

With 'Art Up,' Lowell Community Health Center, creative community join forces to bring local artwork to public eye

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Empty walls at the Lowell Community Health Center will soon be filled with local artists' works as part of an initiative called Art Up. The artwork,

LOWELL -- Artists in the city needed more people to buy their work, and the Lowell Community Health Center needed something on the bare walls of its new center on Jackson Street.

So Michael Gallagher, an attorney who works and lives downtown, recently came up with an idea: call upon artists to come up with works that can hang on the Lowell Community Health Center's walls and that people can purchase, with half the price going to the artist and half to the center.

"We're trying to put 'economy' in 'creative economy,'"

Gallagher said in a presentation to The Sun with leaders of the health center and the city's arts organization.

The program, called Art Up, received 439 submissions from 101 artists who work in a variety of mediums, including paintings, sculptures and pottery. Soon, they'll be put online, where people can pay prices ranging from \$250 or \$500 up to \$3,000.

Everyone wins, those involved in forming the program said -- the artist who has his or her work purchased; the health center, which gets a tax-deductible donation and artwork, and the public, who get to view the work.

The health center says it serves half of Lowellians, and many are people who might not otherwise come across artwork.

"It's just waiting for Lowell art," Maura Smith, the center's chief development officer, said of the public.

The building, which opened in 2012, has about 100,000 square feet and what the center says is a mile worth of hallways. Only about 40 to 50 pieces of art grace the walls now.

Gallagher knows the value of displaying local and original artwork. His Gallagher & Cavanaugh law offices at Middle and Shattuck streets include about 70 pieces of local art.

"Every person that comes in comments on it," he said. "Invariably, people say, 'I never knew how cool Lowell was until I got here.'"

Lowell has a sizable artist community and has always valued art enough that it's even right there in the city's logo: "Art is the handmaid of human good."

But for artists, even exposure for their work isn't necessarily enough, said Steve Syverson, president of the Arts League of Lowell.

"You can't buy groceries with exposure," he said.

The Lowell Community Health Center has a track record of doing well attracting donors, winning strong support for its \$48 million building on Jackson Street. The city itself has also attracted artists, including people like Dave Drinon, who recently became the artist-in-residence at the Whistler House Museum of Art.

Artists want to be around one another, and Lowell provided that opportunity -- and at a cheaper price than Boston, said Drinon, who lives in Andover and is one of more than 200 artists at Western Avenue Studios.

"We view this as a tremendous opportunity," Drinon said of Art Up.

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