Ojibway woman says art changed her life on Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside

Anyone walking the grungy streets of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside can’t help but notice the striking work of local graffiti artist Larissa Healey.

The Ojibway woman is behind the provocative upside-down B.C. flag on East Hastings Street, a symbol of the province’s opioid overdose crisis. She has spray-painted displays for the Vancouver Police Museum, abstract art for Insite (the supervised drug injection site), and the striking 100-foot-wide mural featuring First Nations symbols behind the Army and Navy store.

But while Healey has dyed many streets and alleys, she has never done anything like her latest work: a simulated stained-glass window of St. Kateri Tekakwitha – North America’s first indigenous saint.

The striking image hangs at the entrance of The Door is Open, the Catholic drop-in centre that serves at least 400 free meals to the poor and homeless every day. For Healey, it is an emblem of reconciliation, inspiration, and life-transforming power.

“This painting has completely changed my life.”

Survival mode

Healey is a survivor. A child of the Sixties Scoop, she was one of thousands of First Nations children “scooped” out of their family homes by the Canadian government between the 1960s and 1980s. She was adopted and grew up in abusive circumstances.

Healey moved from Canada’s east coast to Vancouver when she was 17 years old and quickly fell in love with the city’s energy and diversity.
But life in the Downtown Eastside has been hard on Healey. She has suffered trauma, fought addiction, experienced homelessness, and survived attempted suicide. She lives with bipolar disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder and knows what it’s like to wonder when she’ll eat again.

“I don’t know how to describe surviving every day,” she said. “You’re like: ‘Oh my God, I gotta eat. I don’t care what it is. Put it in me.’”

She would rely on free meals from various non-profits, including the Catholic drop-in centre run by nuns and volunteers next to St. Paul’s Parish. She first found them about 20 years ago.

“At the time, I was in a lot of trouble,” said Healey. “I would hide in the staircase, because I didn’t know where else to go, and be comfortable for just a minute, just to take a breath. Sometimes they would open the church doors to go into the church and I would see all these beautiful paintings and these things would make me feel good.”

The fresh soup or sandwich also tamed her hunger. Healey soon came to depend on The Door is Open for its daily free meals and weekly arts and crafts program for low-income women.

“She was very attached to the place,” said Cheryl Guistra, a longtime volunteer. Guistra quickly noticed Healey had an incredible artistic eye.

She would try to catch a glimpse of Healey’s drawings in her closely-guarded sketchbook, and when she did, was always impressed. Many years later, Guistra had the opportunity to commission a local artist to decorate the entrance to The Door is Open. She knew instantly who to recommend.

Getting to know St. Kateri

Reconciliation. That was the theme Healey was asked to bring to life at The Door is Open.

“This is really important to me because it’s a huge issue among our people. A lot of them carry so much, and I get it,” said Healey.

An image of St. Kateri, the “Lily of the Mohawks” and a devout Catholic, was the obvious choice. But as Healey began work on the mural in September 2017, the project quickly became deeply personal.
Healey’s friends have suffered abuses in residential schools, and she has experienced acute suffering at the hands of prejudice herself.

As she laboured over three large canvases in borrowed studio space from Coast Mental Health, she found the work “so spiritually and physically demanding” that when she took a break, she felt like she’d been running a marathon.

Artist Larissa Healey is seen working on her tribute to St. Kateri Tekakwitha. Agnieszka Ruck, Canadian Catholic News

She doesn’t mask her admiration for St. Kateri, a woman also intimately acquainted with suffering and ostracism. St. Kateri was orphaned at age 4 during a small pox outbreak. She faced ridicule both for the scars she bore from the disease and for embracing the Catholic faith. She died of tuberculosis at age 23.

St. Kateri is an example of “the reconciliation of cultures,” said Archbishop J. Michael Miller.

“She loved her culture – she was thoroughly Mohawk and Algonquin – but entered in and became a great lover of Jesus Christ. He became the centre of her life.”

Healey’s design smoothly combines symbols of Catholic and First Nations traditions. St. Kateri is depicted on one large canvas as if on a stained-glass
window, holding a lily in one hand and a cross of birch bark in the other.

On canvasses to either side of the young saint are painted two brightly-coloured teepees and two feathers, symbolizing harmony and unity. Mingled among them are vines, inspired by Jesus’ statement: “I am the vine, you are the branches.”

“This piece is recognizing the Church and First Nations culture,” said Healey. “I love the Church. I include it in our First Nations prayers.”

A life transformed

The 16-month project marked a massive turning point for Healey. Thanks to the long-term commission, she was suddenly receiving regular, monthly paycheques, and with them, a sense of purpose.

“It was a huge difference. I was able to come out of a lot of food trauma and learned how to buy and budget. It was very dignified, to be honest,” said Healey, who also goes by the name Gurl 23.

Now in her 40s, this “Sixties Scoop girl” has stable housing, a steady income, and can even afford luxuries like butter. She also gives back to her community by reaching out to at-risk Indigenous youth.

“I’m building strength. I’m building happiness. I’m building bliss. That’s what this project has done for me.”
Archbishop Miller officially unveiled and blessed the work on the feast of St. Kateri April 17. He pointed out the extraordinary coincidence that on that exact date in 1680, St. Kateri had passed away. Two hundred and thirty-nine years ago, it had been the Wednesday of Holy Week, and April 17, 2019, was the Wednesday of Holy Week once again.

St. Kateri “was just a beautiful young woman, an example of a life that, to the eyes of the world, was plain and simple, but in fact was heroic,” he said.

“She lived a very tranquil, one would say an ordinary, life. In some ways, she was a predecessor of St. Teresa of the Child Jesus. It was the little things of life that she did with burning love.”

At the blessing ceremony, Healey dressed in full regalia and danced and sang with several other First Nations people to the loud beating of a drum. Several Catholics also sang a tribute to St. Kateri, led by Deacon Rennie Nahane of the Squamish First Nation.

The event will stay in Healey’s memory for a long time. “It’s a moment of acknowledgement of our first people, and I want to keep doing that. Let’s keep a moment of peace. We already know about the wars and all that
stuff. I’m not belittling it; I’m just saying, let’s be uplifting,” she said.

“St. Kateri has changed my life, touched my heart, given me spiritual and physical healing, and allowed me to walk between our worlds. I hope this painting will do the same for you.”