



David Lassman / The Post-Standard

THE RAILROAD bridge over West Onondaga Street near the Clinton Street intersection has been painted with messages for the nearby Rescue Mission. To see a gallery of more bridge images visit syracuse.com/photos.

GATEWAY INTO CITY A LITTLE BRIGHTER

Ken Burke likes to listen to old music on evening drives in Syracuse. He'll play vintage jazz or blues while admiring grand landmarks built before World War II. This summer, when Burke was hired to paint a message on a historic railroad bridge over West Onondaga Street, he thought of those rides and immediately chose a style.

Burke — owner of Ace Signs — did his work by hand, on a background of bright red. When he came upon jutting rims of metal, he'd take painstaking care to make sure each letter remained clear for motorists or pedestrians. In the end, Burke embraced a look that he thinks would be appropriate to a Brooklyn movie set of the 1940s.

In white block letters, on the downtown side of the bridge, he painted "Mission District." The other side reads "Lives Change Here," offering a message for travelers approaching downtown.

"It's a style I'm proud of," said Burke, 62, a longtime Central New York painter who did the work for KSP Painting of Syracuse. "Just to see it, the brightness of the red, it lifts your spirits."

The project was paid for by the Rescue Mission, a nonprofit agency that provides more than 225,000 annual meals and 70,000 overnight stays for those in need. Last year, agency administrators joined with the city in officially naming their nearby campus — and the area around it — "The Mission District."

Carolyn Hendrickson, the mission's chief development officer, said she often looked out her



Photo courtesy of the Onondaga Historical Association

THE BRIDGE was built in the late 1930s. Hundreds of spectators assembled to watch its construction.

window at the railroad bridge, used by the New York, Susquehanna and Western Railway. The bridge was constructed in the late 1930s, part of a \$23.5 million effort to elevate the railroads in downtown Syracuse. According to records at the Onondaga Historical Association, it was the longest through-girder, clear-span, double-track railroad bridge in the nation at the time it went up — which explains why hundreds of spectators often gathered during its construction.

Over the years, that span turned into a grim and rusty eyesore. Rescue Mission officials watched with interest as the Near West Side Initiative hired New York City artist Steve Powers to paint uplifting messages on similar railroad bridges on West Fayette and West streets.

"We were tired of saying we're the best-kept secret in Syracuse, and we thought, 'How do we let people know who we are?'" Hendrickson said.

Recalling the view from her window, she told her colleagues: "We need our own bridge."

So mission officials contacted Susquehanna railroad managers, who happily agreed to the idea of a Syracuse agency cleaning and painting the old bridge, Hendrickson said. The property is controlled by the railroad, which meant the mission could start work without approval from City Hall. Andrew Maxwell, the city's director of planning and sustainability, said he didn't know about the project until painting was under way.

Since West Onondaga Street is a major gateway, Maxwell and members of the Downtown Committee asked for a meeting to discuss the lettering with Rescue Mission staff. Mission executives honored a city request to put the more general message of "Lives Change Here" — rather than the mission logo — on the side of the bridge facing incoming traffic.

Not everyone was thrilled. Ed Griffin-Nolan, who runs the nearby Spa at 500 and the Art of Massage, wonders why such a prominent bridge became the canvas for a single institution. "I think (the Rescue Mission) does great work, and they're a wonderful part of the neighborhood," he said. "But I don't think they should have a monopoly on a public space. They figured out how to grab it, and I wish they'd brought more of us into it."

Griffin-Nolan said he's never heard anyone refer to the area as "The Mission District," and he asked — tongue firmly in cheek — if he should be allowed to paint. "We rub necks and backs" onto the bridge.

Hendrickson said she was surprised that some merchants are upset. "We want to be community players," she said, "and we sure didn't want to make anybody mad."

The flap, Maxwell said, could have one benefit: With more and more construction happening downtown — and with old railroad bridges abruptly being seen as artistic or marketing opportunities — he said the city will try and create a process for talking over what gets painted on any bridge, before work begins.

As for Burke, the veteran painter, he said Onondaga Street motorists responded joyfully as he worked. Many pulled over to snap photos with their iPhones. Others honked their horns or gave him a thumbs up. Burke said one man leaned out a window and shouted:

"If I keep going, will my life really change?"

Burke laughed. From now on, there's one way to find out.

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