

ChalkUNITY; Bringing Communities Together through Art
Written by Sandy Forseth, Community Mandala Specialist
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What can a gal with a piece of chalk, a pivot, a paint brush, paint and a community make together? A Community Mandala full of magical, present moment fun! Now more than ever, we need ChalkUNITY around such simple, mandala goodness! The word “mandala” is Sanskrit another word meaning ‘circle’ or a sacred circle representing wholeness. The center of a mandala is called “the seed”, where the mandala grows from the inside out. A community mandala is a place where kids of all ages, abilities and backgrounds can gather & participate, be present in the moment, add color & have fun. They are ageless, inclusive & universal. Spontaneous moments of laughter, singing, dancing & running have been known to happen. However, one of my favorite sights on the mandala is an empty wheelchair, which means a child is actively engaged on the community mandala. Or when a young gal using a walker, sees the community mandala ahead & RUNS fast, with a huge smile on her face. Chalk sticks are provided for adaptability to aid participants in wheelchairs or walkers to reach the pavement. Anything goes on the mandala, so long as you respect others, their art, and blend your own art.



Mandala's are more than a simple shape though. Mandala's are characterized by their radial symmetry, which is a central point that radiates outward. Geometric shapes, sacred geometry, pattern of concentric circles, and attention to symmetry make them pleasing to the eye. In many ways, mandala's mimic the patterns & symmetry we commonly find in nature; such as a snowflake, flowers, tree stump rings, pinecones, and some fruits.

Carolyn Vinup, Sound Healer with Gateways to Brilliance, refers to the center of the mandala's as a 'portal' of energy, light & love, similar to the center of a labyrinth. Some people believe a labyrinth to be the same as maze, however, they are very different. One walks a labyrinth meditatively, with intention to the center & back out again. A labyrinth has symmetry, equal turns left & right, which creates calmness in our mind. When you travel, check out the www.labyrinthlocator.com, as labyrinths can be found worldwide & honor the mindfulness moments across the globe. A maze is a puzzle which one has to find a way.



Mandalas clearly play an important role in cultures all around the world, and act as a symbol of wholeness, something we often forget in our hectic lives. Often mandalas are used for meditation or for marking a sacred, spiritual space. Different cultures use different materials. Tibetan monks carefully create mandala's with intention by placing colored sand, and then the wind naturally takes the work of art away, which represents the 'impermanence' in life. In India, Rincoli is a mandala made from rice flour on the front doorstep of a home to bring blessing to all those within. In Buddhism, a mandala created, called a thangka is hung near the front door for protection. Mandalas are also produced in Africa, Egypt, Nepal, China, Japan, Bhutan, and Indonesia. Other cultural mandalas or sacred geometry are Celtic, Christian (prayer mandala), Hindu, Native American & Om mandala.

I first became intrigued with the ever popular sand mandala at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts created by the Tibetan monks in collaboration with 3M for preservation in 1991. This introduction laid the groundwork well, in combination with my study of Feng Shui, half a dozen trips to Asia, natural interest in Eastern thought, & learning about the Chinese elements.

About 7 years ago, I began volunteering for the inaugural Chalkfest at Arbor Lakes, Maple Grove, Minnesota. This event welcomed chalk artists from all over the United States & a few international artists. Each artist receives a 10 X 10 foot square & the final art projects were jaw dropping. The volunteering encouraged my creative side to emerge & I began saying "yes" to additional creative opportunities. Shawn McCann, Creative Director of the Chalkfest, knew of my professional work with children & families & provided the invitation, space & opportunity to create & learn, grow & tweak the community art piece. I am forever grateful. Thank you also to Marlon Yanes, for capturing the drone photographs, which bring a different perspective. This year, traditional recess was reimaged at an elementary school, by adding a mandala next to the hopscotch & four square.

