



Murals on a Mission: New Kensington

Community Toolkit



Murals on a Mission: New Kensington is a project designed to energize the community of New Kensington, Pennsylvania through high-impact public art. The partnership harnesses the power of large-scale, text-based murals to enhance the visibility of the city, create a sense of place—and bring color, vibrancy, and new character to the urban environment.

Opposite: Ashley Hodder works on her *Shine* mural during New Kensington's *Fridays on Fifth* food truck event in September 2021.



The *CommUNITY* mural located on the corner of 9th Street and 4th Avenue in downtown New Kensington was created in 2020 by Shane Pilster for Westmoreland Museum of American Art's *Making Our Differences Our Strengths* project. Offering a positive message through brightly colored, graffiti-style lettering, this mural ultimately inspired the *Murals on a Mission* concept, reflecting the desire to focus specifically on text-based murals.

Murals on a Mission: New Kensington

About the Project

In the spring of 2020, Rivers of Steel joined a group of passionate business and community partners from the City of New Kensington, in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania. The group came together to discuss a vision for the future of their community—and the role public art might play. Inspired by the work of numerous independent murals recently created in the city center, these partners conceived of a strategy to increase this density of public art and support the city’s effort to reimagine its downtown. The collective effort, entitled *Murals on a Mission: New Kensington*, steadily gathered momentum throughout 2020 – 2021, catalyzed by important seed funding from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts.

The community partners engaged Rivers of Steel’s Graffiti Arts program as a regional leader in the field to help steward this project and yield a successful model demonstrating the power of graffiti style-writing as a tool for creative placemaking. Since the project began, eight large-scale murals have been established in close proximity to the city’s Corridor of Innovation. This created a colorful and energetic outdoor experience that supports and enhances existing economic development efforts, which are currently underway at both the county and district levels.

About New Kensington

Originally an agricultural / trade community centered around the Logan’s Ferry and Parnassus section near Pucketa Creek, New Kensington was developed in the early 1890s by a group of Pittsburgh capitalists who realized the advantages of the relatively level land on the east-bank floodplain of the Allegheny River. Their Burrell Improvement Company quickly sold lots to Pittsburgh investors, and within a matter of months more than a dozen industries—steel, glass, tin plate, flour, and planning mills among them—employed nearly 5,000 workers. Among these burgeoning factories, the most significant for the long-term development of New Kensington and Arnold was the Pittsburgh Reduction Works, site of the first commercial aluminum production in the United States. Established in 1888 on Smallman Street in Pittsburgh’s Strip District, the Reduction Works was moved to New Kensington in 1891 and later renamed the Aluminum Company of America (Alcoa). Thanks to the technological ingenuity of an Ohio inventor named Charles Martin Hall, aluminum production became not

only economically viable, but was the pivotal development in the growth of New Kensington and gave it the appellation, “The Aluminum City.” The Alcoa facility remained in operation until 1971.

In recent decades, New Kensington’s downtown area has experienced the similar high-vacancy rates and economic challenges affecting many former mill towns across the Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area. However, in recent years, a groundswell of grassroots energy in the City of New Kensington has coalesced around a newly envisioned Corridor of Innovation located on 5th Avenue in the downtown area. Combined with coordinated strategies at the district and county level via the [Reimagining Our Westmoreland](#) comprehensive plan and the Alle-Kiski District plan, New Kensington is poised for future growth. *Murals on a Mission: New Kensington* was developed with knowledge of these larger growth strategies and with the intent to catalyze further investments in creative placemaking throughout the Corridor.



Why Graffiti?

In 2009, Tony Goldman transformed Miami, Florida’s Wynwood warehouse district into one of the world’s most dynamic collections of outdoor graffiti and street art. This effectively altered America’s understanding of this art form and the role it can play in creative placemaking. Now an international destination, The Wynwood Walls have accomplished Goldman’s goal of “creat[ing] a center where people could gravitate to and explore, and develop the area’s pedestrian potential,” ultimately demonstrating graffiti’s untapped potential as an economic driver and transformational force for positive community development.

Rivers of Steel’s Graffiti Arts program draws inspiration from the success of projects like The Wynwood Walls, adopting it as a model to generate similar interest and renewed participation in post-industrial communities throughout the Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area.

