

New mural in downtown St. Charles celebrates kindness

Tilly: “I believe in making art that a lot of people can enjoy and respond to”

By David Petesch
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The mural located on the east side of Smitty's sandwich shop is now completed. Kendall's Kindness commissioned the piece. (Sandy Bressner)

“Be Kind, Pass It On,” reads the new mural in downtown St. Charles, a message inspired by a local tragedy and a family's perseverance to continue their loved one's legacy in spreading kindness and supporting the community.

The mural, “Blue Eyes and Butterflies,” created by local artist Catherine Tilly, is located on the east side of Smitty’s sandwich shop. The mural was unveiled with a ribbon cutting on Wednesday, Oct. 9.



Artist Catherine Tilly works on a mural located on the east side of Smitty’s sandwich shop on Monday, Sept. 23, 2024 in downtown St. Charles. Kendall's Kindness is commissioning the piece. (Sandy Bressner)

The mural was commissioned by Kendall’s Kindness, a local nonprofit and component fund of the Community Foundation of the Fox River Valley, started in honor of Kendall Maffia. Kendall was a St. Charles student and artist who lost her life to suicide in 2021.

The Maffia family created the organization in her memory in 2022 to support mental health awareness and offer scholarships to those pursuing careers in art.

Kim Maffia, Kendall’s mother, said the organization’s main mission is to honor Kendall and continue her legacy of passing on kindness, which is the message they wanted the mural to embody.

Maffia said the concept for the mural came from her daughter’s love for butterflies. She said when Kendall and her sister were little, they would get caterpillars every Easter to raise and release the butterflies on Kendall’s birthday.

“The connection we’ve had with Catherine has just been amazing.” Maffia said. “She took our mission and vision and pulled it all together and made it a really beautiful piece. It’s stunning.”

Tilly started painting on Sept. 16 and finished the mural on Oct. 5.



Tilly said she painted her first mural in eighth grade, when she painted the wall of her school’s gymnasium, and has since done too many to count.

“I’m looking for work that aligns with the ways that I want to make an impact or serve my community with issues that I feel strongly about,” Tilly said. “Because of the mental health and suicide awareness component, I felt really strongly that it was a message that I wanted to be a part of.”

Tilly works as a freelance artist and designer, creating everything from digital commercial graphics to interior design and branded murals. In addition to her commercial work, Tilly often works with young artists and at risk youth. She taught art at Wheaton Academy for several years and currently has a residency at the Kane County Juvenile Justice Center, where she works with kids who are detained.

Tilly said she didn’t know Kendall or the Maffia’s before working on this piece, but through her time teaching she has seen the mental health problems so many young people face and has known students who have lost their battles with depression. She said piece is so meaningful, and it felt like it just fit with her ideals.



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“I was just really drawn to that space with a positive message for the community,” Tilly said. “The Maffia’s were giving back to the community, and while I didn’t know Kendall specifically, [her story] resonated with me because it’s very real and really sad.”

The mural depicts a flight of butterflies that span across the building. The Maffia’s shared some of Kendall’s journals and drawings with Tilly, in order to incorporate Kendall’s style in the piece. The words “Be Kind, Pass It On” and “Be the reason someone smiles today,” inscribed on the mural were written in Kendall’s handwriting.

Tilly said during the design process, she wanted to make sure the piece was something that Kendall would have appreciated and would have stopped to take pictures with, and she talked with Maffia often while designing and working on the piece.

“Art doesn’t have to be inaccessible,” Tilly said. “I sort of believe in making art that a lot of people can enjoy and respond to, and I just really hope that that’s the case with this one.”

Tilly said the painting process was easy thanks to the beautiful weather, but the challenge came from how busy the intersection is.

“While the traffic was a bit of a challenge, it’s also been such a blessing because there has been so much encouragement,” Tilly said. “So many people are very excited about it.”

Tilly said the community has been very supportive during the painting process. She said several bikers, pedestrians and motorists who rolled down their windows to cheer her on and encourage her while she works. She said “beautiful,” “joyful” and “uplifting” were the sentiments she heard most from spectators.

“People respond to a positive message and want that for their community,” Tilly said. “I’m just humbled to be a part of it.”

Tilly said butterflies are symbolic of transformation and possibility. She said monarch butterflies only live about a month but can travel over 3,000 miles in that time.

“They do a lot in their short lives and I think that symbolism, as it relates to young people who pass on too soon, I think that is a really important symbol; that their lives mattered, as short as they were, that they were infinitely important,” Tilly said.

Tilly said one of the most special things about the process, was that every day she was on the lift, a monarch butterfly visited her and would fly around the butterflies she was painting.

Owner of the building Doug Kimber said he is thrilled with how the mural turned out. He said the ribbon cutting event had a huge crowd and people have already been stopping to take pictures with it.



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"The mural has been great. It's been really positively received," Kimber said. "I like it a lot, and as far as I can tell, pretty much everybody else does too. People are really getting into it...I'm thrilled. It turned out even better than I ever expected."

Kimber joked that it probably took longer to finish because so many people stopped to talk about it and encourage Tilly.

"We're super excited and hope the community loves it as much as we do," Maffia said. "Hopefully it sends a good message out there for the community to live by."

One effort of Kendall's Kindness is the Kendall's Kindness Scholarship fund, which grants two \$1,000 scholarships annually to St. Charles North High School and/or St. Charles East High School students planning to attend a four-year college and pursue a degree in an art related field. Applications for this year's scholarships open Nov. 1.

Other endeavors of the nonprofit include promoting random acts of kindness on the 12th of every month and encouraging local businesses to participate. They also donate to several mental health and suicide awareness campaigns and other organizations that spread kindness throughout the community.