"With my head, heart & hands, I make a difference." Stated the same, but differently, "With my mind, spirit & body, I make a difference" - Sandy

The mandala art I create is art that represents finding balance & openness, including mind, body & spirit ways. As I create "I find the flow" by being in the zen moment & integrating thought process with creating. From studying Feng Shui, I seek balance & harmony by including each of the Chinese elements; fire, earth, metal, water and wood. This can be accomplished with shapes/symbols or color. For example, to include the element of water, a shape like a wave is added, which creates a sense of movement on the mandala. A flag adds movement as well, blowing in the wind. These symbols tend to 'spin' a mandala & add dimension and emotion.

Mind, body & spirit ways have been an integral part of my practice with pediatric patients, siblings & caregivers I worked with as a Certified Child Life Specialist in the hospital setting. Whether teaching about ways to use one's breath to center, relax & when feeling afraid, or guided imagery, going to a favorite place in our mind to increase coping during a medical procedure & about the calmness one can find as a result of a walk/journey on a labyrinth.

Mind - Mindful. Open to ideas through creation. Shapes come to me to be included from the time of scheduling the installation. I also seek inspiration from the shapes in the community, which then personalizes the mandala. The 55th Annual Red Wing Fall Arts Festival hosted its first community mandala last year. The center of the mandala was . . . wings! A recent installation had a tree in the center, which was the seed of the mandala. The tree provided shade & a whimsical, playful environment ensued while creating a mandala like a fairy garden. Fairy-Dala seemed fitting for the title.

Body - The creative process is a circular cycle. The actual creating from the open phase to vision phase, engaging phase & sustaining phase, which is bringing it into being & lastly, the mapping phase. The supplies are simple; I work with chalk, a pivot, paint & imagination.

Spirit - Both the community spirit & present moment, here & now spirit. This is best story to represent this point: In 2021, Downtown Minneapolis hosted a community mandala as part of the Downtown Street Arts festival. Let me set the context; during a pandemic, after the civil unrest in our very own city of Minneapolis. A pregnant woman who spoke English as a second language brought her 2 year old son. He was very engaged in the process & she sat peacefully watching, talking as I continued to enlarge the mandala. After an extensive period of time, she shared . . . "I just don't want to leave, this is the most peaceful I have felt in a very long time." Hold your heart moments happen on the mandala.

A father's offering regarding the community mandala "The children do not need any prompting to join in. The mandala street art invites them to be in the moment, and express that moment in any way imaginable. It is a wonderful vehicle to connect to themselves and to the greater community." - Mark Pekarek. Another father exclaimed "so YOU are the giant color book designer for the community!"

As the mandala evolves, there is a magic of symbolism that happens during the process. The title mysteriously appears at the last addition of circles. The 27 foot mandala in North Dakota because "Doily Dala", as it resembles a doily! This was inspiring to all who watched the evolution.



In fall of 2021, my heart was heavy during the pandemic for the students & teachers headed back to the classroom. This was represented in the mandala created, which became School Dala, 28 feet wide. The finished product & title wondrously, magically & serendipitously reflect my intention, the community & the location I am creating in. Carl Jung stated this "I knew that in finding the mandala as an expression of the self, I had attained what was for me the ultimate."

Now, the community mandala art is my own personal wish of unity for the communities I work within. Kids of all ages & abilities are welcome to join in the fun. They can color a pattern or chose wherever they'd like to create to add color. Each mandala is an extension of my brand - - - "Inspiring the power of community through mindfulness, art, music & play." Come join us on the pavement for some colorFULL, present moment FUN! I hope you find joy!

The number one question at a chalk festival is "what happens when it rains?" On the community mandala, the rain simply washes away the colored chalk. Woolah - - - clean slate & ready to be colored again! This is different than the professional chalk artists, where an entire day's work can wash away due to rain. The chalk art is covered with plastic, & we wait for . . .

"Art is no longer what we want to do, we now do our art to bring the world back to life." - Martin Prechtel.

Every Good Wish,
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