



A Journey of a Thousand Miles Begins with One Step

by *Bonnie Cohen*

Photography by Jennifer Brown

The Adler Aphasia Center in Maywood, New Jersey, provides help for those living with aphasia and their caregivers. To celebrate their 15th anniversary, I was commissioned to design a mosaic mural to honor their generous donors and founders, Elaine and Mike Adler.

My inspiration for the design was a quote from Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu: "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." I envisioned a winding pathway through a garden of mosaic flowers that the members would be able to create. The design also included a donor recognition area and a tribute to the founders. The staff wanted the mural to welcome every person who walked through their doors with positive, healing energy.

Therapeutic Art

This was one of the most rewarding projects I've ever worked on, because everyone who participated saw how art can bring people together to heal, to energize, and to bring joy into their lives. The professional staff helped me understand the physical limitations of their members and told me about the innovative and therapeutic programming conducted at the center every day that includes crafts, cooking, games, computer, drama club, and yoga. Most importantly, though, it's a place where members can meet other people who are facing similar challenges and become part of a supportive and healing community.



Bonnie Cohen (second from left) guides participants in the mosaic process.

I experimented with materials and techniques that would make the project as stress free as possible for the members and chose an adhesive mesh material that made it easy to place the tiles with only one hand and eliminated the need to use glue. I created several patterns to use as a starting point, and we taped the sticky mesh over the patterns allowing the participants to create their own unique flower designs.

With helpful staff suggestions, I recorded an instructional video with clear, simple directions and samples of the mosaic flowers that we would create together. In it, I spoke about the mural and showed how the flower motifs would be integrated into the design, then demonstrated how to place the tiles using the previously created patterns. The video ended by repeating the quote that would be featured in the artwork—with a slight modification. "A journey of a thousand miles begins with one single *tile*."



Completed mural installed at Adler Aphasia Center.

Working Together

All the tiles and supplies were shipped to New Jersey, and when I arrived for the two-day artist in residency, I met with the staff and volunteers to demonstrate the process. They helped precut some of the tiles, and we set up an exciting and colorful display of tiles on long tables, like a smorgasbord. When the members arrived, they looked like kids in a candy shop, grabbing handfuls of their favorite colors and shapes to create their flower motifs.

Seventy members created flowers during the two days, and each member was assisted by a volunteer. We shared pizza for lunch and a delicious potluck dinner prepared by all the dedicated volunteers. A videographer followed us around and documented the whole project for the gala event when the completed mural would be revealed. The video contains inspiring comments by some of the members about making their flowers. After two exciting days, we packed and shipped over 70 flower motifs back to my studio in Ohio, where I added mosaic leaves, stems, and background colors to complete the picture. I collaborated with The Welch Sign Company of Portland, Maine, which engineered and constructed the frames for the art and donor plaques, ultimately assembling and installing the finished project.

Connecting by Skype

The Adler Center offers a Skype class, and we thought it would be meaningful for some of the members to see how I was putting the mural together in my studio. The staff e-mailed me short biographies about the people who were in the class so I could prepare personal questions and help them ask their own questions about the artwork. This exemplifies the extraordinary level of caring and skill that takes place at the center, which produces healing and thoughtful efforts to help members enhance their lives.

Executive Director Karen Tucker said: "We love how the wall has inspired our donors, the pride the members have taken in pointing out the flowers they crafted, and the warm and welcoming feeling it exudes when any person walks into the center. The process and the wall you and the members and volunteers have created say so much about who we are and how we want all those who enter our program to feel as they navigate life with aphasia."

The two days exceeded all my expectations. The energy and enthusiasm of the members moved me beyond words, and that is a heartfelt compliment to a group of 70 people who struggle with their words every minute of the day. It was a true testament to the healing power of art and the sheer joy that comes with creating something beautiful with your own hands. Adler's words, upon



Detail of mural installed at Adler Aphasia Center.

seeing the completed mural, said it all: "It is *exactly* what I wished for—a **happy wall!**" I was truly honored to be able to help create this "happy wall," which has already inspired significant donations to help sustain the wonderful programming that the center offers.

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Bonnie Cohen is an award-winning designer specializing in large-scale mosaic art, donor recognition, and collaborative art projects. She helps translate her clients' stories and visions into inspiring art that captures the heart and soul of a community. Her work combines recycled glass mosaics with her unique handmade tiles. Find more of Cohen's work at www.bonniecohen.com.

Visit www.americanmosaics.org for more information on the Society of American Mosaic Artists and its goals.

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