

CWRU students team up to paint a mural on Mr.'s E's brick wall

by Maria Dimengo

It all began with pancakes and a cup of coffee.

I first met Hal and Della Esterwood, the owners of Mr. E's Inn, during a business breakfast at Dee's Diner on Pearl Rd. I had told them about a grant I had received from Case Western Reserve University (CWRU) to revitalize storefronts in Cleveland.

Hal and Della have lived in Old Brooklyn for decades, raising their five kids. In addition to Mr. E's, Della has been operating Della's House of Beauty on W. Schaaf Rd. for over 42 years.

So when Hal offered to show me the old wall, I wanted to see what it was all about. He thought it would make a great mural some day, and he asked me to take a look. It was late February, when 20-degree temperatures were part of the routine here in Cleveland. Hal told me I would pass by it on my way to work, so I drove by the space at 4256 Pearl Rd., hopped out of my car, and snapped a few photos.

Even in the wintertime, the space next to Mr. E's was full of life. A proud iron gate offered a protected boundary from traffic and passersby. Patches of snow clung to the worn, peeling paint. The open space showcased the old brick where Theo's Restaurant used to be.

Once measured, the wall at Mr. E's was 60 feet wide, which would turn into an ambitious project if I decided to take it on. But I didn't think much of it, until I got a call from a CWRU student named Ben Meck.

Ben was eager to graduate and needed one more credit hour to finish his degree. He wondered if he could create some artwork for Case Cares, my city revitalization project.

Ben had never met Hal Esterwood and

knew nothing about our chance meeting that February morning. So I immediately thought



Photo by Maria Dimengo

The mural on the side wall of Mr. E's Inn, 4256 Pearl Rd. was painted in primary and secondary colors -- blue, green, yellow, purple -- and white.

of the strange coincidence and e-mailed Ben a picture of the wall to see what might come of this interesting idea.

Fresh from the history books

It's easy to drive right by Mr. E's Inn on Pearl Rd. Located south of Memphis Ave., its windows are covered with posters promoting drink specials and what's on tap for the week.

But little did I know that Mr. E's Inn had been a fixture in Old Brooklyn for nearly three decades. The building was constructed sometime before the 1920s, and Hal had opened his bar there during the 1960s. At one point a Faflik's shoe store, a five-and-dime and other small businesses operated nearby.

The years had been unkind to the buildings that lined Pearl Rd. Although Hal had rented his space for years, the building next to it had turned into an eyesore, ready to be condemned by the City. Vagrants had been living in the building and Hal decided he wanted to create a better space.

After he purchased his building in 2007, Hal took about \$40,000 of his own money to have the building next door demolished. After it was torn down, a faded wall with peeling paint was left behind.

Imagine what it was like when I was presented with the possibility of doing something with that old wall. After Ben showed me his ideas and drawings, I figured it might be fun to create a simple piece of art that reminded us of the way life used to be, an era before there

were streets, brick buildings and facades, and maybe something that reminded us of the original Brooklyn Township.

So a group of CWRU students showed up on a sunny day in June and power-washed the wall. Next, we scraped off the peeling paint, spackled the wall and rolled a sealant over it. We later added a coat of blue paint to match the sky. We then scheduled a meeting with the City to make sure they approved of our idea.

By this time, June had turned into July and we needed to take advantage of the warm sunny days. First, I invited a team of artists from Akron to project Ben's art on the wall and trace it with magic markers. Then the paint-by-numbers game began. Neighbors and kids stopped by to assist, wondering what would become of the old wall on Pearl Rd. Folks walking by waved their approval, while workers on their lunch breaks came by to see what we were up to. Even the regulars from Mr. E's came out to check on our progress. Others stopped by to tell stories and reminisce about the old neighborhood. Complete strangers picked up paint brushes and did their best to follow Ben's drawing, which was taped to the wall every day for three solid months.

Finally, our project is complete. And now that the old wall has been painted, I can't help but think of all those conversations with Kevin, Ann, Carla, Karen, and the students from Charles Mooney Elementary School.

This mural was a transforming moment, not only for me, but for dozens of people who cared. And even though a couple of coats of paint mean nothing to people outside the City, it certainly changed me and the people who wanted to help beautify Old Brooklyn.