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Vacant houses spur art initiative in Wilkinsburg

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By Deborah M. Todd, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

When Wilkinsburg artist Lazae LaSpina noticed bright neon swirls of abstract art decorating boards used to shutter the North Side's vacant Garden Theater, she saw an opportunity to spruce up blighted properties in her own neighborhood.

"I could tell people cared about that area," she said. "In Wilkinsburg, with all of the abandoned properties in that area, I thought that would be a good idea if we did something similar."

Originally conceived as a small neighborhood project in May 2009, Ms. LaSpina's idea has grown into a plan that will not only beautify the homes, but could potentially establish the community as a haven for artists. The Whitney Avenue Art Gallery "Houses in Waiting" project kicked off May 28 with a youth orientation event at Hosanna House.

Funded by the Wilkinsburg Weed and Seed, the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, the Wilkinsburg Municipal Authority and the Wilkinsburg Development Authority, the project's goal is to recruit community members to paint plywood window covers for 10 to 12 vacant houses on Whitney Avenue's 700 block -- transforming the space to what organizers call an "outdoor gallery."

But if the idea catches on the way Ms. LaSpina and Wilkinsburg officials hope it will, the project will spearhead a push to promote the properties for sale as well as programs available for potential homeowners.

"The theme 'Houses in Waiting' intends the board-up art to act as a placeholder while interest is generated for a wide spectrum of home buyers to invest in the neighborhood and take advantage of Wilkinsburg's ten-year property tax abatement program," reads the WAAG web site.

The initiative also has potential to bring neighbors in the Hamnett Place community together to collaborate behind a common theme for the artwork. Volunteers are split up into youth and adult groups where professional artists help lead discussion and activities to determine themes.

Artist Ernest Bey, whose work includes elaborate wood carvings created for the Garden Dreams Nursery on Holland Avenue, said he looks forward to speaking to youth about the project.

"I want to challenge students, who are going to be becoming the lead artists on this project. I want their input," he said. "Because when you involve young people, they come up with something you totally didn't anticipate."

Multimedia artist Kate Joranson said she will encourage adult volunteers to observe the environment around the houses to come up with ideas for themes.

"Boarded up buildings and abandoned sites can evoke a lot of emotion," she said. "I want to try to collect those stories through writing, drawings, maybe collect small objects."

With the window covers painted and primed, workshops scheduled throughout the month and a grand opening event scheduled for July, organizers are optimistic the initiative will help residents see the community in a new way.

Councilwoman Vanessa McCarthy-Johnson said she hopes the initiative can grow to include more of Ms. LaSpina's ideas, such as artists in residence and community parties to promote the site. But she said the initial start is more than enough to spark additional improvements in the neighborhood.

"It gives a sense of value instead of devastation to the properties in the neighborhood. People will look at where they live a little different," she said.

They'll see its not just an abandoned house, it can be just about anything you want it to be."

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