

## Art is Blooming in Ottawa

By AIB Judge Linda Cromer

Wow! is the only word to describe the public/community art program in Ottawa, Illinois. And maybe the “wowiest” examples are the brainchild of mosaic artist Susan Burton who has engaged hundreds of folks in the creation of colorful, whimsical visual delights that beautifully meld horticulture, art, and the history of glass-making in Ottawa. And so it is that a spin-off of the Ottawa is Blooming campaign was the establishment of the Ottawa Community Public Arts Committee, an organization that fosters leadership development and civic engagement in the arts.



The committee’s inaugural project was the *Rainbow Flower*, a mosaic-covered sculpture glittering with brightly colored glass mosaic pieces put in place by more than 400 people spanning every age group and skill level - grade schoolers and grandparents, professional artists and eager first-timers. This remarkable achievement is on permanent display in Ottawa’s premier Allen Park adjacent to the Illinois River. Sited atop a bluff overlooking the waterway and spotlighted by sunshine and moonbeam alike, the *Rainbow Flower* is a beacon to boaters on the river as well as folks enjoying a leisurely stop in the park.



Ottawa is an inspiring place to be – a community with the energy and excitement of folks who revere their origins and embrace the future. And this remarkable community is punctuated with examples of mosaic art that serve as exclamation points in their every setting.

Dated downtown trash receptacles of mundane exposed aggregate concrete are transformed by mosaic designs. Talk about interactive art – tossing a Snickers wrapper into public eye candy is so much sweeter than littering. Add the fact that many of the mosaic designs were created at the

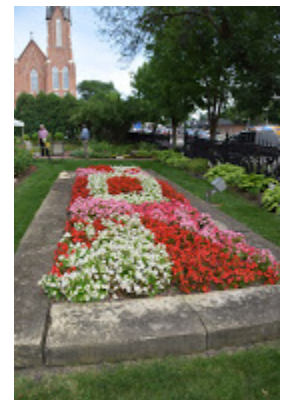


Ottawa is Blooming kickoff at Ottawa City Hall this spring and you multiply civic engagement by artistic development and come up with environmental activism. Quite a calculation.

Mosaic-enhanced garden tools serve as horticultural brushes and anchor the massive *Painters Palette* floral display downtown. *Totem Pole* sculptures of interchangeable “stacked art” pieces (including planters) incorporate mosaics as an integral element and are a concept that could be adapted to any community. A number of mosaic pieces including a festive Goliath-sized wine bottle and jaunty red cow are used to attract attention at public events and reinforce Ottawa’s arts brand.

The massive success of the mosaic art program has spurred other community art initiatives including “Dig Art” – planting beds created with paved outlines, filled in with flowers and sited in prominent outdoor spaces.

Accessible public art has long been an important part of the experience that is Ottawa, Illinois, from an outstanding mural program and large-scale abstract metal works to bronze statues memorializing events important to Ottawa’s storied history.





The Ottawa Community Public Arts Committee mindfully put the “Community” in its name and specifically makes both a connection and a distinction between public art and community art, defining community art as, “Art built **for and by** the community.”

This inclusive arts initiative is a vibrant form of place making and community branding. Ottawa, you make us proud by reminding us that we are all important pieces in the mosaic that is America in Bloom.

