

# Paint a bus? (Spray) can do

By Lara Gerrits - The Tri-City News - March 28, 2008

Frank Bakota is a graffiti artist who is putting his talent to productive use. Instead of tagging the side of a building, Bakota is painting a bus used by PoCoMo Youth Services Society as a mobile outreach service to connect to Tri-City young people.

Frank Bakota slumps over the arm of a couch, the oversized hood of a sweatshirt hiding his dark eyes, which flutter and are nearly closed.

His arm is perched beside him, purple-stained fingertips dangling in the air.

He doesn't speak unless asked to. Even then, his words are marred by slurring or the occasional groan.

The last three days for the 19-year-old have been filled with concentration, precarious body positions and toxic fumes.

Bakota is exhausted.

Aside from a few friends, nobody knows he has spent hours at a time navigating precise lines with a spray-paint can. When he's done, many will.

His work — which, during his younger days marred the side of a building or even a lamp standard — will be featured on a moving canvas that will be seen by hundreds of people every day.

His intricate, colourful designs are emblazoned across a shuttle bus used by the PoCoMo Youth Services Society for its Project Reach Out. As part of the program, a 27-foot bus is converted into a mobile drop-in centre to allow youth workers to connect with youngsters on their turf: skateboard parks, convenience stores, community centres and parks.

Bakota has managed to transform graffiti — associated with vandalism — into something positive, and he hopes to inspire that possibility in the youth who see his work.

"I come from PoCo, exactly where they come from, and I'm using the same spray paint can that they are," he says while taking a break from painting at Touch of Glass Custom Ironworks, whose owner Hooman Mihanyar donated space required for the project to proceed.

Bakota is using vivid colours like orange, blue and purple for his design, based on the PoCoMo logo of body silhouettes encased within a globe — but with an urban twist.

Three years ago, PoCoMo executive director Jerome Bouvier took a chance on Bakota, then 16, and let him paint the society's first outreach bus. At the time, Bakota didn't know much about the society's services but jumped at the opportunity to put his passion into practice. Now that he's involved with PoCoMo, he wishes its mobile outreach was available to him when he was younger, and hopes it will continue to be there for his siblings and relatives.

"Now I understand more what it's out there for," he said. "More buses like this is a good idea."

In addition to fostering respect for the bus, the graffiti design also prompts interest in the outreach program.

"When the kids see this, right away their curiosity piques — everybody's curiosity piques," Bouvier said.

While the latest bus acquisition is a replacement, an additional bus will be added to the road before summer so service levels can be doubled on busy nights. And when the new bus is purchased, Bakota won't be painting it alone.

He'll be heading up a mentorship program to help up-and-coming graffiti artists find positive opportunities for their work. As for his future, Bakota hopes to become a professional tattoo and graffiti artist.

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