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Mural project on historic downtown Meadville building begins

By Sean P. Ray Meadville Tribune
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Local artist Doug Lodge (left) and Lee Scandinaro install backing to a section of a large metal mural on the Snodgrass Building on Wednesday afternoon.

SHANNON ROAE/Meadville Tribune



The historic Snodgrass Building, built more than 100 years ago in Meadville, is getting a new look.

A mural project which will decorate the building's back exterior began Wednesday and is set to finish Friday. The mural will consist of metallic pieces attached to the building in the shape of four flowers, a bumblebee and a butterfly.

Heading the project is Amara Geffen, a former professor of art at Allegheny College and locally known for her sign art installations, such as the large "Read Between the Signs" piece located on U.S. Route 6 near Meadville or the nearby "Signs & Flowers." These works of art use road signs to depict a variety of things, ranging from flowers to roller coasters.

Geffen was asked by the Crawford County Coalition on Housing Needs in 2018 to make the mural, and the project was later tied into an ongoing work she is doing on a green space to be located on the spot of the former Meadville Club building.

Initially, Geffen said the coalition was hoping for the mural to be sign art based, like many of her other pieces. However, logistically, Geffen believed the project wouldn't work, as getting signs from the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation is hard to do and her own supply of signs was depleted.

Instead, Geffen will be working with a different medium.

"It's essentially polycarbonate material sandwiched between two thin layers of aluminum," she said.

Over the years since the first request, the mural has undergone several revisions and news plans, with many other artists getting involved. In the summer of 2018, Geffen worked with two Allegheny College students — Renee Benoit and Sophia Thompson — to develop the concept and preliminary look of the mural.

Some early concepts for the mural would have had the mural spread not just across the back of the Snodgrass building located at 970 Park Ave., but also across several nearby structures, including the former Meadville Cinema on Park Avenue. That idea was later reduced to just the Snodgrass Building but remains a possibility.

"That may very well happen in time, but for now we're doing them one step at a time," Geffen said.

Those preliminary ideas were further refined after Geffen secured three grants to help the project, one from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts and the other from the Pennsylvania Humanities Council, as well funds from a Pennsylvania Council on the Arts Creative Communities grant earlier secured for The Arc. As part of those grants, Geffen agreed to work with local artists to help further develop the design.

These artists were Heather Fish, Emma Cook, Gretchen Wood, Bonnie Mattocks, Amber Mosbacher, Diehl Edwards, Charmaine Koehler-Lodge and Lee Scandinaro. The group was initially going to meet in-person, but the COVID-19 pandemic restricted them to meeting remotely.

"These are young creatives and younger artists that were very intensely involved in the My Meadville endeavor from a few years back," Geffen said.

After what Geffen estimated to be nearly 100 hours of work, the final design was figured out. Working with Craig Newell of Newell Fabrication, the pieces to make up the mural were cut out and delivered this past Tuesday.

Some members of the group of artists who helped refined the plan will assist Geffen in putting up the mural, as will Doug Lodge, Deihl Edwards, Mario DeBlasio and potentially Mike Long from The Arc. Geffen said the choice of doing the mural as metal pieces attached to a wall was done to help speed up the completion of the project.

"If you did a painted mural directly on the building, you're on that for weeks and weeks and weeks," she said.

Further, the mural can be removed easily in case of repairs or any other reasons that might require taking it down. A little under 600 holes will be drilled into the exterior wall of the Snodgrass building to put up the mural.

A major intention of the mural is to create a photogenic visual along Arch Street, which Geffen said is a gateway into Meadville from the French Creek Parkway. The mural is designed to be big and visible from a distance, drawing peoples' attentions as they drive or walk by.

"A lot of what I do is large because it's community scale, it's place scale," Geffen said.

Three of the four flowers depicted by the mural are based off of Echinacea flowers, also known as coneflowers. The look of these flowers, Geffen explained, are very visually distinctive and get across the idea of a flower even when seen from far away.

"The shape was perfect," Geffen said of the flower genus. "It reads from a distance, it looks like a flower, it has an iconic flower feel."

Further, Geffen suggested that there is a metaphoric significance to the use of Echinacea flowers, as the plant has a history of being used in folk medicine.

The fourth flower is a bee balm flower, meant to accompany the bee which will be a part of the mural.

While Geffen is not stranger to murals, even comparing this new project to one she did over at the Meadville Medical Center in terms of visuals, she said the Snodgrass installation is not exactly like anything she had done before.

