

CITY WORKERS EXPLORE DIVERSITY THROUGH ART

The effort is part of a larger project that will eventually involve citywide events.

by Dieter Bradbury, March 21, 2008

Marty Pottenger, director of the Arts & Equity Initiative, looks on as Geoffrey Howitt hangs his block print work of art on the wall at the Public Works Garage in Portland. Howitt works for the Fleet Services division of Portland Public Works.

Even though she grew up in Portland's ethnically rich East End, Linda Dinsmore never gave a lot of thought to her French-Italian heritage.

But at a workshop this month sponsored by the city, she found herself drawing on images of her childhood on Newbury Street to complete a project with paper, cardboard and other media. The art work focused on her cultural identity and how it relates to her choice of work as a city employee.

"It was just a wonderful workshop," said Dinsmore, a caseworker at Portland's Chestnut Street shelter for homeless families. "And it does make you think about where your roots are and where you came from and where you're at in this city today, where there's lots of different cultures and people."

The workshop was one element in the Arts and Equity Initiative, an unusual, three-year project to involve city workers – and eventually the larger community – in an arts-based effort to celebrate diversity and promote creative life, work and policy-making in Portland.

Funded largely by about \$100,000 in private grants, the project will include artist-in-residence programs; dramatic performances by all the city's high schools; civic dialogues on social issues based in the religious community; and exhibits, readings, conferences and other events.

"It's an out-of-the-box idea, and clearly we're living in out-of-the-box times," said Marty Pottenger, a playwright, director and community arts performer who conceived and oversees the project.

Pottenger and several artists-in-residence have been meeting with groups of city employees, holding "story circles" in which participants share their life histories and why they chose municipal employment.

Employees then participate in arts workshops to explore creative ways they can express their identities, values and experience as Portland residents and city workers.

One artist, Daniel Minter, has been holding workshops for employees to do ink block carvings and make print images from their lives at home or in the workplace.

Dave Melendez, a trainer in the public works department, completed a print with images of two public works employees who won a snowplow rodeo competition; his boss, John Rague,

shoveling snow; a truck tire with chains; and several fish and animals to represent his interest in hunting and fishing.

A former construction worker, Melendez, 48, said the printmaking and storytelling may not square with the stereotype of a public works employee. But he said the experience was rewarding, and he likened it to the satisfaction of training someone to drive a bulldozer.

"I'm a very open-minded guy," he said. "Life to me is about risk-taking and growing and taking the opportunity to move forward."

Dinsmore, the caseworker at the family shelter, said the arts workshop helped her realize she had resettled in Portland – after working as a property manager in California in the 1980s – because she identified strongly with the city where she had grown up.

"I need to be here and I enjoy it," she said. "I can go home at the end of the day and feel like I made a difference."

Elizabeth Jabar, another artist in residence for the project, said she has worked hard to encourage people to talk about their heritage and how it might have led to the sort of work they do.

"I've been really blown away by their experiences and how they became the people that they are," said Jabar, who heads the printmaking department at Maine College of Art. "I hope to bring that out in their work – to make that more visible."

The city is contributing \$5,000 to the project, and employees have their initial meeting with an artist during working hours, as part of the city's efforts to promote team building. Any additional meetings are on an employee's own time.

While some may question the investment at a time of tight budgets, the arts initiative has not attracted any visible criticism. Steven Scharf, president of the Portland Taxpayers Association, said he was unaware of the project, but noted that \$5,000 is a tiny fraction of the city's \$268 million budget.

Pottenger is in the early stages of starting a writing workshop with police officers. Her goal is to have the police contribute poetry or other writings for publication in a small chapbook.

"I told them there's a big connection between their work and poetry writing," she said.

"They're both filled with surprise and risk."

Police Capt. Vern Malloch, who heads the department's patrol services division, has introduced Pottenger to members of the force and arranged for her to ride on patrols.

He said the poetry-writing idea has been met with skepticism and joking, but Pottenger has been persistent and patient. "I would be surprised if she didn't find some people who would take it seriously and want to contribute," Malloch said.