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— Nichole Blackburn, muralist and founder of the nonprofit Big Sky Countries

HB artist brings blue skies to kids



"We're all under the same sky" is the message Nichole Blackburn offers with murals like this one in Bolivia.



Brad Graverson Staff Photographer

Hermosa Beach artist Nichole Blackburn has reinvigorated her passion for art by wandering around the world, creating murals and bringing art to disadvantaged children through her foundation, Big Skies Countries.

Muralist creates scenes of beauty here and abroad

By Andrea Woodhouse
Staff Writer

The way Hermosa Beach muralist Nichole Blackburn sees it, no matter life's circumstances, we are all living beneath the same sky.

To that end, the roving artist's murals have brought a dusty New Orleans sunset to teens learning job skills at a Harbor Gateway occupational center, and Ireland's crisp blue sky and fluffy clouds to Filipino orphans.

"The one thing the murals have in common is that there is a sky," Blackburn said. "I take a sky from the previous country I visited, and paint it in the next place. I'm making a chain, and the message is that we're all under the same sky."



Using that commonality to link underprivileged children around the world through art is the aim of the 30-year-old's new nonprofit group, Big Sky Countries, officially launched this summer with the finalization of its 501(c)3 status. "My mission is to donate large-scale murals to orphan-

ages and children's facilities around the world," she said. "They know everything is free, all they need to do is have a ladder and a bucket."

Blackburn's next mural destination is Morocco. Set to travel this fall, the South Bay native is searching for a loca-

tion for the painting, either a school, hospital or orphanage where children have likely never been exposed to art, much less picked up a paintbrush.

"Every time I returned from one of the murals, I feel like I get the inspiration that I lack sometimes here in Los Angeles," she said. "It brings me so much inspiration."

And that's exactly what was lacking for Blackburn just before she started her project two years ago.

Thanks to upscale South Bay residents eager to do up their homes, her business that specializes in high-end wall finishes and murals was booming — but something was still missing.

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Unhappy and restless, she took her art on the road in July 2007, spending a year painting large-scale murals with children in impoverished locales, and ignoring the shock of friends back home.

Blackburn started with a Thai school serving many students who survived the devastating 2004 tsunami. Next, she went to a school in inner-city Dublin, an orphanage in Manila, and then an orphanage serving special-needs children in Bolivia.

After moving stateside last August, Blackburn painted a mural for a newly opened elementary school in post-Katrina New Orleans. Several months later, she worked with children to paint a 40-foot scene at the Occupational Therapy Training Program Youth Center in Harbor Gateway.

When she begins a project, Blackburn works with the facility and its children to develop the mural's theme. Then she sets to work with the same effort and enthusiasm she gives any other client.

Though Blackburn paints the most of each mural, the children, some timid at first, are invited to help. And Blackburn never, ever paints over the kids' work.

"They don't really know what to expect, and at first they are apprehensive," she said. "They can help at any point as the mural progresses, and they get really excited."

Blackburn first got excited about painting as a student at Redondo Union High School. Thanks largely to an inspirational teacher, she excelled in art class and developed new confidence in discovering her talent.

After graduating from San Diego State University with a fine arts degree, she returned home to the South Bay to paint professionally, ultimately establishing her Redondo Beach-based Celadon Studio.

Blackburn said Celadon's business is still vibrant in a drab economy, but she acknowledged her model has changed.

These days, instead of performing job after job after job, Blackburn will spend months at a time with a single client, perhaps painting 10 rooms in a single customer's home.

Among Blackburn's works is an elaborate scene on the ceiling of a Hermosa Beach yoga studio once owned by Benjamin Fucanan, as well as the garage of his Manhattan Beach home.

First impressed by Blackburn's work, Fucanan found himself inspired when she started talking about her idea

to launch a nonprofit this summer.

"That is an example of what she does with these orphanages that are dilapidated and sad," he said. "She goes in there and makes these huge murals and the kids just come to life. It's amazing what she does, and it just touched me."

Pledging to help raise money

for Blackburn's upcoming mission, Fucanan hosted a Moroccan-themed party Aug. 8, turning his home into an elaborate world market replete with henna artists, live music, food and drink, and a silent raffle.

With about 200 attendees, the fundraiser was definitely successful in raising the \$6,500 or so needed for her Moroccan

mural. But Blackburn is working on grant writing, still thinking ahead for a trip to India or Indonesia.

"I'm so in love with painting, and I get so much back from it," she said. "It's never a 9-to-5 thing for me. Even if I have downtime, I'm still looking for something to paint."

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