

YOU GO, GIRL!

Three young women from Harlem arts organizations help restore 1986 mural

Edited by Audrey J. Bernard
Lifestyles/Society Editor

In 1986, Hope Steven Community Garden (then known as the West Harlem Group Assistance Garden) was selected to participate in Artists in the Gar-

den, they develop valuable skills, both artistic and job related.

Working alongside professional muralists, they define and refine their own artistic styles while applying the formal elements and principles of mural making and restoration in a large-

scale public setting. Homage to Seurat has long been part of the apprentices' daily lives as they reside, study

and/or work in the neighborhood. Expressing considered opinions on the value of public art, they are all excited to be part of the restoration, eager to develop new skills and give something back to the community.

"I've always liked murals and the idea that it is an art form that anybody can walk by and see," says **Ariel Mercado**, age 18. "It's free and in a public space. Not everyone has the time or the money to go to museums."

The opportunity to work in a public arena drew Ariel to the project, her first mural. For the past few years she has been active in programs sponsored by Harlem's Children's Art Carnival (CAC). She began painting and drawing classes as an 8th grade student and quickly moved into an internship program New Generation of Artists, becoming involved in the Living Treasures project. For a 2007 documentary about gentrification in Harlem, she conducted interviews and shot and edited footage in addition to designing the project's logo.

"I would see the mural on my way to CAC and always thought it was beautiful and that I would like to work on one someday," she recalls. "Restoring the mural appealed to me because it is so beautiful even though it is so faded. Also, I'm a young artist and don't know a lot. Whatever I can take from the project is good — developing my skills

and helping my community look much more beautiful."

Now completing her last semester of high school, she hopes to attend one of the city's art colleges and has applied to Pratt and the School of Visual

Arts. She plans to become a professional artist, not only painting but also applying her drawing skills to designing tattoos and illustrating children's books.

Arts. She hopes to bring likeminded people together, each contributing certain strengths. "Like making murals," she says, "it will be a collaborative process."

"I have always been interested in restoration and like the



Alexandra Unthank



Ariel Mercado

den, a project of Green Thumb, the community gardening program sponsored by the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation.

From a roster of artists chosen by a panel of art professionals, the gardeners selected **Eva Cockcroft** to paint a mural on the building facing their garden. In 1998, the garden was sold by the City of New York to the Trust for Public Land for eventual transfer to the newly formed Manhattan Land Trust, thus ensuring its preservation.

"Like our garden, which was established in 1983, Homage to Seurat has become a beloved fixture in our Hamilton Heights neighborhood," says garden representative **Ginny Outlaw**. "We are very pleased that the mural will be restored to its former beauty."

Three talented young women, all associated with Harlem arts organizations are working as paid apprentices on the restoration of Eva Cockcroft's community mural **Homage to Seurat: La Grande Jatte in Harlem**. The restoration is sponsored by Rescue Public Murals, a project of Heritage Preservation, a national non-profit based in Washington, DC. (See more on **Homage to Seurat** on page 4).

The apprentices — **Ariel Mercado**, **Jessica Guzman** and **Alexandra Unthank** — are exposed and held to the highest possible aesthetic standards as



Jessica Guzman

and learning about materials. I am very happy to be part of the project. I am gaining ex-

perience and helping my community look much more beautiful."

"I like the collaborative aspect of making murals," says **Jessica Guzman**, age 21. "There should be more murals. A mural is supposed to have a message. If it doesn't make you think, it's not a mural."

Jessica is a veteran muralist and she is planning to visit murals in other neighborhoods. For the past five years she has been associated with CAW4KIDS (Creative Arts Workshop) as part of the city's Summer Youth Program, working on one indoor and three outdoor murals in East and West Harlem.

"I used to live in the neighborhood and remember passing by the mural," she recalls. "I was very aware of the texture of the wall and the colors. I never thought I'd be on a team to restore it. I am learning new skills. What I'm doing is different from making a mural. I really enjoy learning to mix colors to match the original ones. I also like the interaction with the public, explaining what we are doing."

Jessica's goals are to become a designer and own her own business. To that end she is studying business at Borough of Manhattan Community College and plans to study art afterwards, something she has

idea of working with something came before and giving it a new life," says **Alexandra Unthank**, age 21, who grew up a few blocks from the mural. "I had seen the mural pretty much my entire life, but being so familiar with it I hadn't noticed how much it had changed. When I saw the photos, it was shocking."

"Until recently murals were not an art form I was involved with or knew much about, but I did know they had the ability to affect your day in a positive way," reflects Alex who is a member of the Harlem Artists Alliance.

As a young girl, she studied dance and theater. In college, she began to focus on visual arts — she graduated from Sarah Lawrence this past May with plans to pursue printmaking.

"The idea of working on a blank canvas is very daunting," she confesses. "I like to have something to work with. I would always stare at the mural, curious about the way it was painted, how the artist figured out the perfect way of working with the texture of the wall, how to create certain effects."

Alex likes the collaborative process, communicating with colleagues, figuring out how to organize time and tasks for things to run smoothly. She is now more aware of public art and, recognizing that "it's part of humanity to put something on walls" thinks "there should be more of it."

(Photos by Janet Braun-Reintz)