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**Museum, students have banner day**  
**Collaborative effort in downtown harnesses Lowell's artistic spirit**

By Christine McConville, Globe Staff

LOWELL --They stumbled off the yellow school bus onto Merrimack Street, eyes wide, mouths open.

"Wow," said one student.

"Ohh, my God," said another.

The Molloy Alternative High School students were seeing their art right there, hanging in store windows in the city's bustling downtown. For many, it was the first time anything they'd done had been on display, and capturing that feeling in words was difficult.

So Jerry Beck, an organizer of the public art display, tried to do it for them.

He ushered the students inside the now-vacant store, where it was warm. From there, they could watch as people walked by, and looked at the banners they'd created.

"Your voice counts. It's getting heard, and it's not getting hidden behind school doors," Beck told the students.

"People are stopping and reading your words," he continued, as he, too, got caught up in the excitement of this past Tuesday.

For Beck, the artistic director of the Revolving Museum in downtown Lowell, this was a big day.

The museum he brought to Lowell almost two years ago has been working that whole time to harness the artistic spirit that's taking hold in the city. He and other artists have linked up with school and city leaders to share the that spirit with the young people in the region.

It appears to be working.

One of the students, 17-year-old Claudia Tejada, said she's never been part of anything like this before.

"I thought it would be a little school project," she said, about her work on the banners."I'm happy about it," she said. "I usually don't finish things."

Now she is planning to bring her mother and her boyfriend to Merrimack Street, so they can see what she and her classmates have done.

There's no denying that the Lowell that Tejada grew up in will be a much different place in five years. In the downtown, construction crews fill the streets at lunch time, pouring out of the former textile mills that are now selling as luxury condominiums.

Once-empty stores are reopening as artist supply shops, catering to the artists who've established a foothold in other mill buildings.

And the Revolving Museum, with its open-door policy and anti-elitist approach to art, serves as an anchor in this renewed neighborhood, where the push for public art done by city youths began.

The students worked with professional artists to create the banners, which look like a series of giant heads. Some are painted, others are filled with students' sonnets, telling tales of love and loss. Since last week, they've been hanging in windows lining Merrimack Street. Most are in the windows of what used to be La Moda, a clothing store that recently closed.

The project got its official start when Beck and School Superintendent Karla Brooks Baehr were discussing ways to incorporate the arts into the school curriculum at a time when arts funding was hard to come by. Brooks Baehr suggested using the vacant storefront downtown as display space.

Beck immediately took to the idea. To him, it was the perfect next step in an evolution that had been years in the making.

He helped found the nomadic Revolving Museum in 1984. The museum got its name from its unconventional location, in abandoned railroad cars in South Boston.

The museum eventually moved to the city's premier arts district, Fort Point, but that region became rife with development possibilities in the late 1990s. As development pressure mounted, rents soared, and Beck began looking for a new home for his museum.

Beck knew of Lowell, where he had worked on a public art project in 1988. He'd maintained some friendships from that time, and returned occasionally. With each visit, he'd noticed the city's ethnic diversity, 19th-century ambience, and vacant spaces. He noticed new faces settling in among longtime residents.

"I realized that what we were trying to build in Boston, they already had here," he said.

When the former Lowell Light and Gas company's building went up for sale, he bought it. Built in 1859, as the utility's headquarters, it has high ceilings and ornate woodwork. There's also a small home attached to the main building. This is where the utility showcased its products.

In March 2002, the museum opened in the Shattuck Street building. It quickly became an anchor in the artist district.

About two months ago, he and other artists met with the students, helping them create the heads as a way to represent their feelings about the city.

For most of the students, the project was their first introduction to professional artists.

On Tuesday, as Beck and school officials talked to students about ways to make money as a working artist, Carlos DeJesus stood outside the building, assessing his work on the banners. He added the buildings and trees that to him shape some of his world in Lowell.

At first, he said, he resisted his teachers when they encouraged him to participate in the project.

Now, seeing it out there, on display, he wanted to bring his mother to see it.

But she may hear about it before she sees it.

As DeJesus looked at his work, two friends strolled by. After a casual greeting, they learned that DeJesus had worked on the banners.

"Really? Wow," said a visibly impressed Jose Castro. "I don't even know how to draw."

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