

Interconnectedness, oneness, strength, protection, life and growth': Artist Paul Johnson shares story behind mural revealed at Friendship Festival

By Karrie Carlson, Daily Journal Media, June 28, 2025

The 15 faces of varying ages, ethnicities and genders depicted on local artist Paul Johnson's latest mural, titled "Peace-Seekers" by the artist, but known as "Faces of Pelican" to many locals, hold one universal truth — everyone has a story to tell.

Johnson has spent his life learning and teaching art. As a third-grade student in Pelican Rapids, he just knew that art was what he did best. He couldn't have predicted at the time that it would be back in a Pelican Rapids elementary classroom that he would again find artistic inspiration.

Like all growing ideas, a seed must be planted to begin. In this instance, it took form as an application to the Minnesota State Arts Board for a grant to create a sculpture. The proposed work would feature 10-15 faces using the metal relief technique. He knew he wanted it to engage viewers with the message that "all are welcome in Pelican Rapids."

"Hands would embrace, or reach out for their neighbors and the hands would evolve from rooted trees as branches, representing things like interconnectedness, oneness, strength, protection, life and growth," he explained.

The idea took root and he waited to hear about the grant approval. During that time, Johnson was asked to visit Viking Elementary School by art teacher Kate Martinez. He went to speak to two fifth-grade classes about doing art as a profession.

Looking out at the class sitting in front of him, Johnson took in one of life's full circle moments — returning to the school he had learned to appreciate art at from 1967 to 1972. It was familiar, but there was something noticeably different.

"I saw boys and girls of nearly every ethnic background all laughing and carrying on just like my fifth grade class did, with one exception — my class was almost 100% caucasian."

Pelican Rapids had no doubt become a melting pot. What grabbed Johnson was the friendships between the classmates. "I wondered why I didn't have friendships like that. In general, I felt that although I got along fine with everyone in Pelican Rapids, I was keeping company with those most like me."

With that experience in mind, Johnson approached the Pelican Rapids Multicultural Committee, got a couple names of local individuals and began interviewing for his mural project.

The first interview was with Drago Nemec in May 2024. Nemec had served in the Bosnian Army, was wounded and had a lengthy recovery. He worked in a factory that was ravaged by war before he, with his wife, relocated to Pelican Rapids.

Johnson explained, "After that first interview, I started to look at myself differently — as a privileged, white man who had taken so many things for granted, like the peace I enjoy every day."

One by one, Johnson met the people and listened to the stories that would not only inspire his art, but would change his life. The mural consists of three separate sections, each with five portraits that are simultaneously prominent and blended into one.

The first section features Drago Nemec from Bosnia, Olesia Zlochevska from Ukraine, Borys Zlochevska born in Pelican Rapids and Marco Zavala from Mexico. Johnson spent time with all of them, and with each story there was personal and artistic growth.

Flavio Porto from Brazil, Miguel Antonio Pupo Poll from Cuba, Hilda Salazar and Alejandro Gonzalez from Mexico and Sone (Phommachalin) Green from Laos make up the second panel of Johnson's mural.

The third portion of the mural introduces views of Chen (Wang) Dade from China, Rudolpho Martinez from Mexico, Kate (Woolever) Martinez and Ikraan Mohamed from Pelican Rapids and Otto Bernard Johnson from Sweden — the artist's great grandfather.

The completed work features a teacher, a janitor, a toddler, a high school sophomore, veterans, manual workers and factory workers, business owners, college graduates and store clerks — their lives intertwined by the common yearning for peace, community and family — the same attributes Johnson seeks in his life.

The mural, which took around 11 months to complete, was presented to the community at the Pelican Rapids International Friendship Festival. In the crowd were a few familiar faces, such as Zavala.

Johnson explains art as a spiritual experience for him, described as a connection to God that inspires him to "just go." Through creating this piece he gained friends, understanding and a greater pride in the community he is part of. "You know, we create because we're created, and that is a connection that is always there."