



Riverdale Immigrant Women's Centre

1326 Gerrard Street East. Toronto. ON M4L 1Z1. Tel: 416.465.6021. Fax: 416.465.3224

Regarding the GerrardART Project

The Riverdale Immigrant Women's Centre has been a vital organization in the Gerrard Bazaar community for over 30 years on issues of settlement, violence against women and children, women's equality, social justice and community bridge building. It is a very sad day when we hear that members of our communities are sowing seeds of dissent and discord with their opposition to a mural painted by community artists on the walls next door to our organization.

Individual and community empowerment is the basis of our existence. The programs at RIWC are focused on moving women and their families out of poverty by supporting their entry into the job market, offering training and skill development through social enterprises in order to move marginalized women and youth towards economic-self sufficiency and agency.

One thing our role as community stewards has given us is an acute understanding of the ill effects that fear, mistrust and ignorant assumptions can have on the delicate process of building trust, reconciliation and unity between different peoples. Unfortunately, over the past few days – whether ignorantly or with malicious intent – some have been claiming, both in the press and through an online petition, that a “Mosque has managed to obtain city funding to paint a jihadi battle cry as a mural on its wall”.

It is demoralizing and frankly dangerous when a progressive and constructive organization that deals with issues of religious oppression, domestic and systemic violence towards women on a daily basis, one that encounters and challenges fundamentalist thinking and is often victimized by it, is accused of promoting a mural that is purported to be a call to arms against such goals and against the diverse communities that help to achieve them.

We wish to correct the mistaken impressions of those who have spoken out against the mural in question.

The mural was not commissioned by a mosque. In fact, this particular wall is only one part of a broader, block-encompassing series of murals, created through the GerrardART project. This project, designed to enhance the Gerrard Bazaar neighbourhood, was undertaken by our organization in concert with the City of Toronto's StreetART division, and was also generously supported by paint donations from Dulux. GerrardART was the product of more than a year of community consultations, which included input from local residents, landlords, business owners, BIA members, city officials, public servants, artists, community-based groups, and many other stakeholders. The aim of this project was to counter vandalism, increase traffic to the area and generally promote local economic development in order to catalyze the revitalization of our community. The extent of community input and excitement about the project meant that the

mural series as a whole went through more than 20 renderings before being finalized and completed nearly a year ago.

Despite groundless assertions to the contrary, the specific work in question is an example of our community's devotion to cultural coexistence and synthesis rather than a harbinger of a clash of civilizations. The gifted artists on our project worked from a piece of classic Islamic calligraphy considered by many as an art form, one that can be translated to convey a message of unity through community action. This is the meaning that we as a community assigned to it. It is unfortunate that certain parties, after noting that a mosque happened to rent part of the building adorned by the mural, jumped to false conclusions and then sought to promote those conclusions without consulting with those of us involved in the project and the decision-making. Without doing a shred of research, they assumed incorrectly that this art was commissioned by the mosque, and sensationalized it by imputing nefarious purpose to their chosen culprits.

This “overcoming” or “victory” that is communicated in the mural is not a victory of territory or of one group over another, but rather the shared progress of a community that is unified by and exalted by its diversity, religious and otherwise. This thinking can be seen throughout the entire series of murals, which brings together multiple cultural touchstones and influences from East and West in order to create something new, multi-faceted and uniquely Canadian.

It is our duty as neighbours – and as the group that commissioned the block-spanning series of murals of which this piece is but one part – to set the record straight. We hope that providing the facts surrounding this artwork will enable an honest, open and respectful dialogue among neighbours in the community and the city at large, and free us all to return to the important work of building a more liveable city together.

Sincerely,

The Board of Directors of the Riverdale Immigrant Women's Centre