

# Finding unity in a muralist's art

## Globetrotting artist makes her mark



Speter, bottom row in hat, with mural participants in China.

By Raphael Kohan

Though you may not know her by name, there's a good possibility that – if you live in or around Boston – you are familiar with the work of Cambridge artist Tova Speter.

Speter, 28, has been painting community murals for the better part of a decade and has more than 15 large-scale works to her credit throughout the Boston area. Speter's influence, however, reaches well beyond her local environs.

Within the last year, Speter, who received a master's in art therapy from Lesley University, has used the occasions of traveling internationally to create community murals in Argentina and in China.

"I'm hooked," said Speter. "Every time I travel I'm going to have to do one. It's such a different way to experience a country. It's not what you find in a tour book. It's working with real people, creating real art."

While visiting her brother and cousins in Argentina last February, Speter arranged to spend three days of her vacation working on a mural with children from a Ronald McDonald House at a local hospital. It was the best part of the trip, she said.

So when her family took a trip to China in June, her father helped her with arrangements to create a mural on a boat they would be traveling on for three days down the Yangtze River.

"China was more difficult," she said, since not everyone who contributed to the mural was an English speaker. "There was a lot of pointing and demonstrating, but art was the universal language."

However a mural gets done – whether people communicate through English, gesticulations or cuneiform – a community can't help but feel bonded once the project is completed.

"This is a shared creative experience," said Speter. "When people reflect on it they will remember it in the context of everyone

working together."

As a facilitator, Speter said she is not the creative impetus behind the artwork. Instead, it is the communities themselves.

"It's their mural and it stands as something that came from them," she said. "The intention is to empower communities in the creation of art. You can bring a community to art, but you can't always bring art to a community. It's not everyday that they can be the artist."

Speter's own artwork, which she creates from her Somerville studio, features paintings on found pieces of wood – the debris she locates in dumpsters and on construction sites. Using color and purposeful brushstrokes, she seeks to illuminate the inner beauty of these discarded scraps of lumber.

"I hope to convey the idea that everything has an inherent beauty," she said. "There's possibility and promise in everything."

For these same reasons Speter does not mind relinquishing the creative reigns on her mural projects, since they enable others to discover talents within themselves they never knew they possessed.

"People don't think they can do what I say they can do," said Speter. "It takes a lot of encouragement, but after the first two hours, their moods shift. Witnessing that shift is the most rewarding part."

Speter recalled a local mural she did at a homeless shelter in Jamaica Plain. After the project, one of the men told her that this mural was the first project in his life that he had completed from start to finish.

"That's what keeps me going," said Speter. "I wonder, 'What other populations are waiting for a project like this?' Painting murals is for everybody, they all just don't realize it yet."

To learn more about the artist, visit [www.tovaspeter.com](http://www.tovaspeter.com).

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