

ALIVE

Local artists aim to preserve and restore Smoky Brown mural

By Jim Fischer

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A fading Short North mural is getting new attention through a GoFundMe campaign seeking to move the art to Central Community House on the Near East Side

In a city in which the public art of past generations often disappears without a warning as culture gives way to condos, a nascent effort to preserve a 25-year-old mural in the Short North is receiving a welcome reaction.

“That’s My Dad,” a mural by late Columbus folk artist Smoky Brown, was part of a multi-artist project commissioned in 1995 by the since-closed Short Stop Teen Center, housed in the basement of a church at 1066 N. High St., according to Richard Duarte Brown, one of the artists who participated, along with Brown, Leni Anderson and Leon Page.

The current preservation effort was initiated by Dan Dougan, former owner of local music clubs Stache’s and, for 10 years, Little Brother’s, located next door to Short Stop at 1100 N. High St., the current site of Standard Hall. On a recent walk through his former haunts, Dougan came upon the Smoky Brown mural. Knowing how rapidly the neighborhood has changed, he reached out to members of the art community to see what could be done to preserve the work.

“I knew Smoky from the ’80s. And I had worked with the church and the teen center on shared parking and scheduling,” Dougan said. “While we were at Little Brother’s, I became a dad, and those murals were favorites, in particular of my son. It’s still there, but it’s deteriorating. ... I’d like to get Smoky to a place where he’ll be protected and appreciated.”

Dougan contacted AJ Vanderelli, who subsequently reached out to Duarte Brown (no relation to Smoky) and Shelbi Harris-Roseboro, currently the executive director of All People Arts on the city's South Side and a longtime "elder art" advocate.

"As soon as I went [to the Smoky Brown mural site], I was like, 'We have to move this to Central Community House,'" Harris-Roseboro said. "This needs to happen."

As part of its function as a community center for the city's Near East Side, Central Community House is the site of community-arts program Transit Arts, which traces its heritage back to Short Stop, both programmatically and through Jackie Calderone, who co-founded both institutions.

"There was a basketball court in a parking lot at our building. As is the way with kids, there was a lot of trash talking that went on there, which would sometimes lead to fights," Calderone said. "Duarte, being Duarte, said we should put some art on the walls. So we commissioned the 'Fathers & Sons Project,' which included a variety of arts — a theatrical piece, music and the murals. I remember the day they were painting, it started to rain, but these fabulous artists just kept painting."

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The fact that Smoky Brown's mural still stands on the site of the long-closed teen center is "a powerful statement about what happens when you create a sense of beauty in a community," said Calderone, who concurred with Harris-Roseboro that Central Community House offers an ideal location for the relocation and preservation of the mural. "We have several pieces of Grandpa Smoky's art at the Central Community House. And the fact that Duarte is there [as part of the leadership of Transit Arts]... it just feels like a special opportunity."

"I talked to our board and it was pretty much a no-brainer," Central Community House Executive Director Tammy Forrest said. "The connection to Transit Arts and with the arts at the core of so much of what we do... we're thankful that Shelbi reached out to us."

Vanderelli created a **GoFundMe campaign** in support of the preservation effort, which would include the full deconstruction of the block wall on its current site and the refurbishment and rebuild process on Bryden Road. Harris-Roseboro said it's so early in the process that it's hard to know how much the project might cost, but she assured potential donors that "whatever comes in will go towards preserving this mural."

She also said she's not aware of any imminent threats to the wall on which the mural is painted. Attempts to contact a landlord for the 1066 N. High St. structure did not receive replies at press time.

Both Forrest and Calderone recognized the need to work with the City of Columbus via its area and historical commissions to realize the project. But both also mentioned the opportunities for sharing stories about Near East Side artists like Smoky Brown and his contemporaries, including Kojo Kamau and Aminah Robinson.

Indeed, Duarte Brown is working on a project documenting the art and artists of the time called the East Side Canon. It is, in part, his own history, as those artists were his mentors when he was a young Black artist in Columbus.

"For me, those people were family," Duarte Brown said. "Smoky was a teacher to me, and with me not having a father figure in my life, Smoky was like a father, or a grandfather. I treasure that. ... And now, out of nowhere, people are asking me again about this mural, about 'Fathers & Sons' and the stories that go along with it. ... The fact that these young people want to preserve that mural blows me away."