Establishing a Vision & Framework for Success

Concept Development

Murals on a Mission: New Kensington was a concept developed by members of the New Kensington community, who engaged Rivers of Steel as a primary partner with prior ties to their city as well as a local leader in the field of graffiti and street art. The project team wanted to focus on the use of text and style-writing as the primary content for these murals, with the hope of communicating a unified, forward-looking vision for New Kensington that would not only resonate with local residents, but also cultivate a new appreciation for graffiti-style murals. Showcasing optimistic, community-led messages in designs by local artists also helped broaden residents' understanding of street art and its potential as a force for community good.

Plan of Action: Solid Partnerships & Collecting Local Input

As a federally mandated National Heritage Area representing Westmoreland County and seven other counties in southwestern Pennsylvania, Rivers of Steel has a long-term relationship with the New Kensington community reaching back decades. Strong partnerships form the core of this relationship and are crucial to the success of any collective public effort. Each member of the project team for *Murals on a Mission: New Kensington* brought unique assets to the project, from in-kind donations of machinery, personal volunteer time,

and donated materials to professional experience with community development, free event spaces, and available walls for murals themselves. All brought enthusiasm to the community.

Once the vision was established, the project team developed a strategy to collect feedback from local residents and stakeholders during public events and gatherings. These were hosted by project partners throughout the summer of 2021. The team was particularly interested in collecting specific words or phrases that individual community members thought of when imagining the future New Kensington. Rivers of Steel staff and project team members visited with local organizations, such as the New Kensington Art Center, to hear from local voices and learn more about other activities underway nearby.

On May 15, 2021 Rivers of Steel [hosted a free outdoor public event](#) in partnership with New Kensington's Voodoo at the Ritz brewery, which included a live DJ, live painting by graffiti and street artists, and hands-on spray paint activities for kids and adults. Visitors were invited to create their own paintings, learn about *Murals on a Mission: New Kensington*, and offer their feedback on potential words or phrases to be integrated into the final murals. Some of the final works created by the artists at the event were purchased by local businesses, while others were donated for display inside of Voodoo at the Ritz.

On July 23, 2021, Rivers of Steel joined the New Kensington event, *Fridays on Fifth*. The first of its kind in the area, the event attracted over 1,000 residents from the surrounding area. Rivers of Steel invited locals to write inspirational words about New Kensington on sticky notes and add them to a repurposed door that had colorful artwork sprayed on it. These words and phrases were added to a database of additional feedback from which the artists selected content for the final murals. During the event, Shane Pilster painted a "New Ken" space-aged piece on canvas and handed out glow sticks and bracelets to the youth, helping to increase community engagement and collect inspirational words from both adults and children alike.



3,000+
Residents Engaged
(events, surveys, and murals)

100+
Collected Words

30+
Collected Phrases

14
Artists Paid
(murals & events)





Connecting the Dots

Synergy with Existing Initiatives & Creative Projects

From the start, it was important for the team to understand the broader ecosystem of revitalization underway in the New Kensington community and recognize that this project does not exist in a vacuum. Initial conversations about the project began organically between downtown businesses and Rivers of Steel Graffiti Arts Curator, Shane Pilster. Pilster recognized the important role Rivers of Steel—both as a National Heritage Area and a leader in regional creative placemaking—could play by amplifying existing community efforts and helping New Kensington achieve the objectives set forth in both the [Reimagining Our Westmoreland](#) and the Alle-Kiski District strategic plans.

Murals on a Mission: New Kensington addresses core objectives outlined in the 2018 *Reimagining Our Westmoreland* comprehensive plan for Westmoreland County. Core objective 2.2 outlines the importance of cultivating arts and entertainment assets for economic growth as fundamental to the region’s success. *Murals on a Mission: New Kensington* supports those policy priorities by helping to influence the creation of an arts district in downtown New Kensington. Murals created by this project (as well as other unaffiliated public artworks created nearby) support Westmoreland County’s strategy for creating direct density in urban centers by “encouraging local art and community art within the infrastructure and

‘sense of place’ improvements...” (Core Objective 3.1, Invest in Downtowns). The murals contribute to the density of active experience by engaging local residents through various public activities, providing positive experiences for those who spend time downtown, and contributing to the character of New Kensington’s Corridor of Innovation.

