



Painter pays homage to veterans through mural

[BY THERESA CISNEROS](#)

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Painter Carlos Aguilar didn't set out to become a virtual expert on World War II or to move the descendants of local veterans to tears.

But through his labor of love – a newly minted wall mural at the corner of Custer Street and Washington Avenue in the Logan neighborhood – that's exactly what he's done.

Aguilar, 33, has dedicated the last year and a half to creating the military-themed piece, titled “Among Heroes.” Now that he's finished, he's reflecting on his experience and deciding whether to expand the mural or seek steady construction work to cover his mounting bills.

“I left my heart, my soul, my everything at this corner for the past year,” the Santa Ana resident said of the work, which features the faces of more than 60 Orange County veterans. “Every minute that I spent out there was worth it.”

A WORK IN PROGRESS

The idea for the project surfaced about three years ago, when Aguilar's brother challenged him to take his artistic talents to the next level and create something for the community.

Aguilar, who was born in Mexico and raised in Mission Viejo, had painted other smaller murals in town and was intrigued by the idea. It brewed within him, until he spotted an empty wall on the side of an aging complex that houses a small liquor store, a few apartments and the popular La Chiquita restaurant.

“I wanted to create something that would educate and empower the community,” he said. “I wanted to create something important that would make people proud.”

After obtaining permission from the owner, Aguilar began work in February 2012 by power-washing and fixing cracks in the wall and applying the first strokes for the light blue sky and massive bald eagle that would anchor the top.

Aguilar initially planned to replicate the faces of 40 Logan veterans in his piece. But the project evolved as he learned more about WWII and the Santa Ana residents who served in it.

As word of the mural spread, families from other areas began submitting photos of their beloved fathers, grandfathers and uncles – the majority of whom were Mexican Americans from Santa Ana. At the same time, Aguilar spent \$300 on books and research materials to make sure his work was historically accurate. The more he discovered, the more he incorporated.

A FINISHED PRODUCT

Today, period-specific bombers soar at the top of the mural. A faceless man in fatigues – representing unknown soldiers and those who are missing in action – stands in the center. In another area, two comrades lean on each other for support.

The real stars of the mural, however, are the 67 veterans from various military branches whose faces are depicted in it.

Veterans such as Luciano Arzate, of the Army, who died during the Battle of the Bulge at age 20; Fred Chavez, also of the Army, who captured 22 German troops at age 21; and Joe M. Reynoso, of the Army, who rescued Jews from a concentration camp and later became a Santa Ana firefighter.

Aguilar keeps all of their images in a large, plastic envelope in case he needs to touch up their faces; he recites most of their back stories without skipping a beat. Some anecdotes came from the veterans' kin. Others came directly from the men, including a few who shared repressed war memories.

"It was emotional," he said, tearing up. "What do you do when a grown man comes to you and cries?"

Reactions to the finished mural have been equally intense, Aguilar said.

Some wonder why more veterans from Logan were not depicted. Others wonder why he used symbols that allude to the veterans' Mexican American heritage. The vast majority, however, are touched by the images – including one woman who was so moved that she couldn't bring herself to get out of the car and drove off weeping.

Marco Tamayo, an area resident who monitored the progress of the mural about three times a week, said it's a powerful reminder of the military heroes who once walked Logan's streets.

"I couldn't take my eyes off it," said Tamayo, 41. "It reminded me of all of my cousins, uncles and other family members who served in the military."

THE FUTURE

Now that Aguilar has finished the mural, he's taking time to do some much-needed job seeking. In the last year and a half, he's survived on public donations – which ranged from \$5 to \$500 – and the wages he made working construction during two of those months.

Some people have asked if he'll expand the mural to the adjacent empty wall. He says he'd like to but would need to collect at least \$3,000 up front, as he'd need about six months and \$6,000 to finish it. As inspiration, he's written "I will finish this wall" on the empty portion.

For now, Aguilar is treasuring the experiences that the mural brought him and is grateful that he's been able to touch lives through it.

"I leave here as I came," he said. "With empty pockets but able to share the stories of these men, as they shared them with me."

Aguilar can be reached at 714-914-5324.

About Carlos Aguilar

Carlos Aguilar, 33, was born in Michoacán, Mexico. He lived with relatives in several Mexican states before crossing into the United States as a child to join his mom in Mission Viejo.

He didn't speak English for the first year of his schooling in the United States, so he spent much of his school day doodling in his notebook.

His mom worked long hours to support the family on her own, and without parental oversight, Aguilar got into trouble in junior high.

"Then I found art," he said.

Aguilar graduated from Serra High School in San Juan Capistrano in 2000 and got his certificate in graphic design from Saddleback College in 2003. All the while, he continued drawing in his notebook.

He moved to Santa Ana in 2005. For the past few years, he's lived downtown with his mom and brother in a rented house, where he can often be found painting in the front yard.

The "Among Heroes" mural is the fourth mural he's painted in Santa Ana. His dream is to paint a giant memorial featuring firefighters who perished in 9/11 on the side of a city parking structure on Fourth Street.

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