



# THE DAILY PRESS



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## Bay Area joins tribute to workers who built America



Photo submitted

**MURAL AXE** - Mural artist Ellen Griesedieck (center) is joined by a host of children volunteers in constructing a replica 28-foot-long axe that will represent Wisconsin in a huge 120 foot long mural that honors American worker. The project will use themes from all 50 states; the Wisconsin contribution uses wood donated by American WetWood - Timber Treasures of North America.

American Mural Project to feature locally recovered wood

By RICK OLIVO  
Staff Writer

For more than seven years, Connecticut-based artist Ellen Griesedieck has been working on a dream. Griesedieck, best known for her portraits of American working men and women, is engaged on a massive mural project that aims to celebrate the people who built America from their muscles and sweat as well their skills and imagination. "I had been working with people doing tough, uncom-

promising work in copper mines and orange groves, driving cabs and doing open-heart surgery and I realized these men and women were heroes to me. I decided to do a painting — a big painting — paying tribute to this American energy," Griesedieck said. That quest, to construct a massive 120-foot-long, five-story-high mural of paint, fiberglass, aluminum, fabric, ceramic and glass representing a celebration of American ingenuity, productivity and commitment to work came to Ashland Friday. As part of the project, Griesedieck plans to use elements representative of all 50 states. For Wisconsin, she

plans to use a double-bitted axe recalling the state's lumbering era and paying homage to the thousands who continue to make their living in the state's forest-related industries.

In keeping with the heroic scale of the project, the axe replica to be used in the painting is a giant 28 feet in length, and also in keeping with the theme, uses recycled timber from the Ashland firm Timber Treasures of North America. The wood elements have been fashioned from wood that has been salvaged from Lake Superior, said American WetWood owner Scott Mitchen.

On Friday, a group of over 30 area children volunteers helped Griesedieck assemble the massive painting element, as well as a second replica that will remain at American WetWood's headquarters at 310 Stuntz Avenue in Ashland.

Griesedieck said an integral part of the project was to involve children in the creation of the various elements of the mural, to teach them something about the nature of the work ethic; its value and how it has made America great.

"We are the hardest working country in the world," she said. "It's time for a little mind check."

She said the effort by the Ashland kids was impressive. "They spent about four hours in the sun making these 20-foot axes," she said. "Then they threw all this patina on them; that was definitely the fun part."

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## MURAL: Interactive art will take seven years to complete

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Griesedieck said the Ashland effort would blend in with the rest of the elements to create a whole greater than the sum of its parts, much like the United States itself.

"What you are going to see are 50 exemplary state projects that really offer a tribute to work that is done in a wonderful way in this country," she said.

Griesedieck said she found out about Mitchen's efforts to recover sunken logs from an article in Smithsonian Magazine.

"I said, oh my God, we have got to get some of this wood," she said. "This is the history of our country in logging and wood-working," she said.

Griesedieck said she called Scott "out of the blue" and the two hit it off immediately. He quickly agreed to be associated with the project, and in fact serves on the American Mural Project's board along with luminaries including Paul Newman.

Wisconsin is the 12th state to have an element completed for the mural.

"We've already had 10,000 people work on the mural; if there ever was a portrait of America, here it is."

Griesedieck said the mural was intended to be as much about America's future as its

"This is really a project for everybody. We have had volunteers from eight to 80. It's such a high to work on it," she said.

Griesedieck says "optimistically" it will take another seven years to complete. In addition to developing the mural, she has had to work on raising the \$2.5 million needed to prepare the former Winstead, Connecticut mill where the work will be housed.

She said the axe will be "front and center" in the mural.

"Nobody is going to miss what these kids worked on today," she said.

Mitchen said the choice of an axe was singularly appropriate to represent Wisconsin in the mural.

"What better profession to represent the builders of America than the lumber industry that built America and fueled the industrial revolution," he said. Mitchen noted that his firm, recovering timber lost over a century ago, was also an appropriate choice, because it pointed towards a future where resources are reused, recycled and where sustainability is a keyword.

"It is a tribute to the men who went into the woods for a dollar a day. And now their



Rick Olivo/Staff Photo

**PROJECT COMMENDED** — Wisconsin State Assembly member Gary Sherman, D-Port Wing, center, is flanked by American Mural Project artist Ellen Griesedieck and American WetWood representative Scott Mitchen as he presents the pair with a commendation from the state legislature in recognition of the American Mural Project. Sherman made the award Friday in Ashland, following the crafting of a 28-foot replica axe that will represent the state in the five-story-tall mural.

past. "In everything we are doing, we are trying to say 'Look at how many frontiers there are left. Look at what your ancestors did, but look how much there is for you to do,'" she said.

When completed, the mural will be an interactive piece, with children able to touch it, to wonder at the sophisticated engineering it took to construct it, to view the autographs of professional athletes and to see the names of the thousands who made it a reality.

efforts are being used for an educational purpose; that effort did not go in vain," he said.

"This project says there are so many ways we can find frontiers today," Griesedieck said. "It represents a tribute and a challenge to kids."

*Editor's Note:* For more information about the American Mural Project including a view of the projected completed project, log onto [www.americanmuralproject.org](http://www.americanmuralproject.org) on the World Wide Web.