



THE CAPITAL AND VANCOUVER ISLAND

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Bob Sellmer, a part-time dishwasher at Our Place, works on a mural in the centre's downstairs recreation area on Tuesday. Sellmer, unable to work as a house painter after a cycling accident, started volunteering at Our Place more than a year ago. **DARREN STONE, TIMES COLONIST**

Our Place's brush with nature

Artist hopes rainforest mural will create a bit of peace and relaxation for centre's clients

KATIE DeROSA
Times Colonist

Bob Sellmer uses careful brush strokes to paint the outline for an expansive mural, an image of a serene rainforest, a tangle of moss-covered tree branches flanking a gentle stream.

Sellmer has been working on the three-metre-by-10-metre mural on a curved wall in the basement of Our Place for five hours every morning, before he starts his dishwashing shift at the drop-in shelter.

Sellmer, a self-taught artist, is donating his time — he's already put in 50 hours, with an estimated 50 to go — to bring a little bit of the Vancouver Island wilderness to the centre's recreation space.

For those struggling with life on the street, Sellmer hopes the mural will bring "a bit of peace and relaxation, and bring nature off the street."

Sellmer has painted all his life, including a smaller version of this mural on the side of a café on the Sunshine Coast. It was removed about 20 years ago.

"I always wanted to redo this image because it was destroyed," Sellmer said.

"It's not every day that an artist gets a wall like this and I'm giving it my all."

Sellmer moved to Victoria in 2001, after spending five years living in the south of England.

He worked as a house painter to pay the bills but, in 2007, he was seriously injured in a cycling accident that ended his career.

The 55-year-old was struggling to get by as he tried to live only on social-assistance cheques. He started volunteering with a food program at Our Place more than a year ago. Our Place provides services to the poor, disadvantaged and homeless of Greater Victoria.

In February, Sellmer was

offered a job as a dishwasher, his first job since his accident.

Grant McKenzie, Our Place's director of communications, first realized what an incredible artist Sellmer is when he saw him at the Moss Street Market. He knew Sellmer's work would liven up the curved wall.

McKenzie and executive director Don Evans gathered up some house paint in the shades of green that Sellmer needed and let him work away.

"The arc of the wall really lent itself to an organic scene," Sellmer said.

The recreation space, which has a pool table and television, is also where mats are set up during extreme weather conditions. Sellmer thinks the image of a lush green rainforest will provide comfort to the homeless during harsh weather.

"Because his work is so complex, it gives people a chance to

really study the painting and that becomes meditative in itself," McKenzie said.

Our Place is always trying to add artwork to make the centre look less institutional and more like a home, "because we treat everyone like family," he said.

"Especially when we have employees and family members being part of that project, that really enhances it," he said. "It makes it their home."

McKenzie said Sellmer's artwork is an example of the beauty that can be created when people are given the right platform to express it.

"Too often we look at people as very one-dimensional," he said. "In Bob's case, you think, 'This person is a dishwasher' and ... don't look beyond that. Then you realize, 'Holy crow, he's an incredibly talented artist.' We all have these other dimensions to us."

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