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Save the murals: The handprints, 1970

The Preservation Society of Chapel Hill is dedicated to saving those things that make Chapel Hill unique. The society is asking the community to help preserve these community treasures by e-mailing thoughts about them to savethemurals@mail.com. If the society gets enough support it plans to create an "Adopt a Mural" program, allowing the public to save their favorite mural.



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More Save the Murals

Artist's statement by Michael Brown

The handprints mural, on West Franklin Street, was painted in 1990. It is on the Chapel Hill Cleaners. I wanted to do something much different from the first one (which had been representational).

I figured if I repeated myself Chapel Hill might get pretty bored with murals in a hurry. So I decided I should do something abstract and process oriented. I also had a number of elementary school-age volunteers that I needed to keep entertained for a whole Saturday.

I was struggling for an idea when an old childhood memory came to me. I used to enjoy walking past Sloan's Drug Store because you could still see some faded Carolina blue hand prints put there by students after Carolina's 1957 National Championship win.

Eureka! Even a first-grader can make a handprint.

At that time, the cleaners was owned by Robert Humphries. (He and I went on to form a close association, and I feel that he deserves at least as much credit as I do for all these murals.) I ran the idea past Robert. He thought it was pretty darn funny that in his business he spent all day trying to get smudges and handprints out, and I was proposing putting them all over his building! I used handprints of about 50 kids, and some of their parents to paint the mural. By the time it was nearly done I was acting like the Chapel Hill version of Tom Sawyer. I got numerous passers by, some town officials, a prominent musician, all to make their mark. I even got one Carolina basketball player. You'd be surprised how hard it is to talk some people into dipping their hands in a bucket of paint. I'm really glad I talked him into it, though, because it seemed to bring the mural full circle.

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