

Mural is juvenile inmates' gift to city

By MATTHEW RINK

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Matthew, a 15-year-old inmate at the Indian River Juvenile Correctional Facility, never knew about Jacob Coxey, the Massillonian who led an army of unemployed men to Washington, D.C., to demand jobs.

But the teen didn't learn through a textbook or teacher. Instead, he and fellow inmates learned through a paintbrush and giant canvass.

Over three days this summer, the inmates of the maximum-security prison created a mural as a tribute to the history of Massillon and its citizens.

In their effort to "give back," the mission behind the mural, Matthew learned a few things.

"I didn't know anything about that," he said about Coxey, who led the marches in 1847 and 1914. "Walking all the way from here to Washington is just crazy."

The Ohio Department of Youth Services does not allow inmates to be identified by their full name.

Inmates unveiled the 8-foot by 40-foot mural on the side of their building Wednesday.

Inmates who worked on the project told those in attendance about the faces included on the mural, which was designed by Tim and Connie Friesland of Wisconsin.

Two open hands serve as "bookends," said James Darnell, a unit manager. In one hand, there is the Massillon Public Library and St. Mary's Church. In another, there are three figures, which represent the future of the city, he added.

In between, there are portraits of silent-film actress Lillian Gish, Medal of Honor recipient and Civil War hero Robert Pinn, the three firefighters who died in the La Cuisina restaurant fire in 1975, and former mayor Jacob Coxey, who formed the Coxey Army, a band of unemployed men who marched to Washington, D.C., to demand better jobs.

The mural also includes a tower from the now-defunct Republic Steel plant, a neighbor of the correctional facility, and a badge marking the police officers who have died in the line of duty.

Almost every inmate at the maximum-security prison took part in painting the mural.

"Each unit spent a couple of hours on it, and they did their part," Darnell said. "It's very rarely that you can find a project that everyone can work on, especially something that actually gives back in a positive

way.”

Superintendent Beth Oprisch called the unveiling an “opportunity to highlight one of the many positive accomplishments of our youth.”

She commended one student who opened the ceremony with the Star Spangled Banner. The event, she noted, showed the other side of the juvenile prison population at Indian River. Earlier this week, two inmates escaped from the prison, but were later caught by police.

“It doesn’t take courage to jump through a 7.5-inch window,” she said, referring to the escape. “It takes courage to stand up and do this.”

One inmate, Nick, a 16-year-old, said it was a different experience.

“Usually we don’t get to do a lot of things to help people out,” he said. “This is the first time I’ve ever tried anything like this.”

Matthew agreed.

“I enjoyed doing it,” he said. “I haven’t really done anything like this in my life. It’s kind of funny that one of the things I experienced in my life, I did in jail. It’s really good for the kids because they get to get off unit.

“Since I’ve been here, this is the only time I’ve done something like this,” he added. “It shows the community that not everybody here is bad all the time. They just make mistakes.”