

Mural Is Lesson in Life...and Death



Lisa Kyle/Herald & News

Mike Alewitz sits on a scaffold as he works on a mural at Lodi Memorial Library which depicts the fatal explosion at the Napp Technologies factory in 1995. Nearing completion, the colorful mural will measure 16 feet by 17 feet.

Labor Artist Perpetuates Lodi's Napp Explosion

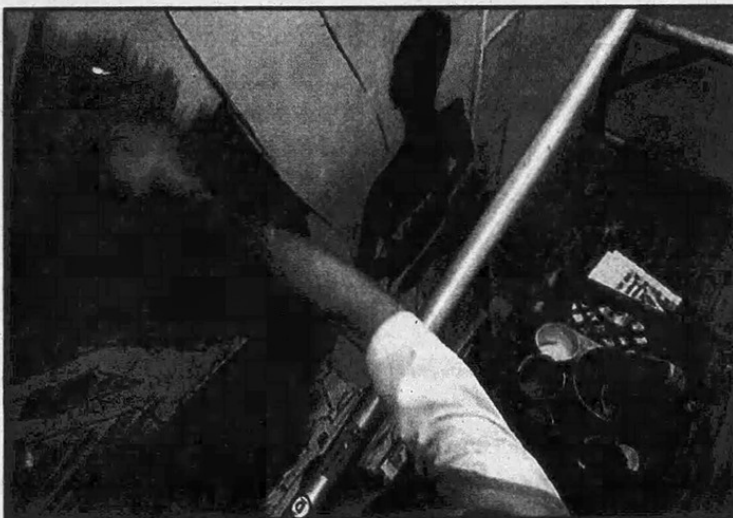
By **BRENDAN JANUARY**
Herald & News

LODI — In April 1995, then 13-year-old Sara Chapilliquen awoke in the middle of the night when the shock wave of an explosion from the Napp Technologies factory shook her from her sleep. She later learned that the blast killed five workers.

Only in the past year, however, has Chapilliquen understood the human impact of that explosion.

Through a program called Link the Community to the Classroom, she and other high school students have spent the year tracking down relatives and survivors of Lodi industrial accidents.

"I've lived here so long," she said. "But this was a good chance to really learn about the town. I couldn't believe that little Lodi had such industry. It was exciting to hear the stories."



Lisa Kyle/Herald & News

Labor artist Mike Alewitz says, "My art is ... designed to be part of a discussion that's going on in the labor movement. I want to tie this explosion in with the general carnage that goes on in the workplace."

Now, the stories will be woven into the final piece of the project: a giant mural. The program has hired 48-year-old labor artist Mike

Alewitz to design and paint the mural. Library Director Anthony Taorima, who was very involved in the project, offered the library as a

site.

The 17-foot-by-16-foot painting is nearing completion. Beneath a wall of scaffolding in the library, Alewitz discussed the meaning of the mural and the link between labor and art.

"My art is agitprop — agitation and propaganda," he said. "It's designed to be part of a discussion that's going on in the labor movement. I want to tie this explosion in with the general carnage that goes on in the workplace."

Alewitz's art is part of a tradition in which labor unions recognized that while man may work to live, work is not life. He pointed to the top of the mural, where a loaf of bread and a bouquet of roses were outlined in black.

"'Bread and roses' is a slogan from the Lawrence Textile Strike," said Alewitz. "They knew that workers need spirit and culture as well as work."

The mural is filled with such

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Mural:

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Information Needed

Link the Community to the Classroom is still looking for information on the following people who were killed in Lodi industrial accidents:

George Jackson: 1969

Oliver Brittingham, Bohdan Turczak, Alexander Henderson, Robert King, Richard Grabowski, and Walter Edmunds: 1973.

Tom Furlong, Jim Gourdine, Buster McKenzie, Calixto Rivera, and Glenn Terraneo: 1995.

If anyone has recollections or photos to share about these victims, please contact Meredith Helton at 1-877-829-4998.



Lisa Kyle/Herald & News

Labor artist Mike Alewitz works on a mural at Lodi Memorial Library. The work is an example of how he used anecdotes collected by high school students to create a memorial for the fatal Napp Technologies explosion.

symbolism. A glow of white and yellow paint, representing the searing heat of the Napp explosion, sits in the center of the painting. Five men are silhouetted against the flash, catching the instant of their death. To the left sits a fire hose with a stack of green money beneath it, which notes the Napp management's decision to refuse the use of the fire hose. Pulling the hose would trip an alarm and call the fire department, and management reportedly did not want to pay for the call.

"That's typical," said Alewitz.

Two figures stand at each end of the painting, one representing the natural world and the other the urban. Their contributions weave into a river that stretches across

the mural. At the bottom, the river meanders through the wreckage of the Napp plant and is choked with dead fish.

Alewitz painted the river in several colors after Taorima described his mother's experience working at the United Piece Dye Works. Every morning, the river gleamed a different color when the factory dumped dyes into the water.

The story is a good example of how Alewitz has used the anecdotes collected by high school students.

The artist is also inviting relatives and friends of those who have suffered in industrial accidents to

contribute by submitting a design. The design will be painted into one of 60 boxes that border the mural. Alewitz is confident that all the boxes will be filled.

"There's no lack of people slaughtered on the job," he said.

Alewitz taught himself billboard painting and sign lettering in the 1970s. He then went to Massachusetts College of Art to take a course in mural painting. His time spent painting billboards proved to be excellent experience. Soon, he was teaching the course.

Alewitz's love of painting and the cause of labor has taken him all over the world. He has painted

murals with labor themes in Mexico City, Baghdad, and the devastated region surrounding Chernobyl, where workers knowingly went to their deaths to smother the smoldering nuclear core with concrete.

The mural's design resonates with Jim Gannon, a survivor of the Napp explosion.

"Those guys at Napp who died were close friends of mine," said Gannon. "I didn't want them to fade into obscurity. Anyone who walks in the library will see that mural will be touched. If they don't know what it's for, they're going to ask."