The number one issue shared most by local residents surveyed in the Alle-Kiski District Plan is the need for projects focusing on parks and beautification. *Murals on a Mission: New Kensington* supports these beautification efforts and helps build healthy and whole communities through public art. The words and phrases selected by residents reflect the unique character of their community via colorful, positive messaging on each

mural that answers their specific desires and also serves as a creative form of façade improvement (Core Objective 5.2, Invest in Beautification).

Additionally, *Murals on a Mission: New Kensington* addresses the Alle-Kiski District plan’s second objective for land use, recognizing the need to enhance and magnify the unique and attractive assets in urban core communities like downtown New Kensington. By focusing on the murals near 9th Street, 10th Street, Barnes Street, and 5th Avenue, the project directly supports the efforts of existing partner organizations in the nearby Corridor of Innovation who are working to transform that commercial district as outlined in the plan’s third land use objective.



In addition to the regional initiatives listed above, multiple independent public art projects have also come to life in recent years throughout the City of New Kensington.

The large community mural created by local artist Bernie Wilke greets visitors to the city as they cross the C.L. Schmitt Bridge (New Kensington Bridge), while regional partnerships like the Hemispheric Conversations Urban Art Project (HCUAP, pronounced “hiccup”) contribute to the city’s density of active experience, complimenting *Murals on a Mission: New Kensington* and providing additional variety downtown.

HCUAP is an international initiative, based out of the University of Pittsburgh, that seeks to create platforms for conversation and education about urban art production (graffiti, street art, and muralism, among other genres) and to explore aesthetic and historical connections between post-industrial cities. During the 2021 production period for *Murals on a Mission: New Kensington*, HCUAP hosted a residency for Latin American artists to visit Pittsburgh and participate in various public art projects. This year, Mexican artist Eva Bracamontes, Argentinian artist Sasha Primo, local New Kensington artist Anton Bachman, Spanish artist Tomas Garcia, Max Gonzales, and Shane Pilster worked collaboratively to contribute an additional mural for the city located at 9th Street and Barnes Street.



Artist Bernie Wilke of East Liberty lead the effort of this community mural in New Kensington on 9th Street as one enters town.



Artist Tim Engelhardt poses for a portrait in front of the mural he painted at the Kafa Buna. Jack Fordyce | Tribune-Review



Artist Shane Pilster painted The Red Dragon Lounge inside of Voodoo at the Ritz in New Kensington.



HCUAP artists Shane Pilster and Max Gonzales were joined by New Kensington native Anton Bachman, visiting artists Sasha Primo and Eva Bracamontes, and Spanish native Tomas Garcia. Artworks by (from left to right): Max Gonzales, Anton Bachman ([@alefantone](#)), Eva Bracamontes ([@evabracamontes01](#)), Sasha Primo ([@sasha_primo](#)), Shane Pilster, Tomas Garcia, and Max Gonzales (tree end caps).



Artist Christian Miller added another mural to the lot at 931 5th Avenue to match his previous piece there from 2017.

