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Emilia Field · Feb 18, 2021

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Are you like so many in Lake Forest who patiently waited for the McKinley Road viaduct mural to be completed? Have you wondered who is behind the work? Do you know what all those small images mean? Your wait has ended! The artist braved the elements and enlisted volunteers including family and local college and high school students to complete the mural. Read further to get the background scoop on the mural art before heading out to see it in person! Socially distanced of course.



The new mural is a special project between CROYA, Lake Forest's youth organization located at the Lake Forest Recreation Center, and local artist, Thomas (Tommy) Quinn. It was initiated and created to mark CROYA's 40th anniversary. During discussions between Quinn, CROYA staff and students, it was noted that there are many differences among the kids who participate at CROYA. Those differences are invited and celebrated in an environment where everyone belongs. These discussions led to the message for the mural, "U Belong."

"We know there are things during middle school and high school years that keep kids apart, whether it be their differences, interests or activities or different clicks," said CROYA Manager Todd Nahigian. "At CROYA we make sure young adults bring their unique passions. Everyone belongs no matter who walks through the door on any given day, evening or weekend. CROYA reflects the image and voice of all of our youth in Lake Forest and Lake Bluff. Our mission is to inspire a feeling of belonging and community."

Quinn had the task of bringing this idea together in the mural. Taking a glance at his impressive portfolio of work you will be drawn to his clean aesthetic, sharp typography, and stunning installations. Looking through Thomas' anamorphic art it's hard to not be excited about the new mural he has created for CROYA. The mural contains 171 icons representing the theme of U Belong interspersed within the letters, "U Belong." Quinn creates these icons using Adobe Illustrator. Once the rendering is to his liking, he passes those outlines through a laser cutter where the machine will make an exact cutout of each icon Quinn designs. The cut out then becomes a stencil that Quinn can use transfer the image onto the viaduct wall. Each of the 171 icons goes through this process to deliver flawless renderings of the images from computer to wall.

So how does someone come up with 171 icons to represent a community? As a Winnetka resident with two daughters, a dog, and love of the Blackhawks, Quinn has many ideas about community, but he made it very clear that he did not want to decide what all the icons should be for the U Belong mural. He recognized he would need some guidance from younger Lake Foresters on what best represents CROYA and is generation current. Nahigian worked with staff to put together a CROYA committee to nominate and vote on different icons that were special to CROYA and the broader community it serves. Among the special icons is a taco that represents the many taco dinners at the Mean Wiener after CROYA meetings. Symbolism is scattered throughout, and every icon tells a story and is meaningful to the grander message of the mural.

U Belong is a message intended to resonate well beyond the front door of CROYA. All of us are different in one respect or another and those special qualities enhance our community. While the year 2020 left us separated and wanting more togetherness, let this mural be a reminder that you belong in Lake Forest and that better, brighter days lie ahead.

Editors Note: Tommy Quinn is a graduate of Lake Forest High School (LFHS) and the Rhode Island School of Design. As a senior at LFHS in 1999, he designed and created a brilliant local spin on Edward Hopper's famous Nighthawks painting on the same viaduct wall.



Lake Forest Love

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