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Faces in the Crowd
Characters Take Shape in the Omaha Mural Project's "Fertile Ground"

WHAT: The Omaha Mural Project's "Fertile Ground"

WHO: Muralist Meg Saligman, the Bemis Center and the Peter Kiewit Foundation

WHEN: In progress with a June, 2009 completion date

WHERE: Energy Systems Building, 13th and Webster Streets

Omaha, NE (July 28, 2008) – One by one, the figures are coming into view in "Fertile Ground," the 70-foot tall, 328-foot long mural on the Energy Systems building at 13th and Webster Streets. The Omaha Mural Project, a gift to the city from the Peter Kiewit Foundation that is being managed by the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, will ultimately reveal almost 50 likenesses of real life Omahans in a work that defines how we as a community think about who we are, how we got here and where we are going.

"I saw myself! I saw myself," beamed Keanu Ellefson after visiting internationally acclaimed muralist Meg Saligman at her on-site studio. The five year-old, obviously wrestling with the idea of a larger than life version of himself, was actually viewing a sketch that will be translated into a towering Keanu when the image of the child eventually appears next to a train in the 22,000 square-foot mural.

Keanu, it turns out, stumbled into the project when accompanying his siblings, seven year-old Quincy and ten year-old Annika, both of whom are also in the mural, to their scheduled photo shoot.



Work on the mural *Fertile Ground*, continues in the Studio

"The kids in the mural are a good example of how the process can be a serendipitous one," said Saligman in explaining how she made an impromptu decision to also photograph Keanu that day, a move that transformed him from a tag-along to a titan of the playground circuit. "The design, in the end, has everything to do with content and composition, but sometimes it comes down to being struck by a particularly beautiful photograph and deciding that I simply must find a way to work it in."

Because the characters in "Fertile Ground" represent a cross section of the community, one may think that the selection process driving who "made the cut" in such an important public art project would be a thoroughly deliberate, almost scientific one. Not necessarily so, explained the artist. "You'd be surprised that after hundreds of photographs, the diversity, breadth and depth

of the people of Omaha just sort of naturally worked itself out as I composed the mural," the Philadelphia artist said. "It all came together beautifully and I'm just super impressed with how genuine people are here. They were all so willing to share themselves and their stories with me in a very moving and meaningful way."

What may still be a rather abstract notion to Keanu is not at all lost on his sister, Annika, who fully understands that a frozen-in-time representation of herself will survive the years in what will be one of the largest murals in the country when it is completed next summer.

"I can't believe I ever looked like that," Annika anticipates saying a decade or two or three from now when visiting the towering image of an earlier version of herself. "I think it will help me feel young again every time I see myself plastered on the huge mural."

Meg Saligman and select characters from "Fertile Ground" are available for media interviews. Arrangements may be made by contacting the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts.

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The Peter Kiewit Foundation