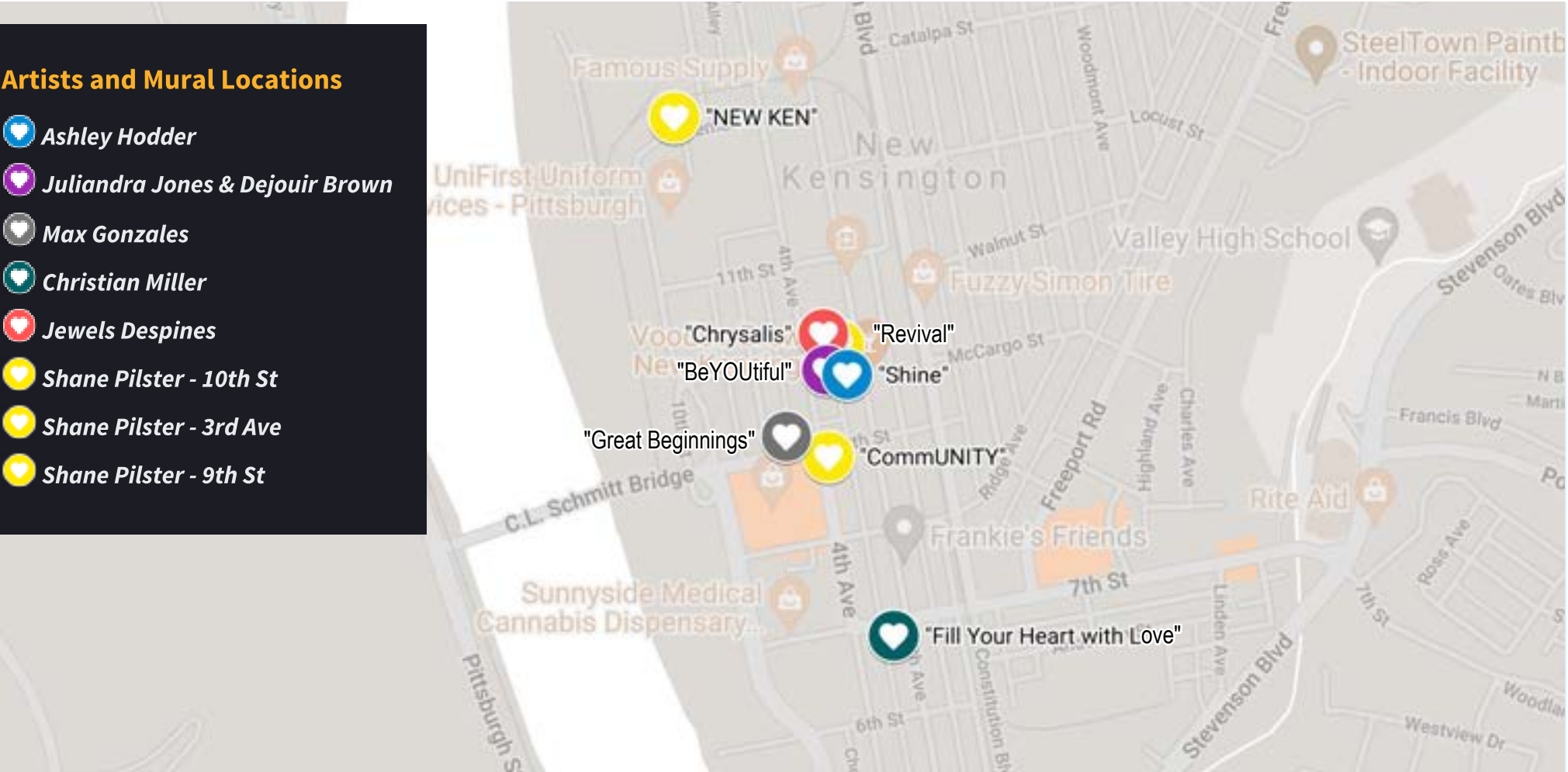


Cat mural by artist Raphael Pantalone. This building houses Frankie's Friends Cat Rescue in downtown New Kensington.



Artists Max Gonzales and Scott Brozovich painted a wall of portraits of musicians, playwrights, celebrities, sports figures, and more on Iceburgh Records & Studios at 1700 Horne Boulevard in New Kensington / Arnold.

Between May and November of 2021, Rivers of Steel and the *Murals on a Mission: New Kensington* team worked with six local artists to install eight graffiti-style murals throughout the city's downtown.



For directions and an interactive map to each mural: <https://bit.ly/newkenmuralmap>



Artist:
Ashley Hodder



Artistic Freedom

Every artist selected their word (or phrases) from the list acquired from the community and residents. Each concept had few limitations, aside from approval from the building owner and minor changes from Shane Pilster. Our goal was to allow the artists to showcase their styles and personalities through their work.

Artist Max Gonzales, pictured above, gathers his ideas through a makeshift spray can telephone.



Artist:
Juliandra Jones



Shane Pilster

Shane Pilster is an artist, muralist, curator, and graphic designer. Bridging his expertise in graffiti and urban arts with community involvement, he prides himself in also being an educator, advocate, mentor, and well-rounded, creative individual.

In 2012, Pilster first partnered with Rivers of Steel to develop its Graffiti Arts program, pioneering programs for the public, as well as students. In his curatorial role, he's worked with local and international artists, writers, and muralists, assembling a diverse collection of works at the Carrie Blast Furnaces and throughout the National Heritage Area.

