free for several years. She hopes the mural can “inspire other addicts that it can be done.” About 100 women have enrolled at Martha’s Place-12 at a time-and nearly 30 have graduated from the program, which includes spiritual, emotional and educational mentoring. Tolson attended the ceremony with her family and fiancé.

NTCA salutes association members Holland Tile, Mapei and Dal-Tile for its contributions to this worthy effort and unique tile installation challenge. It is projects like Martha’s Place that have inspired *TileLetter* to show its readers what a difference many of the professionals in our industry are making through our Power of Getting Involved series.

This story was excerpted from the January 2004 issue of *TileLetter*, the official publication of the National Tile Contractors Association. For more information about NTCA, please visit their web site at www.tileletter@tile-assn.com.