**Title: Paint by Numbers**

**Intro:** *A small group of artists is creating something big in one of Chattanooga’s oldest neighborhoods.*

A blank canvas can take many shapes. This summer, in Chattanooga, that shape was 40,000 square feet of gray concrete in the 300 block of M.L. King Boulevard.

Slowly but surely, in the past few months, the empty walls of the AT&T building have been transformed into a colorful, intricate mural — an emblem of pride and hope in the M.L. King District. The project has been a labor of love, and a show of solidarity, for a neighborhood that's rooted in the heart of Chattanooga — a community that has thrived, and then struggled to thrive, throughout the years.

“This is an area that was so vibrant for so long, and now, it’s really coming back to life,” says Dennis Wagner, the Director of External Affairs for AT&T Tennessee. “The entire community is extremely excited and has been very supportive of this mural from day one.”

It’s only been a few months of cleaning and priming and finally, painting. But this project was in the works long before the first pressure washer hit the sidewalk in June.

Conceived by Public Art Chattanooga, a division of the City of Chattanooga, and funded by the Lyndhurst and Benwood foundations, the idea for the mural came about years ago. Its purpose: to use public art as a means to lend a sense of place to the district, and – hopefully – to kick start future beautification and economic development efforts in the area.

“It’s fascinating how this project is bringing the neighborhood together,” says Hollie Berry, one of the artists who is assisting with the mural. “Residents constantly stop by, commenting on different parts of the design as it’s revealed, and we’ve had a great response to community paint days.”

Public Art Chattanooga commissioned internationally renowned artist Meg Saligman, a muralist based out of Philadelphia, to lead the artistic process. Meg has been featured as one of the 10 most influential American muralists of the past decades, and her work has garnered numerous awards. She is, to put it lightly, experienced.

But this isn’t a one-woman endeavor: large-scale murals lend themselves to collaboration, and Meg has become known for her inclusive, community-focused artistic process. The M.L. King mural project is no different; every step of the way has been a group effort. Seven apprentices, including Hollie, were selected from a pool of 33 applicants to work side-by-side with Meg. They are artists who share a mix of talent, experience and perhaps most importantly, a profound understanding of how public art can give rise to strength and pride within a community – especially when it’s the community itself that informs the design.

“All of the ideas for the design – the colors, the figures, the faces – came from community input meetings that we held,” Hollie says. “It was a kind of brainstorm: people talked about their memories from the place, the biggest challenges and accomplishments, their vision for Chattanooga’s future.”

Guided by the voices of the neighborhood, Meg and the apprentices created four separate but cohesive designs for the four walls, each depicting a different time of day – dawn, afternoon, evening, dusk – and each with a different energy.

“The overall theme that we pulled from the meetings is the idea of transformation,” Hollie says. “The city has changed from an industrial city to a scenic destination, and specifically in the M.L. King District, from a segregated neighborhood into an integrated one.”

Hollie says that, in general, the transformation has been positive, but there’s a strong sense of nostalgia for the “Big Nine,” referring to the area around 9th Street before it was renamed for M.L. King. Decades ago, it was a lively and successful business and social hub, with a thriving jazz scene and a strong sense of community. So the mural represents the neighborhood as a whole: past, present and future.

Creating something of this size and scope isn’t without its challenges. There was the approval process, which was a lesson in bureaucracy, wrapped in red tape. There were the logistics – site setup, traffic reroutes, safety considerations. And then there was the weather: painting outdoors all day, every day, during the hottest summer on record is not for the faint of heart.

But the team that Meg assembled hasn’t wavered. In fact, their enthusiasm for the project is overwhelming.

“This is has been a huge opportunity for me, as an artist and a human,” says Anier Fernandez, a local painter, originally from Cuba, and one of the project’s apprentices. “Being a part of the project has made me feel that I can really do anything, and I’ve learned so much. But what has been most is amazing is interacting with the people on the street, seeing how involved and how grateful they are. I have no words to describe it.”

The artists expect to have the mural completed by the end of November. But even after the paintbrushes are put away and the sidewalks are clear, the project will have just begun to serve its mission – and hopefully, in doing so, will inspire many more.

“This mural has become very personal to this community,” Hollie says. “And that is the point: to create something that feels like it always belonged here, and something that will remain here for generations to come.”