IG: www.instagram.com/outafterdark
Portfolio: www.dowhatwelove.com



Middle: Black & white 70mm film taken by Don Henderson
Bottom: Action shot by Neil Glenn while on his lunch break



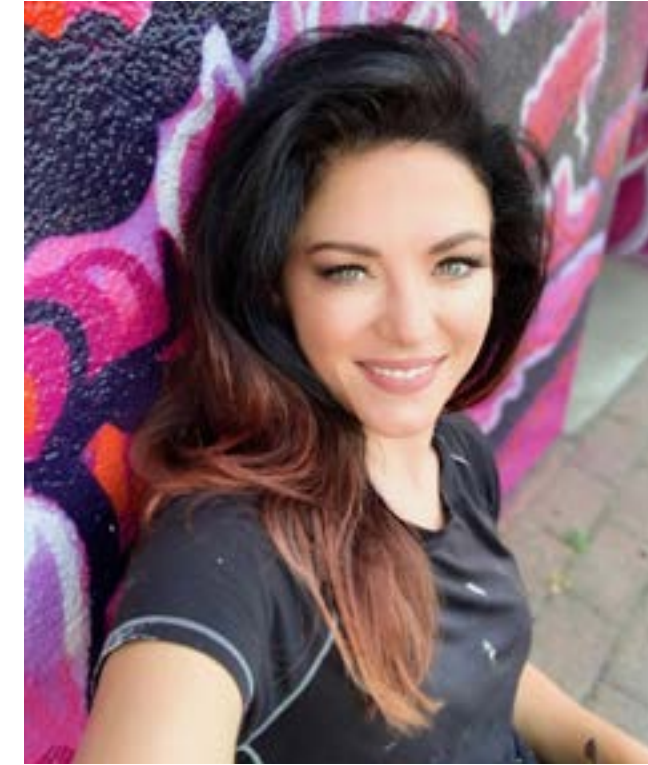
For directions and an interactive map to each mural: <https://bit.ly/newkenmuralmap> | 431 10th Street, New Kensington, PA 15068



For directions and an interactive map to each mural: <https://bit.ly/newkenmuralmap> | 971 5th Avenue, New Kensington, PA 15068



Top and middle: Ashley Hodder rendering light refracting shins on the lift
Bottom: Detail shot of the shins



Ashley Hodder

Ashley Hodder is a local Pittsburgh artist specializing in large-scale public art projects. Her art can be seen in many Pittsburgh neighborhoods, having completed more than 100 murals, as well as sculptures and installation work. Her work features bold colors and forms, references to nature, and large-scale portrait work. She seeks to bring color and fun in unexpected places.

IG: www.instagram.com/ashleyhodderart
Etsy: www.etsy.com/shop/AshleyHodderArt



The sun setting on Ashley's mural from 20 feet in the air.



The pair have done several collaborations together since 2019, from canvas paintings to large-scale murals.

Juliandra Jones & Dejour Brown

Juliandra Jones (PBJ Customs) is a visual artist and muralist who believes in the power of community and using art to elevate the voices of all people. Her goal is to create work that highlights the identity and emphasizes the defining characteristics of the community and space. She will be launching a free mobile art program in Pittsburgh in 2022.

Dejour Brown (Jouirnoe) is an urban artist with a distinct cartoonish style. He has been able to successfully branch into digital art, creating original logos and illustrations for Black-owned small businesses.

IG: www.instagram.com/pbjcustoms
IG: www.instagram.com/jouirnoe

Juliandra: www.pbjcustoms.com
Dejour: www.jouirnoe.com



They chose the word "BeYOUtiful" to inspire and encourage everyone to embrace their own magic / beauty and love themselves.



For directions and an interactive map to each mural: <https://bit.ly/newkenmuralmap> | 418 10th Street, New Kensington, PA 15068 (Ivy Alley side of building)



For directions and an interactive map to each mural: <https://bit.ly/newkenmuralmap> | 1290 3rd Avenue, New Kensington, PA 15068 (facing Arnold, PA)



Shane Pilster created individually stylized letters spelling out "Welcome to New Ken" at one of the main entrances into New Kensington, PA from Arnold, PA.





Max Gonzales

Max Emiliano Gonzales, a muralist, printmaker, curator, educator, and social activist, is a 4th-generation Mexican American. Having recently moved to a full-time career as an artist, he creates and collaborates with organizations like BOOM Concepts, Assemble, Hemispheric Conversations Urban Art Project (HCUAP), and Rivers of Steel.

