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## Youth Involvement and Leadership through Public Art

**Youth Council:** Monterey County Youth Council

**Sponsoring Agency:** Monterey County Workforce Investment Board Office for Employment Training

**Element:** Career Preparation and Youth Leadership

**Function:** Coordinating Youth Services

**Subjects:** Innovative Programs, Youth Involvement

**The Opportunity:** When the Monterey County Youth Council began its work, the Monterey County One Voice Murals project was already in place and very successful. Since the program was being funded by workforce dollars and included at least four of the ten WIA-mandated elements, the Youth Council decided to partner with the program and provide funds.

**The Practice and Evidence:** The One Voice Murals Project, a program run through the One Voice Arts and Leadership Program, engages youth from throughout Monterey County in eight-week summer youth employment projects during which they create murals. Up to one hundred youth participate in these annual projects, which not only beautify the community for years to come but also provide the youth with team-building skills, bonding, and a pride for their community, which will translate into their being productive members and good citizens of the community where they live.

Through the One Voice Murals Project, youth muralists learn many valuable job-related, transferable skills, including working well on a team, enhancing group dynamics, developing leadership, thinking creatively, and solving problems. The project also provides a positive and motivating role-model leadership activity for youth.

During the six most active years, over 720 youth participated with a greater than 90 percent success rate in relationship to participation. An alumni survey indicated that, at the program's peak, 96 percent thought it was excellent, and many went on to participate in leadership programs, visiting different cities to give presentations. Thirty-six percent of the youth gave money they earned to their parents to help at home. Approximately fifty murals have been completed throughout Monterey County.

The Murals Project is not only the largest and most successful youth program of its kind in the Monterey tri-county area, but also the most influential public arts program in the county's recent history. As a result of the work of youth in Monterey County, this art program is being replicated across the nation. The One Voice Arts and Leadership Program that sponsors the Murals project

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has been honored by the National Endowment for the Arts, and has had information on display in the California Capitol and in the Monterey County Courthouse.

Another successful One Voice public art project was the Healing Pole, created during the summer of 2002. One Voice had been given a 23-foot log that was a remnant of the Port Chicago disaster, with the stipulation that they create a sculpture out of it and give it to a community in need of healing.

A master carver, Shane Eagleton, was hired to work with the youth and direct the project. With no training as artists, youth sculpted the log using chisels and mallets. Eagleton carved a DNA helix into the log and the youth added 16 endangered species, to show the “connectivity of all animals and plants,” noted Eagleton. Youth participant Jaymes Lambert said, “People were kind of timid with each other at first, but we all worked together great, and the project turned out to be something wonderful.”

The City of New York accepted the healing pole as its first commemorative gift in recognition of the September 11 tragedy. On September 5, 2002, the pole was installed at the front gate of Bronx Zoo. A documentary on the pole, sponsored by the California State Youth Council and California Workforce Association, was seen by over 20 million people on 20 public television stations.

**The Details:** The One Voice Murals Project started in 1995, five years before the Youth Council was established. It was developed as a response to information that the Workforce Investment Board (WIB) received regarding the importance of art, leadership, cultural issues, and youth involvement in the community. They were looking for an arts program they could establish to complement the Summer Youth Employment Training Program and the eleven different academic enrichment programs that ranged from Graduation Equivalency Diploma (GED) through Regional Occupational Programs (ROP) to community college and computer literacy offerings. They also had programs that integrated drama in which students created their own plays where youth from all different parts of the county worked together.

Monterey County is very diverse culturally with at least 12 major ethnic groups that are somewhat compartmentalized, so WIB members looked to establish a county-wide program because it would be a great opportunity to learn about cultural diversity. In 1996, they went to Chicago to visit a major community arts program. It was initially run through the city’s jobs program, but eventually they formed their own 501c (3) non profit. They took a part of downtown and created spaces where 20 different arts programs were located, and the aldermen had other centers throughout the city. They hired professional artists from around the country.

The Monterey County WIB members asked how they could create a comparable program in a miniature form at home. They decided to start a county-wide cultural murals program. They invited local cities and businesses to co-create the program, to match dollars, and to identify youth who would participate. Together with the youth and city officials, the WIB members

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developed concepts for the murals. The concepts were relatively non-controversial: jazz, fairness, peace, citizenship, honor, subjects that everyone can believe in, so as to ensure the project would be successful.

Each community decided how the concepts would be represented. A paid professional artist worked with members of each community to create the image, and then the renderings were taken to their city council to approve and to contribute funds. At the mural project's highest point, it was receiving \$120,000 per year in matched funds. In 1996, two or three murals were created. At the project's zenith, 20 murals were created in eight weeks. Thirty-six professional artists were hired, and they worked with over a hundred youth. They also did sculpture, drama, and martial arts.

Basic funding for the youth mural and arts project has been supplied by the Workforce Investment Act and sponsored by Monterey County Workforce Investment Board, the Office for Employment Training, and the Monterey County One-Stop Career Center System.

**Breakthrough Moment:** "I knew it would work the day that we started," said WIB Executive Director Joseph Werner. However, one of the most dramatic moments for the project came during the first summer. "The first year we had a community paint day," Werner reported. "We publicized the mural project and invited people to come out and paint. When our congressman, state senator, supervisor, and over 200 people from the community joined in, I knew it was working. People were supporting youth."

**What's Next for this YCidea?** During the summer of 2005, a mural will be created at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey.

## Where to Go for More Information

Monterey County Youth Council

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## Tool

[One-voice Murals Project](http://www.co.monterey.ca.us/workforce/murals/index.htm)

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