

By Nick Davies

Meet American artist Nichole Blackburn, BFA, who recently completed adorning one of the walls of Phuket's Dowroong Wittaya School music room with a vibrant mural depicting colorful scenes of traditional Thai sports, games, dress and musicianship against a dramatic backdrop of mountains and vivid skies.

The mural has transformed not only the dull gray wall – which now looks like a life-size window on traditional Thai life – but also the hearts and minds of those involved in the project, from the school children to teachers to parents and even to Nichole herself.

Nichole funded this first in a series of donation mural projects from her own pocket, which will take her around the world as she seeks to inspire and be inspired by the experiences she has and the people she meets along the way.

Now in her late 20s, Nichole has gone from struggling artist to achieving recognition and success at home in Los Angeles with a long list of well-to-do clients lined up for the next year and beyond.

Her portfolio is one of colorful murals depicting scenes from nature and storybooks, where she has transformed the walls and the occasional ceiling of homes and shops into imaginative landscapes and colorful underwater scenes that seem to be so full of life that you expect the animals and people in them to start moving at any moment.

Scenes from Peter Pan are a favorite among her younger clients and Nichole also plans to illustrate children's literature between her globetrotting adventures.

Nichole's success as an artist in the US has enabled her to fund her own travels and pay for all the materials needed to undertake her donation projects, with the paints alone totaling US\$600. All she asks for at each destination is a wall and a ladder.

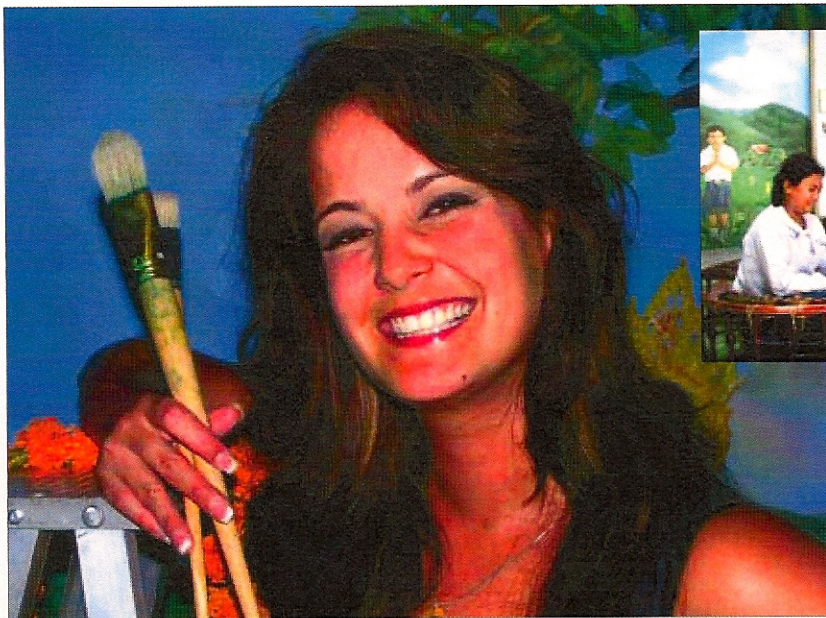
"I wanted to make sure that when I arrived here I would be completely self sufficient and be able to start on the project without having to rely on people to help me hunt around for materials once I got here," she said.

Enthusiastic to get started, Nichole was rolling on her base colors within a day of arriving and finished the mural just before her departure.

So what has driven Nichole to take up her global wall art adventure? "A few years ago as a struggling artist, I used to think that being paid well for my work and having a year's worth of bookings would equal success, but when I eventually reached that point I still felt there was something missing in my life.

"It was only when I started doing donation work that I found some of the fulfillment I was looking for," said Nichole.

"The attraction for me is partly the creative freedom of not



Above: Students continue with their music lesson as Nichole works on her mural.

Left: Nichole has discovered a happiness that success in Los Angeles failed to provide.

Art with Heart

School walls come to life with donation murals from international artist

working for a client and also seeing the reactions and involvement from the kids," she added.

Although Nichole's stint in Thailand has been brief, just 10 days, she feels she has received so much more out of it by coming into direct contact and being involved with the local community rather than arriving simply as a tourist.

"Meeting the kids at the school has been great. They are so curious and friendly, bringing gifts of food and trying their best to communicate with the limited vocabulary that we have between us, sometimes even reverting to sign language to get a message across.

"Meeting and interacting with the children and teachers at the school is part of the fulfillment I was looking for and I feel we all get so much more out of the project than would ever be possible back home, just working on paid for projects," she explained.

Nichole was introduced to the school by Don Battles, an old friend of her father. Don spoke to several establishments on Nichole's behalf; Dowroong Wittaya School being the first to accept her charitable proposal.

Used to working with a certain amount of peace and quiet in clients' homes, Nichole had to paint while Thai music lessons continued as usual, attracting curious glances from the students, with children and teachers coming up to her and helping out during their break times.

"Painting in this way was a little strange at first but it has been so much more rewarding than the usual artist-client relationship, which is what this project is all about – but I could not really envisage until I arrived here and

started working on the mural.

"At first, I imagined being left to my own devices to paint the mural in the way I had planned, but as the students and teachers have become more involved, it has taken on a life of its own with some of the students and teachers appearing as characters in the mural or some of the braver ones actually dipping into the paints and dabbing on their own addition to the mural."

Nichole plans to visit and donate murals in five countries in the next 12 months, funding them herself as a trial run before setting up a non-profit organization, when she will be able to better predict the way her individual projects will take shape.

Next month Nichole will be painting a mural at a children's facility in Dublin before moving on to her mother's birthplace, the Philippines, followed by an orphanage in Mexico and another in Bolivia next year.

Nichole hopes that by doing projects such as this in places with more basic lifestyles than many Americans have experienced, she can create some awareness among friends, family and clients back home and encourage them to take part or make their own contributions to people less fortunate than themselves.

"When I was first planning this project, people I spoke to both here and at home took some time to fully understand what I was trying to do, but the more people hear about it, the more they ask how they can contribute or participate, which I think is a great way of bringing the two cultures together and creating some kind of mutual understanding and appreciation between us," Nichole

explained.

As Nichole travels from country to country, she takes her own paints and plans to take something from each her previous projects to the next. Sky is the main theme of the murals in this year's donation projects.

The clear blue sky with almost three-dimensional clouds in the Dowroong Wittaya music room mural is one that she previously photographed in Peru. When she moves on to Dublin, the mural there will be filled with sky that she has photographed here in Phuket.

Nichole also plans to do arts and crafts projects with the chil-

dren in Dublin that she will then incorporate in her next stop in the Philippines.

Working at a faster than usual pace and with the help of extra young and old hands, Nichole and her ad-hoc team of students and teachers have managed to transform two 10-meter sections of wall that make up one entire side of the music room in just under 10 days, including sanding the wall down, adding base coat and primer before painting on the colorful layers that make up the details.

Their efforts have left something that will be admired and bring brightness to the otherwise basic surroundings for years to come, and of course, students will be able to point out to their friends the parts which they personally added and for some, their own likeness where it has been incorporated into the painting.

Although Nichole is currently traveling, readers can contact her by email at look@celadonstyle.com or visit her website www.celadonstyle.com

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