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Suburban artists paint lighthouses for Chicago's Mag Mile display



Video: Lighthouses on The Mag Mile



Katlyn Smith

There's no dangerous coastline near the lighthouse outside Chicago's Hyatt Regency hotel, a deep blue tower without a working lantern.

But the structure, a tactile piece with Braille stamped on the side, serves as a navigational aid nonetheless, directing Michigan Avenue shoppers, tourists and anyone else who encounters it to the work of a nonprofit group that employs people who are blind and would otherwise struggle to find jobs.

Wheaton artist [Anne Hanley](http://cj-hungerman.squarespace.com/) (<http://cj-hungerman.squarespace.com/>) painted the stark-white, 6-foot-tall lighthouse that landed in her garage more than a month ago with a playful, underwater scene: A school of orange fish wraps around the base, one wearing a pair of blue glasses and reading a yellow book of "Fish Tales."

The Chicago Lighthouse display along the Magnificent Mile and nearby streets features the work of Hanley, other

suburban artists and nationally known painters. After the outdoor art exhibit ends in August, the 51 lighthouses will be auctioned to raise money for the [social service group \(https://chicagolighthouse.org/\)](https://chicagolighthouse.org/) for kids and adults with visual impairments.

The lighthouses communicate empowering messages about access and inclusion in the arts, workforce and education. More than 100 artists contributed to the project, 55 of whom have a disability.

"They are gorgeous sculptures, works of art. Many of the artists are renowned fine artists, and so they're exquisite," Lighthouse President and CEO Janet Szlyk said.

But their works are not just beautiful monuments. The lighthouses tell a story about a lifeline -- a beacon of hope, shall we say -- for disabled and veteran communities.

Sharing the story



Janet Szlyk, The Chicago Lighthouse president and CEO, poses with one of the sculptures and the artist who designed it, Diane Rakocy. -

Courtesy of Jessica Grant for The Chicago Lighthouse

The "Lighthouses on The Mag Mile" exhibit is a celebration of a 112-year-old organization, but it's also a personal one for Szlyk, who in August will mark a decade at the helm of the Lighthouse.

"This is really the largest awareness-building initiative in The Chicago Lighthouse's history, looking back at the archives and comparing it," Szlyk said. "We knew we had done a lot to increase employment, and that is one of our major missions here.

"And in the past five years, we've gone from over 200 employees to over 1,200 people who now receive a Lighthouse paycheck. But still it was a story a lot of people didn't know about."

Inspiration for the project struck Szlyk about a year ago on a Saturday in August, when she was walking down Michigan Avenue, captivated by a display of German shepherd sculptures that were later auctioned to support families of fallen police officers.

She remembered the widely popular cow sculptures that popped up in 1999 and the joy it brought to her young daughter at the time.

"I thought, what about lighthouses? It really makes a lot of sense," she said.

There were some early naysayers who thought the project was "just repeating what others had done."

"But I thought that if you're going to reach a lot of people, we've got to do something big, and it certainly will reach the millions of tourists that come through our city," she said.



The lighthouses have become a popular photo op along the Magnificent Mile. - Courtesy of Othervertical for The Chicago Lighthouse

Szlyk was proved right. Nearly four dozen sponsors supported the project, and the lighthouses have become a popular Mag Mile photo op.

In an industrial building in Chicago's medical district, the Lighthouse is a hub of activity housing one of the oldest low-vision clinics in the country, a cafeteria and a clock factory where the majority of employees are legally blind.

The Lighthouse also runs Illinois Tollway customer service call centers staffed by a largely veteran and visually impaired workforce.

At an unveiling of the Mag Mile lighthouses, Szlyk and board member David Huber expressed hope the display would lead other employers to follow the nonprofit's example.

"People with disabilities can do just about anything if given a chance, and they are some of the most productive and efficient employees you'll encounter," said Huber, who cannot see out of his right eye.

He sponsored the marquee piece by Jeff Hanson, a painter who is legally blind and made national headlines for using his art to raise \$1 million for charity before he turned 20.

"This event means to me that you can use your disability to make awareness for others," Hanson said.

The artists

The influence for Hanley's fish-reading theme wasn't too personal for the Wheaton bookworm -- it's "to be enjoyed by



Wheaton artist Anne Hanley molded figurines of fish and stamped Braille around her lighthouse, adding a tactical experience so that people who are visually impaired and blind can appreciate it.

- Courtesy of Anne Hanley

hopefully a diverse audience," she said -- but it also happens to focus attention on the Lighthouse's educational arm and a preschool for kids with vision problems.

For his vibrant lighthouse near the Chicago Athletic Association hotel, [CJ Hungerman](#) used techniques of his mentors.



Geneva artist CJ Hungerman used a bold color palette to draw attention to the work of The Chicago Lighthouse with his 6-foot-tall structure. - Courtesy of CJ Hungerman

The Geneva man struggled with drinking in the early 2000s but had friends who were graffiti artists and "helped me understand where I was going in my life other than down," Hungerman said.

"The brightness and brilliance and the intensity of their trademark -- that's them," he said. "That's their whole being."

His lighthouse, titled "Can I: I Can," reflects that same intensity in

shades of pink and blue and yellow.

"The medley of colors and intermingling shapes represents the diversity of people that reside in our communities," an artist description (<https://lighthousesonmagmile.com/gallery-artists/>) reads.

Art instructor Kristin Haas and six students at Oakton Community College in Des Plaines -- Allie Huffman, Larsa Kena, Brenda Mejia, Christina Mihalopoulos, Erin Conoboy and Shane Tolentino -- are the creative forces behind the structure they called "Be the Light" (<https://www.instagram.com/occlighthouse/>).

"It was easy for them to work together and come up with great ideas and encourage each other and support each other," said Haas, a Glenview artist. "Those are all the things the Chicago Lighthouse does."

If you listen to a self-guided, audio tour for the display, you'll hear her students talk about their creative process and color scheme, the symbolism of the five hands painted on the body of the lighthouse to spell "peace" in sign language.

But the students could be speaking for all the artists when they end their narration with this:

"Everyone who sees our project can be a light."



"Be A Light" is the title of the lighthouse painted by students and their professor, Kristin Haas, at Oakton Community College in Des Plaines. - Courtesy of Kristin Haas

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