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# Art Project To Solicit Thoughts On Goals And Dreams

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Sarah Mannes Homstad and Amy Miner are not gloomy people. In fact, they are quite the opposite.

So don't get the wrong idea if you hear them repeatedly say, "Before I die..."

The two Yankton women have been spearheading a community interactive art project that gets people to reflect on their mortality while also encouraging them to live out their dreams.

Having recently met their fundraising goal to purchase materials, the plan is to erect the project next week near the Meridian Bridge.

The idea behind the "Before I Die" wall Mannes and Miner have advocated for was born in New Orleans with artist Candy Chang.

After she lost someone close to her, Chang transformed an abandoned house into a fill-in-the-blank chalkboard for people to reflect on their lives and share their personal aspirations in a public space.

The idea caught on with others and has been done in New York City; Washington, D.C.; Berlin, Germany; Des Moines, Iowa; and Melbourne, Australia, among other places. A writer for *The Atlantic* called it "one of the most creative community projects ever."

Homstad said that, when she saw the project on a design blog, it was an inspirational bolt of lightning.

"It wasn't, 'I want to do this,'" she recalled. "It was, 'We need to do this!'"

Homstad, a Yankton Area Arts (YAA) board member, had already been brainstorming with YAA Executive Director Miner about possible community projects. They both agreed that "Before I Die" was worth pursuing.

The same person could blow the project off while walking past it on a Monday, and on Tuesday that individual could have a very profound reaction to it depending on intervening life events, Homstad mused.

"Every single person is at a different point in their lives at that moment (they encounter the wall) than they would be a day from now or five days from now," she said.

It also builds community, an important goal for YAA.

"There are people who will communicate with each other on the



PHOTO: TREVOR COE (SAVANNAH, GA.)

board and never speak in real life," Miner said. "That's pretty cool."

One of the attractive aspects of it is that it is simple to execute, Homstad and Miner said.

A 32-foot by 4-foot plywood wall will be erected with the words "Before I die I want to \_\_\_\_\_" stenciled on it. It will be installed on the northern edge of the lower deck of the Meridian Bridge. Chalk will be available for people to write in their thoughts.

"There has been an urgency to get it done," Homstad said.

Added Miner, "We're not willing to go on a five-year plan."

Not all members of the community were as instantly sold on the idea as Homstad and Miner. When the idea was brought before the city's Park Advisory Board by Parks and Recreation Director Todd Larson, it did not receive support.

Homstad and Mannes were not deterred.

"When we initially got a little push-back, it forced us to think about how badly we wanted to do this," Homstad said. "That was really helpful, because it made it obvious we were willing to champion the project."

At a later meeting where Homstad and Miner appeared to answer questions, the advisory board gave it unanimous approval.

The project was then taken to the Yankton City Commission, where commissioners had many

concerns about graffiti and foul language. Homstad and Miner assured commissioners that they would check the board early every morning. If a vandal uses paint, the plywood can simply be painted over, they added.

The commission voted 7-2 to allow the installation to go for a month before reviewing it for a second 30 days.

"It's set to go for a month, and then we'll review how it's going. The plan is to leave it up for two months," Miner said. "It is an installation that is temporary. That is part of the idea. It's ephemeral. Nothing lasts. We don't last. It's the whole metaphor for the project."

Along the way, the organizers plan to document it in both pictures and film. Photos will be posted on the Yankton section of beforeidie.cc, the official site for the global art project. At the conclusion of the installation in Yankton, a film will be assembled about it.

"It can become a part of the history of Yankton," Homstad said. "In 2012, this happened. This is what people were thinking." I'm excited about that."

While not the smallest community to undertake the project, Yankton is dwarfed by the size of many of the cities that have participated so far. Part of the appeal was bringing a "big-city idea" to Yankton, ac-



KELLY HERTZ/P&D

"Before I Die," an interactive exhibit in which the public is asked what they wish to accomplish "before they die," is scheduled to be displayed in Yankton, possibly as early as next week.

Yankton Area Arts recently completed a fund drive to raise money for the project. LEFT: YAA Executive Director Amy Miner, left, and YAA board member Sarah Mannes Homstad are spearheading the project, which will be on display in Yankton for at least one month, including during the Riverboat Days celebration. The project will be erected near the north entrance of the Meridian Bridge's lower deck. ABOVE: A photo from a similar "Before I Die" exhibit in Savannah, Ga.



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