"We've done a lot of murals, but we're never had an attached mural like this with the relief quality," she said.

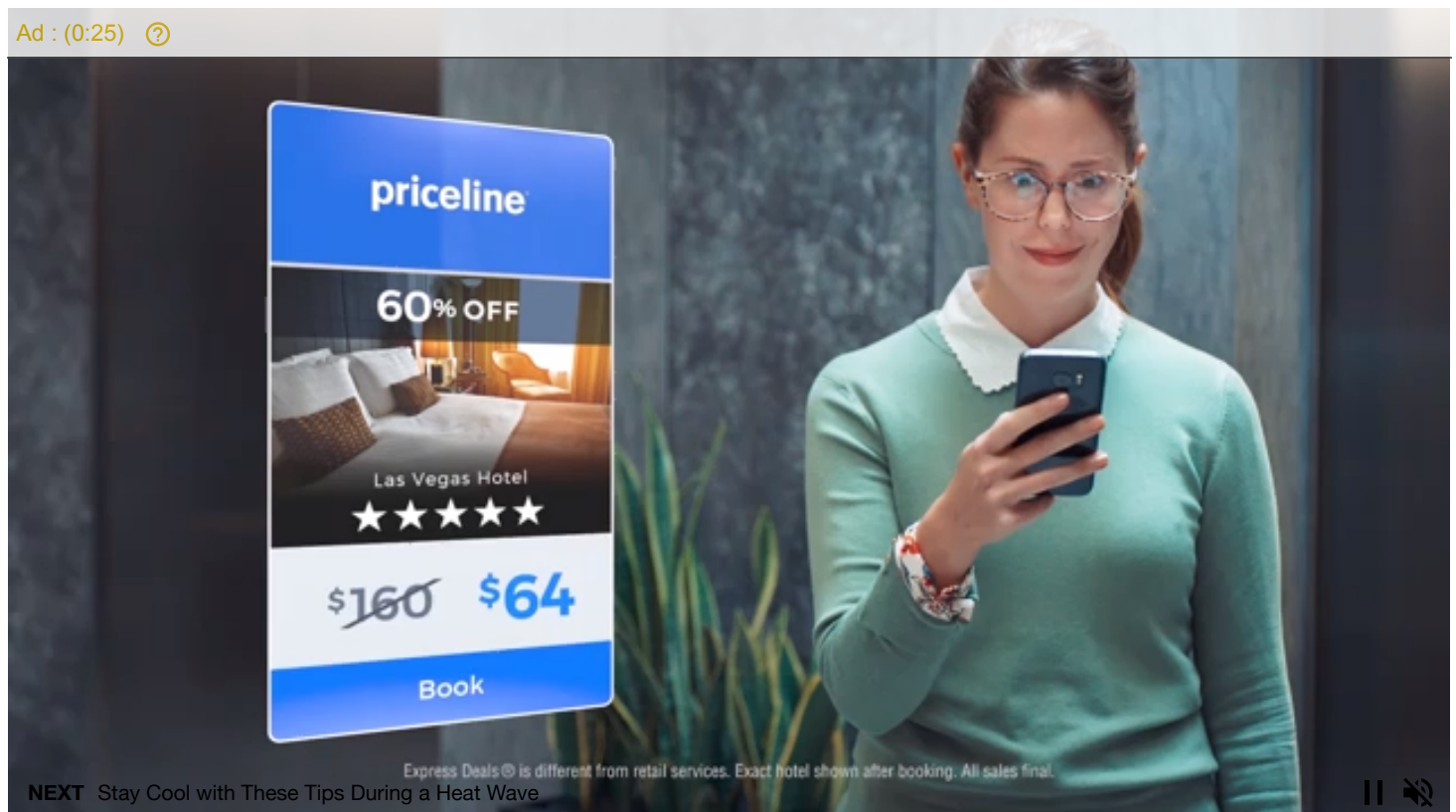
One thing Geffen really likes about the final design is its simplicity, consisting of white silhouettes against a boldly colored background. She was also glad to be able to turn a plain space into something "really visually beautiful," and looks forward to finishing the green space that accompanies the mural.

The mural is scheduled to finish Friday, weather depending. A virtual community dedication is planned to occur sometime in October, but Geffen said details are still being ironed out on that project.

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Editor's note: This article was updated Sept. 10 to correct information about funding sources for the mural project.

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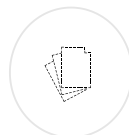


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