

"I ALWAYS START WITH THE EYES."

Michelle Loughery is 10 feet up, perched on scaffolding, paintbrush in hand. By her side is a 4x6-inch photograph, the inspiration for what's in front of her: an emerging 25x90-foot mural. Suddenly, Loughery drops her brush, climbs down the scaffolding, jogs across the street and turns around to stare at her work, only to jog back, scramble back up and continue painting. She will perform this little routine many times over the next 12 hours. "It's how I get my exercise," she laughs. It will take at least a week, but soon a work of art will transform the cinder block wall of a parts supply depot, small warehouse or dry goods store.



EVEN IF HER GRANDFATHER hadn't been a fiddler, Loughery seemed destined to live a country-and-western life. Literally born a coal miner's daughter, she grew up in Michel, B.C., about 20 kilometres from the Alberta border, moving to nearby Sparwood only when the slag heap above Michel's soot-blackened settlement began to look ominous, and fears arose that it would slide down and bury the town. After graduating high school, she wasn't one of the kids who left for the big city; instead she got married, had two children and later became the administrator of a local art and heritage centre. She eventually found a niche for herself in the visual arts. Her chosen genre, that of producing murals, has "small town" painted all over it (and vice versa). And much of the recognition she's achieved with her art is due to a series of singers and guitar strummers she's covered the walls with in dusty Merritt, B.C., which calls itself Canada's capital of country music.

There's another side to Loughery's work, but it's not immediately evident in the place she's suggested as a meeting



ABOVE: Josh Spahan (in red T-shirt with other crew members) is one of Loughery's success stories. FAR LEFT: Loughery found herself tearing up while painting Elvis. LEFT: Paints — many of which are donated by a local store — are used to transform walls into works of art.

spot: a café called Hillbilly Jack's in the Merritt Desert Inn, a motor hotel that's Loughery's home away from home when she's working in Merritt. There the 46-year-old is seated in a big wooden booth with enough people to fill a pickup truck — the bed of the truck, that is. There's her husband, Rick (whom she married out of high school back in Sparwood, divorced after raising their two children, and recently remarried), Amber Papou, administrator of the Merritt mural project, and seasonal employees Josh Spahan and Kristy Whittaker, with two young kids in tow. It's April, and they're strategizing for the painting season, which is about to begin.

Wherever a person might land in this city of 7,000, it's not hard to find one of Loughery's murals, but it's an especially short walk from Hillbilly Jack's. On the south side of the hotel, it's impossible to miss a big Elvis Presley, looking deceptively cheerful even though Loughery found herself tearing up while painting him because she says the photograph she used as a reference revealed so much pain.

Around the north side of the hotel, visible only from a parking lot, there's a more genuinely happy depiction of country singer Gretchen Wilson, a mural where the pain was manifested in a different way. "The kitchen vents right there," points out Loughery. "The fumes — that's carbon monoxide, you know. We had to stop. It's still not finished."

Live and learn: No more murals beside restaurant vents in desert towns where the sun beats down, raising temperatures to the high thirties. This isn't the only lesson absorbed in the making of Loughery's murals, though. The other side to her work? Giving at-risk kids a chance to turn their lives around.

Every year since 1994, Loughery has taken on mural projects in towns both here and in the United States. It's pretty much a turnkey operation from the community's point of view: Loughery and Papou secure the funding (government programs, along with some corporate support, adding up to almost \$1 million a year in the case of Merritt), research the art themes, hire the crew — most of whom are teens and young adults on the street — and then ride herd on them, probably the hardest job of all. The painting provides a backdrop, a framework for the employment and life skills her crew learns. "Art is being created and kids are being taught," Loughery says. "Eventually you will change people's attitudes." For many of the dozen or so young people she hires each year, the experience proves to be life changing.

This was certainly true for Spahan, a funny and thoughtful 27-year-old who was born in Merritt. He qualified for the job pool by being "at risk," a description that in his case meant "getting arrested a lot, drinking, doing crime, being a typical teenager." Never mind that Spahan was well beyond his teens at the time — he took the job "to get a paycheck to party."

Spahan had talent as an artist, however, which Loughery says is often the case with at-risk kids because the artistically inclined don't settle easily into the kinds of jobs a rural area has to offer. "In a small town if you're street-level and artistic, you're vulnerable. Johnny Cash and Elvis Presley would have been called at risk," she says.



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Before Spahan quite realized what was happening, his daily routine on the mural project had become more important than the nightly routine he'd been subjecting himself to. By year two, he graduated from days spent taking skills classes and doing prep work to becoming crew foreman. During the off-season he finds a little work painting — sometimes murals but mostly just walls — and is gradually settling down to life as a responsible citizen. He'll even be doing the painting on a new native-themed town square, which makes him both a poster artist and the poster child for the other side of Loughery's mission.

In B.C., many of her young hires have been First Nations — kids like Spahan, who didn't benefit from the involved parenting most of us take for granted, says Loughery. So the job means spending as much time in computer, first aid and life skills classes back at the office as it does on site. Everyone learns how to take photographs and make videos. "We put the kids who are most damaged behind a camera," says Loughery, a tactic that both engages the very shy and helps focus those inclined toward

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