

The art in the building pays a dividend.

As I parked my car in the lot and headed into the building the other morning, I spotted “The Jill.” I hadn’t seen her for a while and, assuming that she was doing some work for RWA, I headed over to greet her and see how things were going. Jill, a young woman given to wearing tie-dyed and rainbow-colored clothes so reminiscent of an era long faded, at least for me, except in memory, told me she was doing good, that she was doing some work for RWA, that she was wanting to save and get an RV, and that, in general, life was pretty good.

I had met Jill 6 or 7 months ago when she sought me out and asked if I could get a copy of one of the prints on the wall for her, that she really loved this specific print, and would love to have a copy of it so she could put it in her bedroom. At the time that I met her, she was living in one of our sober houses on Union Avenue. I basically said, “Sure, let me see what I can do,” and I asked her to get back to me in a couple of days.

The print that Jill was interested in was one that would take a little time to find in the building, as it was probably on some level, strategically placed in one of the stairwells. The print was one of my favorites, a picture of an old, painted VW “hippie bus,” which hung in the hallway right next to a picture of a young Joan Baez sitting on a beach strumming her guitar. Directly across the stairwell hung an original “McCarthy for President” peace poster. I’d be the first to admit my fondness for the artifacts and icons of that long-ago era.

Anyway, a couple of days passed and I hadn’t seen or run into Jill, then several days after that I got a note from her apologizing for being such a “space cake,” and that she would try to come and see me in the next couple of days.

I didn’t know much about Jill. In fact, I didn’t even go out of my way to find out that much about her except where she was living and that people thought she was doing good, that she was a good “kid,” and a hard worker. When we finally connected, I said, “Come on, let’s take a walk down to where that poster is. So, we walked to one of the less frequently used staircases, walked to the wall where the print hung. I proceeded to take it off its hook, hand it to Jill with the words, “I know you’ll take care of it. It’s all yours.” I think my action stunned her. She didn’t really know what to say. So I just said simply, “Look, I know you really like this. I know you’ll treat it well. There’s just one thing I want to say. There are lot of great things about this time, but one thing that wasn’t so great was the glorification of drugs. And I’d just ask you to remember that.” I guess I said it in sort of a paternalistic way and because I was making some assumptions that maybe she had struggled with the “drug issue” in her past. I’m not even sure it was a correct assumption, but it was one I made. She took that kind of gentle admonition seriously, said she understood, and gave me a sentence or two about her sobriety. We shook hands and I wished her the best of luck and told her to keep in touch.

So, back to the present. Jill looked at me and said, “You know, every time I feel down, I look at the wall in my room, I look at that picture, smile and immediately feel better. Sometimes it helps me get through the day.” I just smiled and gave Jill a thumbs-up as we headed to the separate places in the building that we were going.

You know, when we decided to place art all over the building, we did so for a lot of different reasons. Somehow what Jill articulated and the meaning behind it is, by far, the most important one.

Jim Cuddy

April, 2013