Max envisioned his artistic outcome to be a collaboration: *"I wish to use this project as a way to highlight the voices of the underrepresented while creating a community for those who share common experiences."*

Artist Max Gonzales pays homage to the building owner's computer and electronic museum in the theme of an old Sears catalog style mural.

IG: www.instagram.com/goodboygems
Portfolio: www.maxgonzales.art

Max took on the largest wall of the series and utilized several phrases and words gathered from local residents. Shane Pilster assisted in painting.

For directions and an interactive map to each mural: <https://bit.ly/newkenmuralmap> | 932 3rd Avenue, New Kensington, PA 15068



For directions and an interactive map to each mural: <https://bit.ly/newkenmuralmap> | 649 5th Avenue, New Kensington, PA 15068 (backside of the building)



Christian Miller adding some psychedelic love art—along with his signature rabbit integration—to the wall in his home town of New Kensington.



Christian Miller

Christian Miller, also known as “Mad Rabbit,” is an artist who aims to create as much as possible. Working in several mediums, he produces hand-painted signs for small businesses and creates mural projects to bring color and positivity to the neighborhoods.

Rabbit is also a printmaker and a studio artist who creates paintings. His work focuses on trying to bring humor and hope while talking about the trials and tribulations one goes through in life.

IG: www.instagram.com/mad_rabbit_lab
Store: madrabbitlab.bigcartel.com



Christian Miller fills in blocks of bright colors for the background of his *Fill Your Heart with Love* mural.



Jewels Antonio

Pittsburgh native Jewels Antonio became fascinated by lettering and graffiti during bus rides downtown as a child. Jewels began experimenting with graffiti in the streets at age 12. As an adult, he has transitioned into a mural artist and printmaker.

Jewels has owned and operated the Pittsburgh-based screen printing studio Public Print House since 2015 and has been traveling the Midwest painting text murals for the last decade. He draws his influences from traditional sign painting, comic art, and classic freight train graffiti.

IG: www.instagram.com/jewelsantonio



Jewels Antonio in the beginning phases of his mural planning process.



For directions and an interactive map to each mural: <https://bit.ly/newkenmuralmap> | 423 10th Street, New Kensington, PA 15068

