



The Sanpitch Dragon

In the middle of the last decade, Gunnison City initiated an effort to create a walking path along a segment of the Sanpitch River which ran through the southern end of the city. The project was called the Sanpitch River Walk.

After the path was completed, members of the community came up with the idea of having some kind of public art through the path's underpass under U.S. 89, which also serves as the city's Main Street.

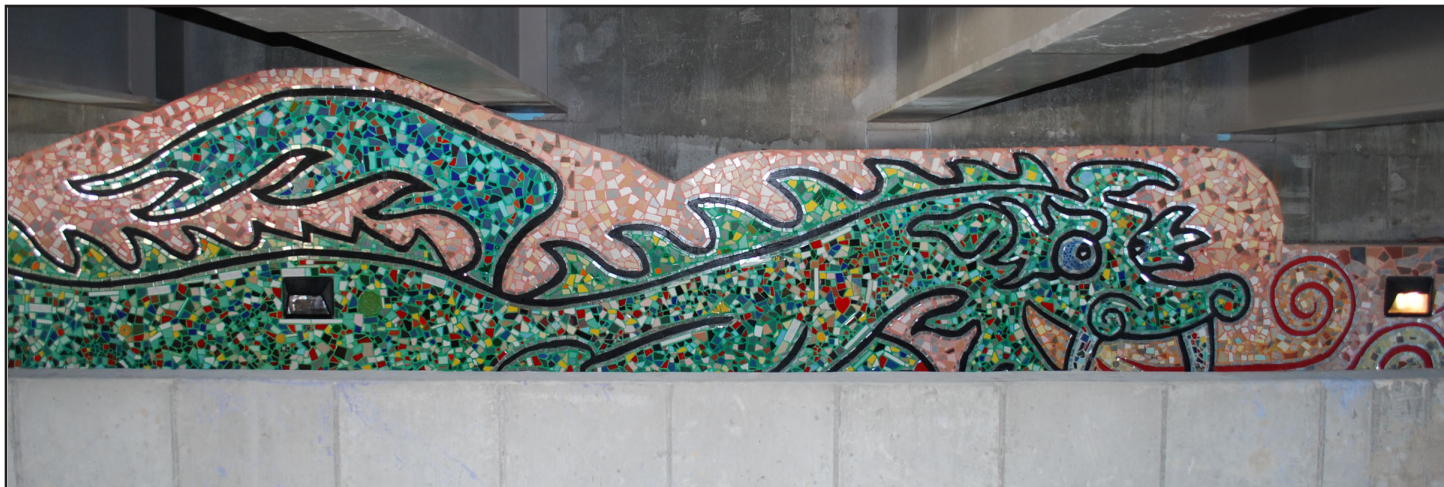
It was remembered that at the dedication of the River Walk under the highway, a semi-truck passed overhead and an elementary school-aged girl commented that it sounded like the roar of a dragon.

