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Nereo Zorro's mural in a Langside Street alley depicts a red fox, an animal the artist says used to roam the streets before humans took them over.

Artist Nereo Zorro hopes to transform Winnipeg's back alleys, **one mural at a time**

# CHANGING LANES

BEN WALDMAN

**N**EREO Zorro was crouched down in front of a Spence neighbourhood garage last week, with a can of spray paint in his hand, when a man approached him and asked a question tinged with a touch of suspicion: what exactly are you doing?

Zorro understood the man's concern: most garage doors and fences along the alleyway, pockmarked with potholes, had at least a trace of unwanted graffiti.

But the 36-year-old artist, who looks about half his age, took a moment to explain himself as he sprayed the colours of a red fox onto the metal door.

He was asked to paint this.

Zorro, a chosen last name that coincidentally means fox in Spanish, was born and raised in Winnipeg, and his first home was a stone's throw away on Furby Street. A skilled muralist, in recent years, Zorro began examining his old stomping grounds, more particularly its back lanes.

Where others might see broken concrete, overflowing dumpsters and unwanted graffiti, Zorro saw potential to reimagine an untouched spatial resource. These back lanes that had fallen into disrepair were indicative of greater societal issues — poverty, inequality, misallocation of resources — not any problem inherent to the West End or its residents.

As an artist is wont to do, he wondered whether a little bit of colour might help.

So a few weeks ago, he put out a call on social media for a special project, seeking willing garage owners: painting creatures, like the red fox, which lived in the neighbourhood before any buildings were ever put up. "These animals used to roam these lands before us," he says.

"I'm open to all worthy creatures because the world is not just Winnipeg," he adds. "We need to recognize the connection that we have with nature, and all living beings who share our world."

The first homeowner to volunteer their door — Zorro does charge a flat rate to cover the cost of each mural — lived in an ideal spot: directly behind the Langside Tot Lot.



Nereo Zorro's chosen last name is Spanish for fox, an animal he's emblazoned on a garage door.

Early on a warm summer Thursday, there were no tots in the lot, the play structure dormant. On one side of the lot, behind an apartment building, was a section of back lane about 20 metres wide, filled with all manner of garbage — old mattress frames, food wrappers, discarded furniture.

"I was talking to someone on the street the other day and she said she hadn't been back in 20 years, and my, had the neighbourhood changed," says

Zorro. It was clear she didn't think the change was for the better.

But that's the thing about change: if it can happen in one direction, it can happen in the other. That's Zorro's hope for the murals. "I want them to help change perceptions, maybe add some more colour and more life into the area, especially ones where kids are connected to," he says. "They can get inspired. It's like looking at a pretty flower or looking at a sunset. The same

thing applies. It has the same effect."

He knows that first-hand: after a rough few years in the 1990s, the rise of local arts organizations such as the Graffiti Gallery, where Zorro has worked, rose up to "transform the idea of what you could do with a spray can."

More recently, Zorro has worked with young people embroiled in the criminal justice system in projects related to art therapy, and saw a remarkable transformation in the participants' demeanour: some rival gang members who could hardly look at each other were holding hands and laughing in a matter of days.

In other words, he knows art can change the world. And when he looks at piles of garbage, he shakes his head at the notion that the garbage itself is the issue: it's a symptom of underlying societal concerns that have bedevilled low-income neighbourhoods for years, with the pandemic making things much worse.

To clean up the garbage week after week and not change anything else would be a Band-Aid solution, he says. "I am more interested in the back end of things," he adds.

The back lanes. They can teach you a lot about a neighbourhood. Maybe even more than the front yard. The back lane is out of the direct eye of the public: it's where the truth of a place often lies, unvarnished and unconcerned with judgment.

● MURAL, CONTINUED ON G4



## MURAL ● FROM G1



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**Nereo Zorro hopes his West End alley paintings start conversations and inspire others to take care of their spaces.**

Zorro, who spent most of his life in the West End and has recently taken up residence in Costa Careyes, Mexico, looks at the lanes as dormant ecosystems: a lot of space that does not get enough use or attention. In Wolseley, he saw the wild-life-centred garage murals of his friend, the local artist Kal Barteski, and thought something similar could enhance life in the lanes of his neighbourhood.

His goal is to paint 37 murals across the country on garages to help enliven the alleyways, with commissions from homeowners in Calgary and Toronto already in the works. But Zorro hopes to do the bulk of his work in the neighbourhood where he grew up.

Last week, he pulled up his golden Honda Odyssey van to the house on Langside, putting it in park and sorting through an impressive array of spray paints.

The red fox is significant to him: not only is fox his chosen last name, it's a name he gave his son, inspired by a fox sighting at Seven Sisters Falls a decade ago.

He pushed on the can's trigger, and fumes of colour spurted out in controlled beams.

Chefs sometimes say if you want to get a room's attention, start chopping. Painters start painting. Then, the neighbourhood takes notice.

A tattoo artist approached Zorro to talk about the art on her body. Families asked about the process. Some children pointed at the project from the Tot Lot — "They were looking at this, instead of at that," he says gesturing to the mess of trash. And then a neighbour emerged to ask a question tinged with suspicion.

When Zorro explained, the man eased up, and then told the artist he was doing something good.

"That was probably my favourite interaction, because it was a transformation that happened in one conversation," Zorro says. "It changed."

[ben.waldman@winnipegfreepress.com](mailto:ben.waldman@winnipegfreepress.com)