Words of Love

Tonie Vaughn

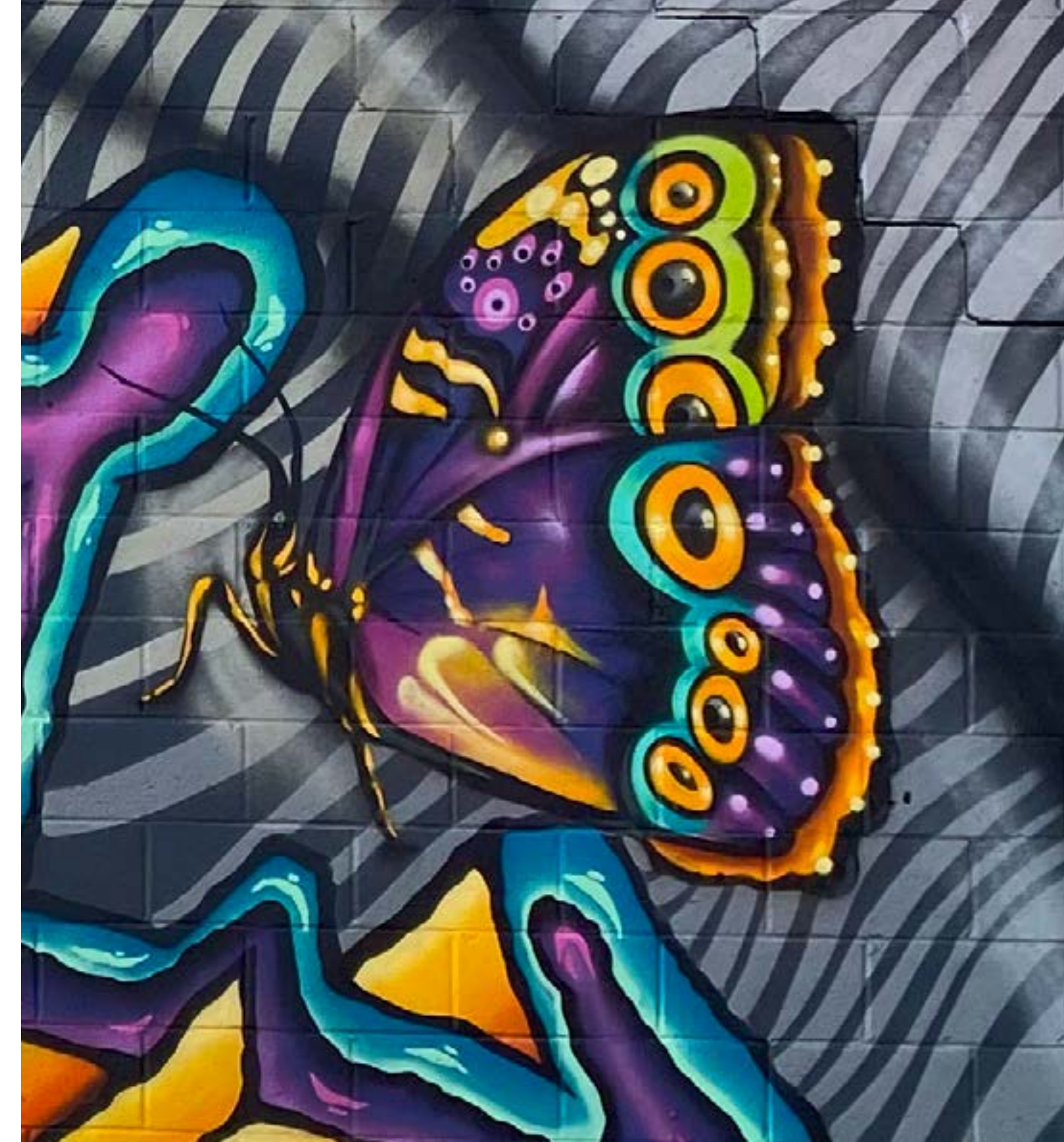
“ How fitting the word REVIVAL was chosen for my wall at Tonie’s Massage Therapy Retreat. Massage is a revival of mind, body, and health. My massage retreat is a reflection of my granddaughter Maiyanna who passed away in April 2014 of a rare brain cancer at the age of 4. Shane was contemplating how he was going to present his artwork and the colors he told me he was going to use were Maiyanna’s favorites—purple, pink, and blue. And Gray is the color for brain cancer awareness. As Shane began to complete his project, I asked if he could add a butterfly—because Maiyanna loved butterflies. He thought it was an “AMaiyzing” idea and graciously incorporated it into his art.

”

Abbey Bricker

“ While working at the *Fridays on Fifth* event for Rivers of Steel, I was approached by a man who had previously been at the table but wasn’t ready to submit a word for the *Murals on a Mission* project. When he came back up he had a small piece of paper with the word “Chrysalis” on it. He asked if I knew what the word meant and I said that I did. We talked about rebirth and how it tied to his own particular story. He shared that he had been sick for a long time and with Covid, he had barely been out of the house. And that he was so happy to be at this event with all these amazing people of New Kensington, how it felt like it was not only a rebirth for him but also New Kensington itself. He was really excited to share his word and I’m so excited to see this particular story serve as a source of inspiration for one of the muralists for the *Murals on a Mission* project.

”





The Future

While the 2021 *Murals on Mission: New Kensington* project was a true success, it is only the beginning. The long-term vision for this project includes expanded mural formats, visiting artists programs, interactive technological experiences, and community-driven events that bring people to downtown New Kensington for educational experiences. Rivers of Steel remains a committed partner in the effort to reimagine the future of New Kensington. The organization will continue to work with the project team to bring new, creative programs to the city as an extension of its mission to serve the Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area.

Sustained economic growth and success for New Kensington requires long-term investment and a vision that inspires the existing community, while attracting renewed interest from those outside the city. The *Murals on a Mission: New Kensington* team views the success of this public art project as an opportunity to harness these eighteen months of momentum and continue to advocate for future investment in the community's arts and entertainment assets, new and old.



Project Partners & Acknowledgments

A Warm Thank You

Murals on a Mission: New Kensington has been made possible by generous support from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts and Bloomberg Philanthropies, who provided the crucial seed funding necessary to launch this pilot. In the months since its inception, the project has continued to grow, complimenting other public art in the city, creating renewed energy downtown, and attracting new projects throughout the Corridor of Innovation.

