

Hope a significant element in Indigenous artist's dark past-brighter future mural

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In one large panel, a mother and child are brightened by rays of sunshine that bring a remote First Nation community to life.

In a second, a person starves and struggles, hands outstretched, as black clouds roll in to blanket Winnipeg's skyline.

These stark, contrasting views of life are the inspiration behind Manitoba artist Jedrick Thorassie's new mural unveiled Monday on Burrows Avenue in Winnipeg's North End.



RUTH BONNEVILLE / FREE PRESS Jedrick Thorassie's murals are on either side of the front door to Ndinawemaaganag Endaawaad Inc. (Ndinawe), a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting urban Indigenous youth.

The darker painting represents the emerging artist's childhood in foster care and moving to Winnipeg.

The brighter work shows his hope of what life for Indigenous people can and should be.

"I just hope to show people you can grow up and have a really rough life and then pick yourself up and change your life for the better," said Thorassie, a member of the Sayisi Dene First Nation. He is originally from Tadoule Lake, a remote fly-in community about 985 kilometres north of Winnipeg.

He grew up in foster care — most of it in Thompson — which he said was tough. It didn't get an easier when he moved to Winnipeg, where he remains, he said.

"I barely knew any of my family, I've barely been to the rez, I barely know any of my people, I barely know my own language," said Thorassie. "I've had a really rough life."

The two paintings are displayed on either side of the front door to Ndinawemaaganag Endaawaad Inc. (Ndinawe), a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting urban Indigenous youth.

They were created in collaboration with the Graffiti Gallery, to bring attention to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's of Canada's call to action No. 66, which asks the federal government to establish multi-year funding for community-based youth organizations to deliver programs that further the cause of reconciliation.

Thorassie said the inspiration for the work came from Ndinawe, because it helps people such as him battle poverty and addiction and give them a safe space.

"The people I know, I associate with, they all come from the streets, the North End of Winnipeg," he said. "So, I try to show all that in my art."

Thorassie said he was given full control over what is in his paintings, and his process. And while it was great to paint what he wanted, he was scared people might not understand the work or might get the wrong message, he said.



RUTH BONNEVILLE / FREE PRESS Artist Jedrick Thorassie said his paintings aim to reflect life in the North End and to inspire people.

"I was supposed to be an artist, this is my passion," he said. "It just feels natural to me."

He said he got help from his daughter Leah, who offered suggestions on what should be in the mural and helped him during the weeklong process to colour in its panels.

Ndinawé executive director Shanlee Scott said Thorassie's murals offer hope to Indigenous people.

"Hope based on reclaiming of identity, of who we are and what's important," said Scott. "It's about belonging once again."

Scott called it an honour for the organization to have the paintings displayed on its building.

While Thorassie is still a newcomer to the Winnipeg art scene, he said he hopes to continue showcasing new work and inspire other Indigenous artists.