

Bringing hopeful images to dull walls

A column written by *Lancaster Newspapers'* columnist, Jeff Hawkes,

Brian is a pale, introspective 14-year-old boy from Columbia who got in trouble and found himself last month locked behind concrete block walls on the Sunnyside peninsula.

The walls of the Youth Intervention Center effectively isolated Brian and several dozen other teens. The walls also enforced control and drove home the hard reality of detention.

But then artist Eli (short for Elisabeth) Weaver showed up.

She brought brushes, paint and a chalk string line to YIC's austere, windowless cafeteria. And she talked to Brian and other YIC residents about doing something to a wall that had never happened at YIC.

She said they were going to turn it into a mural.

Working together, Weaver said, they were going to take a 30-by-8-foot cafeteria wall of unrelieved beige and transform it into a stirring, colorful and permanent work of art. The monthlong project would be driven by the residents' ideas and talents, and the finished piece would attempt to say something meaningful to those who encountered it.

That quickly, Weaver had Brian's attention.

"I am a creative person," he told me. "Working on the mural has helped me be even more creative."

Not every resident was as confident, and Weaver sensed the hesitancy. "It's daunting when you start with (drawings on) paper and are looking at a 30-foot-long wall," she said.

But the process of engaging troubled kids who've been separated from family and friends and who are on edge about their loss of freedom

mattered as much to Weaver as the project's outcome.

She teamed with Scott Feifer, an English teacher and longtime volunteer writing instructor at YIC, to develop the mural's theme of transformation. Feifer encouraged the kids to write about the metaphorical walls they've experienced. From those writings came images and phrases to incorporate into the mural.

Eighteen-year-old Sanchez -- for this story, I'm not using residents' real names -- saw quiet kids in his unit grow more at ease with expressing themselves as the mural progressed. Walls they had thrown up started to crumble.

Credit for giving the kids the experience of creating a mural goes to the nonprofit ArtSmart program. Its volunteers regularly visit YIC to share their love of art and to nurture creativity.

Sixteen-year-old Stacey said meeting Weaver, Feifer and other volunteers helped her gain a new perspective on her struggles with anger and to envision a better life.

She said working on the still-unnamed mural -- with its message of moving from darkness to light, from confinement to freedom -- made her see how walls are surmountable. "I'm not sure where I'm headed from here," she said, "but I'm sure it's somewhere bright."

Inexperienced hands that sketched the drawings and applied the paint brought the wall to life with an array of arresting images -- from handcuffs to a bandaged heart to a phoenix.

But while the mural is raw and unpolished, it reflects a beauty found in all great works of art: an attempt to grapple in honest terms with the human condition.

Or as Stacey put it: "A part of me is on that wall."