

## *Jane Golden*

The power of determination and belief have propelled me forward over time. Starting out, I was excited by life's possibilities, but unsure of my direction. I thought a lot about the power of creativity and imagination to somehow make a difference in the world. This seemed true to me in 1978 when I graduated from Stanford and moved down to Los Angeles. As I drove around the city and saw numerous powerful murals, I felt that my hunch about art was correct.

One day, while waiting at a bus stop, I came across a small article in the LA Times about the Los Angeles Mural Program. They were giving out grants for local artists to paint murals. I remember vividly, all these years later, the palpable excitement I felt when I read the article. Maybe I could be an artist and not be disconnected from the world.

I called the number in the article and was told that the grant cycle had just passed. So I stopped by their office and dropped off my materials anyway...just in case. Then I began calling them, every few days for several months. Tenacity is a trait that comes naturally to me. Finally they called me back. They said, "We hope we never hear from you again, but you have the grant."

A few weeks later, I was painting my first mural, an image of the old Ocean Park Pier in Santa Monica. This was the opposite of the isolation I found in my studio. Every day, people stopped and watched. They asked questions about the design or they discussed local politics. Even before it was fully painted the mural had become a focal point of community energy and activity. I was amazed and thrilled by this experience. Mural painting became my passion; each work gave me new insights into the power and impact of public art.

But then I had a setback. I developed a chronic illness that made me too weak to paint. I had to come home and move back in with my parents to recover my strength. This was a depressing and dark time and again I found myself facing an uncertain future. I had to figure out how to make peace with this illness, draw on the tenacity I had within me, and re-

route it to get better and move forward. After a lot of time and work, I started to recover, and I started painting murals again. The power of art helped put me back in touch with my determination and resilience.

Then I got another break...a bigger one. In 1984, the City of Philadelphia had a new mayor, a new optimism, and a growing graffiti crisis. Some of the new city officials saw graffiti not just as vandalism, but as misplaced artistic energy. They wanted to find a way to redirect this behavior, so the Anti-Graffiti Network was born. I read that the Anti-Graffiti Network was going to include a mural painting program and I immediately applied for a job. After a brief test of my mettle, working with 50 kids and buckets of house paint on the Spring Garden bridge, I was hired.

Here's how it worked: if young graffiti artists pledged to give up vandalism, and then put in time on a clean-up crew, they could join the mural program as paid apprentices. Not only could they leave their mark on the city in big, visible, and much more permanent ways, they could be paid to do it. For many kids, art can be a lifeline—it helps them escape the whirlpool of vandalism, drugs, and crime. As these kids worked on mural crews, they learned not only about composition, color, and brush strokes but also about teamwork, self-discipline, and responsibility. More importantly, they began to believe in their own potential. The kids and I connected in ways I would never have expected. Being diagnosed with lupus at a young age and told I would not live long created a feeling in me of being an outsider, not unlike them. Here we were, as different as could be, but we found a commonality that lasted a decade.

As we painted murals throughout different neighborhoods, I saw the real social power of art. In areas where the only city workers most people ever saw were the police, we began to deliver “public art as a city service.” The murals became the first signs of hope on a neglected street or a struggling block.

Now 3,800 murals later, with more than 40,000 kids served since 1984, with countless adults and communities impacted, with programs in shelters and prisons, a robust after-school and summer program and re-entry program, with projects and initiatives that look at the nexus of art and economic development, with new large civic gateway projects

that incorporate light, sound, and new technologies, our philosophy remains the same. We see public art as a partnership between the artist and the community—a creative collaboration expressing the vision of the artist while reflecting the concerns and spirit of the neighborhood. And through this collective process, the murals take on a purpose far beyond beautification; they become catalysts for positive social change, inspiring many other actions around education, community, and economic development. They show us how we can be aspirational and pragmatic, using art as a remarkable tool of transformation.

My job is challenging, daunting, and sometimes overwhelming. And yet, it has made me so hopeful in spite of the fact that what I see often seems hopeless. I'm inspired every day by the spirit and tenacity of the citizens in the city's neighborhoods. The work has taught me to recognize my own privilege, and I look for ways to harness that privilege to assist those with fewer supports, without making assumptions or feeling I have answers. I have learned to be less judgmental and more empathetic. I have learned most of all to be grateful for the gift of meaningful work.

When I think about how I got to where I am, the word grit comes up in my mind over and over. I had wonderful and caring parents who not only supported me in every way but insisted that I embrace the concepts of humility, generosity, and commitment. Even though I am a deeply impatient person who wants results immediately, they cultivated in me the belief that the fruits of one's labor may not be evident for years. There were no short cuts; belief was critical and hard work was necessary. I feel so grateful to them for instilling in me a sense of what it means to believe in things before they are real and the understanding that life is, after all, a journey of faith.