

Street artist takes on MS



Hardships are no match for Lydiaemily's fighting spirit.

by Andrea Sachs

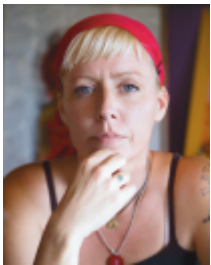


Photo courtesy
of Lydiaemily

Since she became an oil painter 20 years ago, Lydiaemily (her nom de paintbrush; her rarely used last name is Archibald) has been creating forceful images of political figures and causes. "It's my lot in life to paint things that make you think," the Pasadena, California, artist says. She quickly found out that such subjects did not position her well for commercial success. "No gallery felt my work would sell," she recalls. "They'd say, 'Come to us when you're painting flowers or nudes.'" So nearly a decade ago, Lydiaemily took to the streets—literally. She learned to do huge murals of her paintings on city walls using acrylic paint.

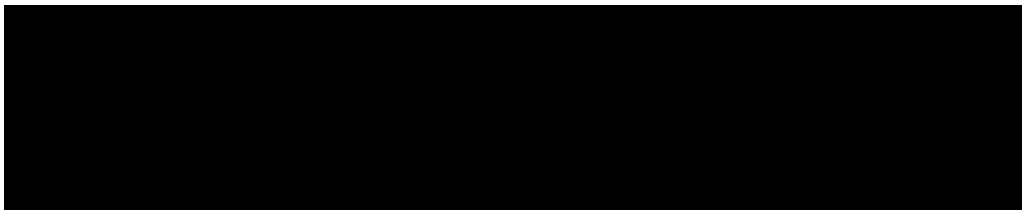
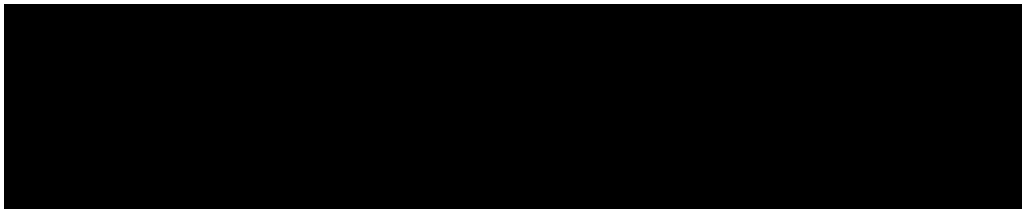
Click on the image below for a larger view of the mural.



Artist Lydiaemily, who has a following throughout the world for her powerful murals on city walls, designed this mural for attendees to sign at the National MS Society's 2014 Leadership Conference in Fort Worth, Texas. Photo courtesy of the National MS Society

When Lydiaemily, 44, was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 2012, it seemed natural for her to make her condition part of her art. Last November, during the National MS Society Leadership Conference in Fort Worth, Texas, she engaged more than 700 people in creating an enormous collaborative mural, shown above. "As we gathered together and began to share stories, it fostered camaraderie among us," she says. "And it made MS seem just a little bit smaller, a little bit more surmountable."

Now, Lydiaemily is eager to expand upon that work; she began by painting murals in four cities this spring—Austin, Texas; Louisville, Kentucky; Portland, Oregon; and Los Angeles—to raise awareness of MS. Just maybe, she says, that can help "turn the stigma of MS into a colorful, artful, hopeful diagnosis." As she told the conference attendees, "I can't sing. I'm not a doctor and I can't write a book. But I can paint."



Lydiaemily has needed that determination and grit to keep her personal life on track. She is also a survivor of cervical and uterine cancer. In addition, she is a single mother with two daughters, one of whom has autism. Painting has also become increasingly difficult, she told conference attendees: “Because of my MS, I can no longer hold my paintbrush on my own, so I take the sparkly shoelaces from my kids’ shoes and tie them to my hands to make sure I can still paint.”

That fierce determination keeps her connected to her growing number of fans. Because of online communities such as Twitter and Tumblr, and art-world buzz, her following has grown in such far-flung places as Kenya and China. Not only are the once-reluctant galleries now knocking at her door (such as the Garboushian in Beverly Hills, California); a filmmaker is too. An upcoming documentary about Lydiaemily, funded by a Kickstarter campaign, is expected to premiere in independent theaters next year. And she never did have to paint those flowers and nudes to get noticed.

Andrea Sachs is a New York City-based journalist who was diagnosed with MS in 2009.

To see more of her work, visit lydiaemily.com. To learn more about her film, visit pc594.com.