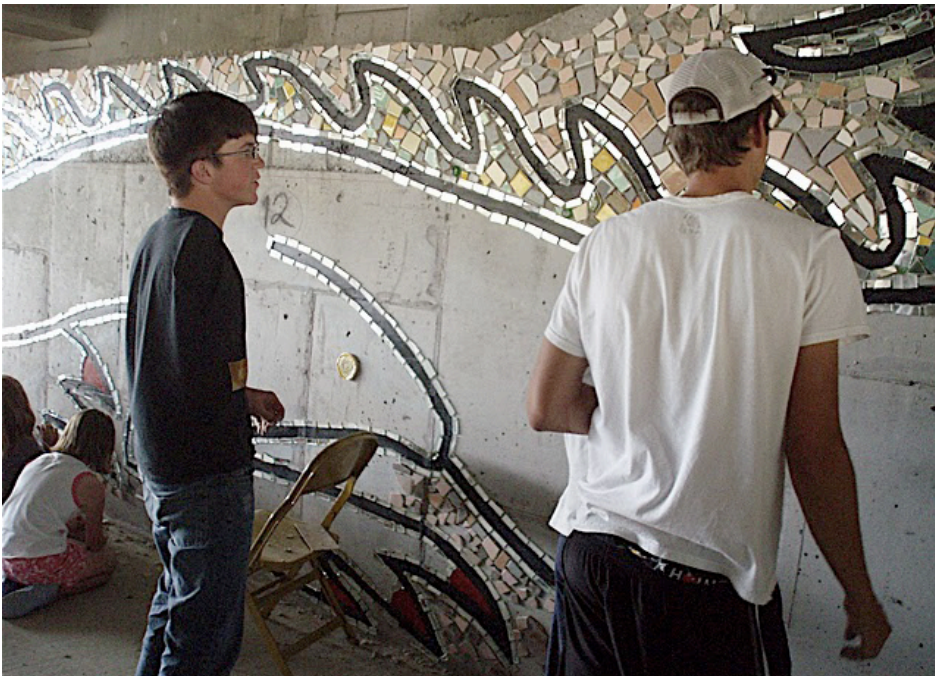
The roaring dragon idea took hold, and the public art idea evolved into the concept to create a tile mosaic of a dragon, to be called the Sanpitch Dragon.

The call went out to local art teachers to have their students conceptualize a dragon. More than 100 sketches of dragons were the result.

A design artist incorporated elements of many of those sketches to come up with a design that would use the available space. Once the drawing was on the concrete wall, community members—notably hundreds of children—installed the tile pieces, instructed and led by a tile artist.

The Utah Arts Council helped fund the Dragon with a Creative Community grant to the project's sponsor, the Casino Star Theatre Foundation.





The Sanpitch Dragon has had a lasting impact. “It really impressed those kids,” says Casino Star Theatre Foundation Director Diana Spencer.

Just one evidence of that is found in a case of vandalism perpetrated on the Dragon a couple years after its installation. The young man who vandalized the mural was brought by justice by his own friends

because they themselves had helped with the Dragon and were invested in it. “There was a real sense of ownership by the kids who had worked on the dragon,” Spencer says.

In February of 2011, Gunnison Valley 7th-graders were asked to write essays for a contest sponsored by the Utah League of Cities and Towns. The students were to write on

the topic “Why I Like My Community.” Seventh-grade teacher Stella Hill said the number one response to that question, even four years after the project itself was the Sanpitch Dragon, either because students had participated, or because going to see it since then has been impressive to them





A May 29, 2010, article in the Ogden Standard Examiner newspaper made mention of the Dragon, showing that its impressions extend far beyond Gunnison City. The article talks about James and Barbara Cowlin, who founded the U.S. Route 89 Appreciation Society, and who named the Dragon as one of the things to see along the highway. A portion of the article follows:



Folks used to get their kicks on Route 66, but if James and Barbara Cowlin have their way, travelers will be singing a different tune: "Life's so fine on Route 89."

The Cowlins founded the US Route 89 Appreciation Society, and are appreciating it right now.

They left Nogales, Ariz., on May 17 to follow the highway through Arizona, Utah, Idaho,

Wyoming and Montana to the Canadian border—and back. Including 89's two alternative routes, that's 1,963 miles each way.

The couple, who live in Oracle, Ariz., are photographing and making audio and video recordings as they go.

...

Another favorite [place

along U.S. 89]? Gunnison's Sanpitch Dragon.

"The Sanpitch Dragon is a 218-foot-long mosaic, created under a bridge over the Sanpitch River on 89," [James] Cowlin said. "It's sort of a community art project, and if you stand under the bridge as cars and trucks are going overhead, you hear the dragon roar."



Gunnison City Sesquicentennial



In 2009, Gunnison City celebrated its founding 150 years previous. The focus of the entire community that sesquicentennial year was on the city's history and heritage, civic pride, and hope for the future.

Part of the celebration included a special performance from the city's youth, made possible largely through an Arts Education grant from the Utah Arts Council.

