Community members immediately embraced the WHEDco step-street mural as their own
(photo by thisistheBronx)

*By Colleen Digney and Gary Axelbank*

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For three days through the weekend the people of the Bronx weren't stopping to smell
the flowers — they were stopping to paint them. Community development
organization WHEDco (Women’s Housing and Economic Development Corporation)
invited community members to help Bronx artist Laura Alvarez paint a unique step-street
mural on the border of the Jerome Avenue rezoning area on Edward L. Grant Highway.

But after just the first day of painting the 126 steps, it was clear that this mural represents
much more than a piece of art to the community.
Mural painter Laura Alvarez (R), Marco Castro of WHEDco, community artist Ahmed Sulieman (thisistheBronX)

With her love for design and patterns, Alvarez has painted popular community murals in the Bronx before. Inspired by local gardens, Alvarez’ “Highbridge Flowers” mural is already serving another purpose — connecting people in different neighborhoods. The steps are a natural connection between the commercial district at the bottom and the east residential community, including the Highbridge library, at the top of the steps.

Marco Castro, senior program manager of WHEDco, explained that the mural was painted on the steps, rather than a wall, to help connect disparate ends of this west Bronx community. WHEDco also hopes that the painting will create a healthier Bronx by inspiring people to use the steps.

“We’re not just trying to change how it looks, but how it feels,” said Castro.

Artist Laura Alvarez finishing off the WHEDco step-street mural (thisistheBronX)
While beautification was an obvious goal, Castro emphasized that it’s also about inspiring locals to take ownership of their own neighborhood, especially with the potential for upheaval that the Jerome Avenue rezoning could bring.

“This is something for the people of the community,” explained Alvarez. “If they get involved and be part of it, they’re going to take care of it.”

Kings of the step street mural. A couple of Bronx youngsters took ownership of the public art project. (thisistheBronX)

Castro acknowledged that while there are still cleanliness and maintenance issues in the community, this is the start of a long term project to change the dynamic of the neighborhood, so that when people walk past this beautiful mural, maybe they’ll think twice about dropping garbage.

As you watched them work and community members happened by, that’s exactly what happened.

“I jumped in as soon as I heard that I could help,” local resident Rosilan Thompson told thisistheBronX. She beamed with excitement not only when pointing out the flowers she herself had painted, but when seeing people take care of her community. “I believe in our Bronx, I love my Bronx,” said Thompson.

Another resident said that this project inspires him to do more art. “I’ve always wished one day to do something like this, it’s fantastic,” said Ahmed Suleiman a pencil artist from Florida who said he was inspired to take on mural painting after participating in this project.
The mural even caught the attention of a passerby who was visiting from Paris to explore Bronx graffiti. Without hesitation he joined in to help.

Alvarez welcomed anyone interested to help paint. “I truly believe that everyone is an artist and everyone can do beautiful things,” said Alvarez. “You just have to believe in yourself and sometimes that takes someone putting a brush in your hand.”

The city’s Department of Small Business Services sponsored the project.

Link: http://www.thisisthebronx.info/whedco-mural-inspires-community/