



'Before I Die' murals draw citywide attention

By Erin Vogel, for RedEye

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Fill in the blank: Before I die, I want to _____.

Recently, residents in Edgewater and Pilsen have been answering the same question-- but they've been writing their answers on the sides of neighborhood buildings.

The answers are part of the "Before I Die" mural project, one of many public art projects created by [Candy Chang](#), a New Orleans-based artist. Chang uses materials like sidewalk chalk and post-it notes to encourage neighbors to engage with the physical spaces in their communities--and each other.

The project, a series of walls painted with chalkboard paint and lines of stenciled letters that say "Before I die, I want to _____", is only about a year old, but it has already spread across the country in cities such as Brooklyn, San Diego, Amsterdam and London.

Elizabeth Shank, founder and President of the [Good News Only Gallery](#) in Edgewater, and Lauren Pacheco, executive director of the [Chicago Urban Art Society](#), decided to work together to bring the murals to Chicago after learning about Chang's project.

Pacheco and Shank got together in February to outline possible locations for murals, and by March 10, the first mural in Edgewater was installed at 1101 W. Granville. The week after, two more walls went up in Pilsen on 18th and Carpenter and 18th and Laflin, with the help of students from [Yollocalli Arts Reach](#).

"The kids were just hands in, like 'jump in, get your hands dirty, grab a roller' it was great," Pacheco said. "They were so amazed that it was such a playful project, but with

a deep message, and they got it immediately."

It didn't take long for the walls to start filling up with chalk messages and wishes either. By the end of the first weekend of the Carpenter wall, about 500 people had left their comments on the mural and on the sidewalk below.

Pacheco said that there is no set budget for the project; she and Shank have been using their own money to buy any rollers, paint, and chalk they need. The overall cost for a mural is pretty cheap--a wall can be painted and stenciled for as little as \$75. Pacheco said the cost of murals could most likely be covered through neighborhood donations.

Pacheco and Shank's current plan for the project is to keep the murals up as they are until the middle of the summer, at which point they hope to replace the chalk murals with something more permanent and less interactive.

They are already hearing requests for murals from residents from Hyde Park, and outside of the city too, from Ottawa, Illinois, and even from someone from Germany who heard about the Chicago leg of the project.

For the time being, however, they only have plans to install murals around the city. A third mural in Pilsen will be installed at 21st and Allport as soon as this week or the next.

Pacheco and Shank are finalizing plans to unveil a mural in Little Village on April 7, with a "Before I Die" header written in Spanish. Pacheco is waiting for a Chinese translation of the phrase for a wall in Chinatown on Wentworth Avenue. A mural is also slated to be installed in Wicker Park on April 14, on either Milwaukee or Diversey Avenue.

Pacheco said that at some point, she and Shank will have to take a step back and stop putting up new murals because they won't have the ability to check up on every location.

"It was always like, 'Let's do two walls. It'd be great if we could just do two walls,'" Pacheco said. "We'll be more than willing to give people our stencils, so they can go out in their community and do the project themselves. Fundamentally, it's a project that the community has to take ownership of. It's the community's piece."

Shank said she was happy to see that people were buying new chalk for the mural on Granville Avenue, and residents seem enthusiastic to pass by the mural as they walk to and fro the Granville red line stop.

"I really like this installation. I think it's beautiful," said Ryland Marsh, 20, from Edgewater. "You see people sharing chalk with one another or expanding on other people's ideas. I wrote, "Before I die, I want to be happy."

"When you're writing these statements down, you're putting them out there for everyone to see, so it's like a challenge to yourself," Shank said. "It's like after you write it down, you have to go for it. You're writing your private hopes and dreams, but by sharing it with others, you're making it more real."

Check out more pictures of the mural and updates with comments as they are added to the murals at beforeidiechi.tumblr.com. View Candy Chang's original project [here](#).