Guest artist Clive Romney, founder and president of Utah Pioneer Heritage Arts, taught and led the performance.

Romney and his organization's mission is "to preserve the memory of our pioneer ancestors by becoming the premiere proponent of pioneer-era arts and provider of cultural events featuring those arts

and derivative arts whose roots lie in that era."

The Sesquicentennial Program involved the city's youth performing pioneer games, dances, and providing original music composed by Romney and the students focusing on local history. One song was about Captain John Gunnison, the city's namesake. Another was about the Sanpitch Dragon, the impressive community art project many of the children had helped create just two years previous.

Romney taught and rehearsed the children for the final presentation.

The performances consisted of a program presented at the Casino Star Theatre (the Casino Star Theatre Foundation was again the sponsor of the event), and more programs at local schools.

After the program, students and teachers were asked about the experience. Some of those questions and selected answers are presented here:

HOW DO YOU FEEL YOUR STUDENTS RESPONDED?

"The students loved this different way to learn by music and movement ... This was definitely a no-fail experience."

"The students had a fantastic experience. The children sang our song that we wrote all week and into the final week of school."



WHAT DID YOU LEARN DURING THE PROJECT?

"I learned that if you have people as good as Clive Romney, the song was easier to learn."

"I learned that knowing about one's heritage is very important. It brings more meaning and understanding, and also respect, for your ancestors."

"That anyone can be a songwriter."

"I didn't know that Gunnison was named after Captain John Gunnison."



COMPLETE THIS SENTENCE: ART IS ...

"Art is awesome!"

"Art is a way of putting our lives into perspective. Art is everywhere and everything. I love it."

"Art is fun."

"Art is a cool thing to do."





SWIMMING POOL SEA-SCAPE

Another Arts Education grant to the Casino Star Theatre Foundation helped a project for the Gunnison City swimming pool, providing a wonderful art-creating experience and adding to the aesthetics of a public facility.

In fact, because of a glitch in the grant application process that year, the grant was offered based on the excellence of the foundation's and community's recent previous projects rather than on the application itself.

The project was simply to create a painted mural on the walls of a portion of the Gunnison City Swimming Pool complex. Of course, a water theme was apropos, so planners decided on an underwater sea-scape.

The guest artist drew the design on the wall. The students colored it, many of them responsible for one specific element of the drawing. Using photos of

underwater scenes for reference, students mixed the colors, developed their own shades, and then applied the paint.

They achieved depth and a bit of an impressive 3D effect.

Project director Diana Major Spencer says the project was "spectacular."

"It was wonderful," she says, "and the kids were so responsive."

Many of the students remembered the San-pitch Dragon of three years earlier, and said the sea-scape project reminded them of that one. Becoming somewhat used to special art projects, Spencer says, "They were hoping they would have something again the next year."

The enthusiasm of the youth is one reason Gunnison City hopes to continue such kinds of projects and efforts long into the future.

An indication of the success of the project is found in the comments of the post-project report. Some of those comments are here:

The children showed much cooperation. Some worked in pairs, others alone. They were absolutely respectful toward the artist, materials, and venue. There was NO goofing off. They focused on the project and stayed for hours.

It helped them to realize they can paint and create something wonderful. Many of them learned to stick with a project and follow it through. They felt the joy of creating and developing something they can be proud of.

Brinley said it was like working on the dragon “two years ago.” I told her it had been three years, when she was only six. She asked me when we would do another project so she could help again. Her friend hadn’t lived in Gunnison when we did the dragon. She said she felt bad about that, but she was really glad to be here for the mural.



One little (2-3 years old) guy worked on his seahorse for a couple of hours. Another worked on a big red octopus for two days, and still has to come back to finish a couple of the tentacles. One boy told the Mayor that he didn’t know before that he could paint something that looked like it was “supposed to.”



“Parker and Josh said they’d rather be doing art than playing ball.”

I feel these kids will continually love art their whole lives—because they had the opportunity to do projects like this one and others. Projects like this create a discovery project to a love of art.