

# Chicago Tribune

Meet the cowboy hat-wearing Catholic brother who creates the murals under the Fullerton 'L' stop

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NOV 04, 2019 | 6:30 AM



## Murals under the "L"

Brother Mark Elder, muralist and adjunct faculty professor at DePaul University, stands with the latest column mural under the Fullerton "L" station near the DePaul University campus. The project is titled "The Story of 'The Little School Under the 'L'". The illustration on the column is based on a photo of the construction of the Lake Street "L" station from the mid-1890's. It also includes an illustration of a CTA token. (Raquel Zaldivar / Chicago Tribune)

Under the CTA Fullerton Brown/Purple/Red Line stop walk is a concrete forest of art.

On 17 support pillars under the "L" are colorful murals depicting DePaul University's history, including the first female and African-American graduates, legendary basketball coach Ray Meyer and Olympic track and field star Mabel "Dolly" Staton.

The murals are designed by Brother Mark Elder, a DePaul art professor usually seen around campus in a big, Tom Mix-style cowboy hat which he jokes is part of his religious garb. With the help of his students, Elder put up the first murals in 2016, and adds another set every year.



A photo of Benjamin L. Hooks is pictured on a column that is part of "The Story of The Little School Under the 'L'" by Brother Mark Elder and his students under the Fullerton "L" stop. Hooks, who was an American civil rights leader, graduated from the DePaul University College of Law in 1948. (Raquel Zaldivar / Chicago Tribune)

The murals, a mix of cartoon-like portraits, photos and abstract images, are part of a growing collection of art in and around CTA "L" stations and bus terminals — mostly sponsored by the agency. The DePaul murals are paid for by the university, but have the CTA's approval.

Elder said his murals and other CTA art allow people regular access to something essential.

“The notion of having museum-quality pieces you can encounter on your daily travels enriches a person's life,” Elder said. “Without it, it would detract from our daily existence — a lot of color, a lot of delight, wouldn't be there.”

Elder received a physical education degree from DePaul in 1978. Then he discovered he wanted to study art, and got a Master of Fine Arts degree at the University of Denver. A member of the Vincentian order, he has taught at DePaul for 25 years.

Elder is known as the university's muralist, and produced the large portrait of St. Vincent DePaul that can be seen from the "L" on the McCabe Hall dormitory. What Elder calls the "Big Vinny" mural is made up of tiny portraits of DePaul faculty, staff and students that Elder sketched, then had made into rubber stamps. The stamps were used to color in the mural, paint-by-numbers style, Elder said.

Every year, Elder and his mural students create four murals for the parking lot under the tracks, which is just south of Fullerton Avenue, at Belden Avenue. Sixteen murals have been done, plus one mural about the project, called "The story of 'The Little School Under the 'L'." The project will be completed in 2021, with a total of 25 pieces. Wrapped around the support pillars, the murals measure about 10 feet tall, and 8 feet around.



Portraits of DePaul University's first African American graduates, Marion Amoureux, right, and Rose Vaughan under the Fullerton "L" stop. (Raquel Zaldivar / Chicago Tribune)

Elder, who draws inspiration from the American painter and muralist Thomas Hart Benton, picks the subjects through an open discussion session, last held at the DePaul Art Museum.

"I'm one of those people that insists on a discussion with the people who are being affected by the art, and let them tell me what's important, and then we'll create something from that conversation," Elder said.

Once subjects are chosen, Elder researches and designs the murals. He works on them with his mural students in the spring, using acrylic paint on a porous material called polytab. Elder finishes them and in the summer, he and a few students glue them to the surface of the pillars with an acrylic gel, and protect them with varnish and graffiti guard.

The most recent four murals are a joint portrait of two former DePaul presidents (the Rev. John Cortelyou and the Rev. John Richardson), the DePaul fight song, the 1979 Final Four men's basketball team and the school's relationship with the CTA.

The Fullerton stop was built in 1900, just two years after DePaul's founding, and Elder believes the connection was key to the school's success. "Without it, we'd be a small school," Elder said.

He drew the design for the CTA mural from old photographs of the original construction of the "L" — the girders being raised echo the DePaul "tree of wisdom" emblem. There's also a reproduction of an old CTA token.

The CTA has made a push for more art on its system since 2011, doubling the number of installations of mosaics, paintings and sculptures to more than 60, and more are coming, according to Elizabeth Kelley, transit art administrator.

Some of the more elaborate recent examples of CTA-sponsored art include the Theater Gates' installations at the new 95th Street station on the Red Line, with tapestries made of from old fire hoses and a performance space and radio station. At the Green Line Garfield station is Nick Cave's trippy, colorful designs for the ceiling, platform windbreaks, elevator towers and interior columns.

There are six installations coming to transit stops in the next few years, Kelley said. Four are coming to the Blue Line stops, at Montrose, Irving Park, Addison and Western. One will be at the Diversey station on the Brown Line, and the sixth will be at the #66 Chicago bus turnaround in the Austin neighborhood, where a structure will be built to house electric bus chargers.

The cost of the six projects, including design, materials, fabrication, delivery and artists' fees, will be about \$770,000, Kelley said. The artists are Chicagoans Matthew Wilson, Chris Cosnowski, Dan Devening, Dan Sullivan and Edra Soto, along with Los Angeles artist Shinique Smith and Francesco Simeti of New York City.

Kelley said public art has always been an important part of civilized society, and it serves the agency's goal of making its facilities more welcoming.

"It has transformed the CTA to be a living gallery of art and architecture," she said.

Transportation song quiz

Last week's novelty hit was inspired by the citizens band or "CB" radio fad. It was "Convoy" by C.W. McCall, whose real name was William Fries. Michael Rigney of the Near North Side was first with the right answer.

This week's song is about journeying to find work during the Great Depression. You could take the Lincoln Highway, or ride a "flat rattler." What was the song, and who wrote it? The first person with the right answer gets a Tribune pen, and glory.