

Advocate photo by SOPHIA GERMER

Artist Jessica Normington paints a utility box at the intersection of Elysian Fields and Filmore streets in New Orleans on Feb. 17. Community Visions Unlimited, a nonprofit, receives money for local artists to paint utility boxes around the city to make them more visually pleasing.

SPARK OF CREATIVITY

Electric boxes-turned-paintings give neighborhoods a jolt

BY KIM SINGLETARY
Special to The Advocate

There's nothing like a nice piece of art to transform a space, and sometimes, if the art is large enough and unique enough, that space can be an entire neighborhood.

Since Hurricane Katrina, 90 electrical boxes around New Orleans have been transformed into various works of art, thanks to the New Orleans Street Gallery Project. The project pairs local artists with these most unorthodox of canvases in an effort to beautify area streetscapes.

"When my husband and I returned to the city after the storm, I found that so many of my artist friends were struggling," said Jeannie Tidy, founder of Community Visions Unlimited, or CVU, the nonprofit behind the New Orleans Street Gallery Project. "I had helped with an electrical box painting project in San Diego before, and it was so successful that I thought maybe I'd give it a try here — create something that benefits both local artists and neighborhoods."

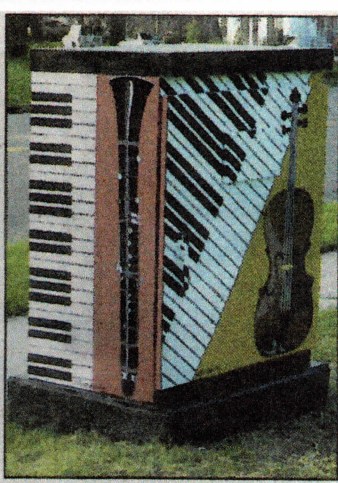
But Tidy wasn't prepared for the tremendously positive effect the project would have for everyone involved.

"We began working with the group about two years ago, and now I'm happy to say every one of our boxes has been painted — I think that's around 40," said Emily Leitzinger, secretary of the Mid-City Neighborhood Association. "It's been incredible. Not only do they do an amazing job, but we've found that in every area we have one, we've seen a drastic reduction in graffiti and litter. People are just more respectful of an area where there's art."



Photo provided by Community Visions Unlimited

Jennifer Lindsley painted butterflies at Elysian Fields Avenue and Robert F. Lee Boulevard.



Photos provided by Community Visions Unlimited

Congo dancers are artist Linda LeBoeuf's theme at Basin Street and Claiborne Avenue.

The keyboard-motif box painted by artist Robin Daning can be found at Broadway Street and Claiborne Avenue.

Artist Erin McNutt put the image of Deacon John Moore on a box at Basin and St. Louis streets.

A streetcar follows a different track on this box at Broad and Banks streets. The artist is Sean Clark.

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Each box costs \$750 to transform. The money comes from grants and donations from mostly individuals, local businesses or neighborhood associations. "That amount includes primer, good quality paints and a small payment of \$250 to the artist," Tidy explained.

The paycheck isn't high, given that it can typically take about a week for an artist to complete a box.

"For all of us, I'd say, it's definitely not about the money," said Robin Daning, a Massa-

chusetts native who grew up visiting New Orleans to see her grandfather, a jazz musician. "As an artist, there's just nothing like this city, so I knew someday I'd make my home here. I'm fortunate enough to have done that, so when I heard about this project two years ago, I knew that I had found my way to give back."

Daning says the rewards of the work have been far beyond what she could have imagined.

"It's been so surprising to see how grateful people are," she said. "Someone is always stopping by while I'm out there working just to say thank you. I've even had people bring me

food or water, or offer me money."

CVU is currently the only organization that has been granted city approval to paint electrical boxes, the only provision being that no box could be touched without prior neighborhood approval.

"We will meet with a neighborhood association and ask for approval to paint a certain box," Tidy explained. "If they say yes, we talk about what sort of a design they'd like to see, and then I put the call out to local artists, with priority usually given to an artist that lives in the neighborhood."

For Metairie resident Jessica

Normington, the project represented a unique way to stretch her artistic skills.

"I've always liked a challenge," she said. "I've never done anything as large as the first box I did. If you were to flatten out that box, it would be a 20-foot-wide canvas."

Since 2014, Normington has completed six boxes around the city. She is currently at work on her latest on Esplanade Avenue. She says that, like many other artists, her involvement with the project also has helped her pick up other commissioned work.

Both Normington and Daning say they're eager to continue with the project and hope to make their mark on some of the 310 remaining unpainted boxes throughout the city.

"Right now, we're working on about 40 boxes that will honor different musicians around the city," Tidy said. "You're going to start seeing them from Howard Avenue down North Rampart Street all the way to Press Street, and down Loyola Avenue from Howard to where it becomes Basin Street, then Claiborne. We've got a lot of work to do."

