

Let us spray

Dan Zak

Five artists have just painted the District's largest-ever mural.



Two stories high and as long as a city block, it sprawls over a crumbling retaining wall behind a brown shopping plaza in Northeast Washington, near a black chain-link fence tangled with barbed wire, surrounded by an ash-colored asphalt parking lot.

Red Line commuters from Maryland will see it as a vibrant streak across a familiar (if routinely ignored) green-gray landscape by the Rhode Island Avenue Metro stop. Those on foot, who live in or pass through the Edgewood neighborhood, will see it up close: whirling figures, rich hues sprayed up and down its 20-foot height, a roiling progression of five artistic visions sharing one 275-foot-long wall.

"The artwork is just amazing," says Wayne Sumpter, 52, who lives on nearby Channing Street and cuts behind the Rhode Island Avenue Shopping Center nearly every day. "It definitely gets your attention. It wakes you up. When I come through here I'm not thinking about a lot, but the wall stopped me. It pulls you to it."

The mural, titled "From Edgewood to the Edge of the World," will pull focus from many directions, from many kinds of people. People will see it from the Metro, the parking lot, the train tracks, as they return home to the Edgewood Terrace public housing complex, as they use the Metropolitan Branch Trail, a planned bike-and-walking path that will skirt the mural on its way from Silver Spring to Union Station. People will see it in spite of nearby trash-strewn ditches, in spite of parked cars with smashed windows, in spite of the fact that they may only ever see it at a distance, from behind Metro plexiglass.

"People now stop in this area where typically they cut through," says District artist Quest Skinner, who is one of five professionals contributing to the mural. "It changes your environment. Your environment can be luscious even in the darkest of times in the darkest of places."

Over the past three weeks, the five artists and 40 apprentices from the city's Summer Youth Employment Program spray-painted in both the midday August heat and the glow of car headlights at night. They whitewashed the wall, chalked up a grid, projected images to sketch, tugged scaffolding, slapped on face masks, showered color over concrete, then sat on a curb to soak up the progress. The D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities partnered with the youth employment program and Albus Cavus, a nonprofit artist collective and mentoring program, to transform the wall and engage local youth.

"Historically, this was the edge of the known world for Washingtonians," says Peter Krsko, 30, director of Albus Cavus. But they "were not afraid to step beyond the border, beyond the edge, and discover something new and exciting and make the city large and more prosperous. Basically, as the title of the wall means, we would like people to step beyond their own personal boundaries."

Even the boundary of the mural has already been broken. Last weekend as part of a city-sponsored "mural jam," dozens of graffiti artists and local amateurs parceled and spray-painted the remainder of the retaining wall, which extends another 700 feet behind the shopping center to Fourth Street NE. The mural is officially unveiled Monday.

It's a populist addendum to the main work, and the whole thing is an epic kickoff to a season of muraling. Six more murals will go up around the city by year's end as part of the MuralsDC program, which D.C. Council member Jim Graham started two years ago to beat graffiti artists to the punch. In the end, though, these are works of art and sweat before they are triumphs of bureaucratic cooperation. To understand the intricacies of the Edgewood mural, now the biggest and busiest of them all, we talked to the five artists charged with spraying their vision onto concrete.

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