

'Soul poles' spread throughout Victoria

By Danielle Pope - Monday Magazine

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Painting project brings new energy to Fernwood residents

It started out as a response to vandalism. Now, those stenciled pansies, poppies, sunflowers and daisies that mark hydro poles have become a fixture in the Fernwood community for the last three years. And, this year, those painted wild flowers could spread even further.

The Fernwood "Pole Painting Project" began in 2008 by artist Beth Threlfall after she attended a community lecture about neighbourhood livability and beautification. This year, the Fernwood Neighbourhood Resource Group has adopted the project in a May 28 event. Already 60 people have signed up to paint, and 40 members of Telus are heading out to join the efforts — a long way from Threlfall's solo mission.

"I came out of that 2008 talk pretty jazzed and I thought, what's one thing that catches my eye in this community — the telephone poles," Threlfall says. "It really bothered me that there was this blight that came out in our neighbourhood through tagging and vandalism, and I wanted to do something to change that."

Threlfall asked BC Hydro for permission to paint just the poles in front of her own house. After some consideration they granted her request, and soon after she had stenciled floral designs on her own hydro poles, neighbours were requesting she bring the same energy to theirs.

"It was wonderful! I was meeting neighbours I had never seen before, who stopped to ask what I was doing, and cars were going past, honking in approval," she says, adding that she calls her works "soul poles."

Still, not everyone was thrilled with the art. One neighbour would paint the poles, and Threlfall's work, in black, which would then often be retagged and vandalized. Threlfall kept returning to the poles and repainting them, until she finally caught the unsatisfied neighbour in the act and explained her mission

and the fact that she had permission.

"Some people definitely prefer to have a clean look, and we're telling people that even on painting day we will respect anyone who doesn't want their pole painted," Threlfall says. "So many people love it, though, and it brings a real vibe to the community."

While the project remains a thrill to Threlfall, she's happy and relieved that the neighbourhood group has stepped in to make the event official and turn it into something even bigger than she ever could have done alone.

"There are thousands of poles in the Victoria area, and I would walk past and see these tagged poles and feel this sense of duty — oh my god, I have to tend to that pole," Threlfall says. "It is a non-intrusive way to brighten up any neighbourhood."

For the Saturday event, all supplies are being provided by the Fernwood Neighbourhood Resource Group, with paint collected from donations and the reusable refuge at Heartland Landfill. There will be musical entertainment and a BBQ after, and even non-Fernwood residents are invited.

"It's evolved into this larger than life project, and we've had such huge support from the community on this," says Mila Czemerzys, project organizer. "We're really putting all our resources into this, and we'd like to see it continue. It fits within our values so well, and it's going to be a lot of fun."

Pole projects have cropped up in other areas of Victoria as well, and some



Pole artist Beth Threlfall beautifies a hydro pole with art.

Sharon Tiffin

of Threlfall's work can be seen in Oak Bay, James Bay and Quadra area.

However, Threlfall adds that there are still challenges to be dealt with.

"Unfortunately, pole painting is not a solution," she says. "I still have to re-touch my poles at least twice a year due to tagging ... It would be marvelous if everyone would recognize and protect our community by getting involved." M

Event

Join in the fun on May 28, 10 am to 2 pm, starting at Fernwood Square. Paint and materials will be provided, no painting experience necessary. For more info, visit fernwoodnrg.ca