Rivers of Steel has had the honor of leading a dedicated group of local partners, community leaders, and advocates who have given their time, energy, and in-kind support to the project. They are the real visionaries behind *Murals on a Mission: New Kensington*. A special thanks is owed to Old Towne Overhaul for donating various machinery and providing numerous walls for the murals. Voodoo at the Ritz, New Kensington has also been a steadfast supporter, offering space for public events and enthusiasm for the community.

Murals on Mission: New Kensington would not have been possible without the many artists, assistants, volunteers, and workers who helped create the murals, prep the walls, design concepts, collect community feedback, and so much more. Thank you to the following individuals for your passion and dedication.

These People Rock (alphabetical)

- Eric Ashby
- David Scott Brozovich
- Carrie Lewis DelRosso
- Jon Engel
- Hemispheric Conversations Urban Art Project (HCUAP)
- KeyBank
- Large Scale Systems Museum
- Michael Malcanas
- New Kensington Art Center
- Olde Towne Overhaul
- Penn State New Kensington
- Sherwin Williams, Lower Burrell
- The City of New Kensington
- The Corner Center for Entrepreneurship
- The Leone Family
- The River Community Church
- Michelle Thom
- Voodoo at the Ritz
- Week of Hope Community Service
- Wesley Family Services
- Tommy West

Featured Artists

Jewels Antonio

Dejour Brown

Max Gonzales

Ashley Hodder

Juliandra Jones

Christian Miller

Shane Pilster (lead artist)



Rivers of Steel

Founded on the principles of heritage development, community partnership, and a reverence for the region's natural and shared resources, Rivers of Steel strengthens the economic and cultural fabric of western Pennsylvania by fostering dynamic initiatives and transformative experiences.

Rivers of Steel showcases the artistry and innovation of our region's industrial and cultural heritage through its historical and 21st-century attractions—offering unique experiences via tours, workshops, exhibitions, festivals, and more. Behind the scenes, Rivers of Steel supports economic revitalization—working at the grassroots level to deepen community partnerships, promote heritage tourism, and preserve local recreational and cultural resources for future generations.

Rivers of Steel's Graffiti Art program draws inspiration from the underground culture of local graffiti writers, urban explorers, and guerrilla artists who animated the Carrie Blast Furnaces—and similar post-industrial sites—following the collapse of the steel industry in the 1980s. Through this program, Rivers of Steel works with local artists, schools, and communities to support creative placemaking strategies, advocating for the recognition of graffiti and street art as a quintessentially American art form.

For more information, visit riversofsteel.com.





Visiting HCUAP artists paint a mural in downtown New Kensington with local artists.
From left to right: Anton Bachman, Max Gonzales, Eva Bracamontes, and Sasha Primo



Ashley Hodder's inspiration came from the historic jewelry building the mural was painted on in downtown New Kensington.



Juliandra Jones and Dejour Brown use their digital mock-up as reference with an assortment of spray paint brands being used.



Juliandra Jones adds colors to the background after their design proportions had been mapped out



A detail shot of the mural by Max Gonzales and Shane Pilster that not only pays homage to various decades of technology, but also incorporates a subtle conversation with the public mural across the street stating, "I ALSO BIFF" - This derives from a local piece of graffiti that holds a special place in the hearts of some residents.



A detail shot of the line work along with a selfie reflecting the mural by Shane Pilster.



Christian Miller is from New Kensington and has been producing artwork in the area for several years. Rivers of Steel were honored to have him contribute more work in his hometown as part of *Murals on a Mission*.



New Kensington youth assisted the team in finding the right words and phrases that inspired them about their community. These three contributed words that were later used in the murals around town.



Phil Seth painted this owl during the May 15th, 2021 event at Voodoo at the Ritz in New Kensington.



Shane Pilster stands in front of the *CommUNITY* mural billboard that pioneered the concept for this project.



Residents attended the *Fridays on Fifth* food truck rally in downtown New Kensington.



Ashley Hodder painted into the evening during the *Fridays on Fifth* event.



Max Gonzales worked into the night with a head lamp in order to take advantage of the warm weather before the southwestern Pennsylvania cold settles in.



Detail shot of the *Do What You Love* text from the mural by Max Gonzales and Shane Pilster.



Detail shot of *BeYOUtiful*



Scott Brozovich supported the project by priming many of the large walls, including this one for Ashley Hodder's piece.



Detail shot of *Shine*



Detail shot of *Revival*

MURALS

on a mission



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