

Entre Amigos: Mirroring murals connect sister cities



Denise Baxter takes a break behind a caution tape during a wall-painting assignment. Photo courtesy of Denise Baxter

By Kernan and Mina Turner / Amigo Club

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Ashland artist Denise Baxter has become known for her giant street murals, first in Ashland and soon in its sister city, Guanajuato, Mexico.

Baxter, the founder of the Ashland Art Center, painted a 52-by-18-foot mural in 2014 on the side of the Ashland Emergency Food Bank building on Clover Lane. It depicts Ashland through the seasons: a campfire on Emigrant Lake in winter, field planting in the spring, wading in Ashland Creek in the summer and harvesting in the fall.

Two years later she provided logistics for the 24-by-53-foot mural of Guanajuato's historic buildings that covers a restaurant's exterior wall facing Calle Guanajuato across the street from Lithia Park. It was designed and painted in primary colors by Laura "Loreta" Rangel Villaseñor of Guanajuato with the help of Southern Oregon University art students recruited by Baxter.

Baxter will spend next month in Guanajuato to work on a 75-by-11-foot mural on a wall bordering the Paseo de Ashland near the main entrance to the ancient city, founded in the early 16th century by the Spanish. The street name was dedicated during the 40th anniversary celebrations of sister city relations held in 2009.

Baxter said in a phone interview that the mural, titled "Ashland — Where Culture Meets Nature," will span sunrise to sunset across the length of the wall, with iconic images ranging from Emigrant Lake to Southern Oregon University, the Mount Ashland ski lodge, Ashland Springs Hotel and the Allen Elizabethan Theatre. She and Loreta have switched roles in Guanajuato, with Loreta handling logistics for Baxter, who will be aided by University of Guanajuato art students arranged by Loreta.

All three murals have been sponsored by benefactors Kathryn and Barry Thalden of Ashland.

"One of our missions is to make the world a more beautiful place, and public art is a great way to do that," Barry said in an email.

Asked what attracts her to Guanajuato, Baxter replied, "My heritage." Her mother is the daughter of Mexican immigrants, and Baxter speaks Spanish.

“I love Mexican culture, especially the warmth among family members,” she said. Her 16-year-old daughter, Audrey, already an accomplished artist, will accompany Baxter to Guanajuato to help train the student artists who will assist with the painting.

Thalden said the mural in Guanajuato is on schedule, with completion expected by May.

“The mayor and the City Council of Guanajuato have enthusiastically taken this project under their wing. In fact, they hired an architect and contractor to expand and prepare the wall to receive the mural painting,” he said.

He acknowledged that Ashland and Guanajuato amigo clubs have assisted in moving the project forward. The mural design concept will be presented to the Amigo Club board of directors at its March meeting today (Tuesday, March 20). Thalden quoted Kathryn as saying, “In December, when we were in Guanajuato coordinating the project, they really rolled out the red carpet for us.”

—Amigo Club’s Entre Amigos (Between Friends) column about Ashland ties to its sister city Guanajuato, Mexico, appears on the third Tuesday of each month. Longtime AP reporter and bureau chief Kernan Turner is an Ashland resident and Amigo Club member.