Can this tiny storefront save Philly's most drug-ravaged neighborhood?

by Samantha Melamed, STAFF WRITER, Posted: March 30, 2017
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In a battle against heroin in Kensington, is art an answer? This is the first in an occasional series in which the Inquirer will follow the progress at the Kensington Storefront.

On Saturday, in the shadow of the Market-Frankford El's Somerset station, a *Who's Who* of city officials gathered to inaugurate a freshly painted storefront.

Outside, a drug user hunched, frozen in space; a woman taped up fliers for a missing dog; a cluster of men turned the sidewalk into a gauntlet of catcalls. Indoors, there were speeches and live music, brochures and business cards, and a glossy, red ribbon sliced with the requisite gigantic scissors.

The occasion was the launch of a Mural Arts hub at 2774 Kensington Ave., a storefront where nothing is for sale but everything is on the table.

At the intersection of public art and public health, the Kensington Storefront will house art classes, mural painting, knitting sessions, tax workshops, mental health screenings, Narcan training, foreclosure-prevention counseling, and more, plus set office hours to accommodate whatever else may come up.

The aim is to create a space -- physical and figurative -- for hope in one of the city's poorest neighborhoods and the epicenter of its opioid crisis.

"This space is part of a plan of healing and connection," said Jane Golden, who heads Mural Arts. But, she acknowledged, it's also an experiment. "Who knows what impact these programs are going to have? But what would be worse is to not try."

The storefront is a project of Porch Light, a collaboration between Mural Arts and the city Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disAbility Services. DBHIDS, as it is clunkily abbreviated, finds itself on the front lines of the battle against opioid abuse because, according to Deputy Commissioner Roland Lamb, 86 percent of people in drug and alcohol treatment last year also had mental health diagnoses.

At this point, "We're trying everything," Lamb said. "Treatment programs are not going to be enough. Police are not going to be enough. But if we invest in the community, that will be a real opportunity to make a change."

Michelle gustafson / Staff Photographer

Roland Lamb, deputy commissioner of the Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disAbility Services, speaks at the launch of the Kensington Storefront. Jane Golden, executive director of Mural Arts, listens at left.

The storefront is the second of its kind for Porch Light, which launched a hub called Southeast by Southeast in 2011, designed as a temporary pop-up to address a rash of suicides among Bhutanese refugees. It has been open for six years, serving 60 to 80 people per day with arts and language classes, exhibitions, and workshops on topics like how to report hate crimes. It has even spawned a business, the Refugee Women's Textile Cooperative.

In Kensington, Golden promises that, at the very least, the storefront will be a hub for public art on a grand scale.

"We can't go in small. It's too serious. The problem is too overwhelming," Golden said. "Bold physical improvements are where we need to go."

To that end, the storefront is expected to yield at least two large-scale murals and 10 smaller public art projects. In addition, Mural Arts is working with the city Department of Licenses and Inspections on artistic collaboration involving the ongoing work of cleaning and sealing blighted buildings. Golden envisions that artists and community members could help address as many as 500 facades, with a cohesive design sensibility.

"What we want to do is think about color and the role color can play in the neighborhood," she said.

The project is funded through June 2018, though Mural Arts hopes to extend it.

Partners include local community development corporations New Kensington CDC and Impact Services, as well as Prevention Point Philadelphia, which runs harm-reduction programs, like syringe exchanges and HIV testing and counseling.

The New Kensington CDC intends to offer foreclosure-prevention and energy counseling, among other programs here. Rolando Sanchez, Impact Services' corridor manager for Kensington and Allegheny -- whose projects include helping businesses access city grants and running a program that puts private security guards on the corridor during business hours -- said he planned to work out of the hub at least four hours a week.

Jose Benitez, executive director of Prevention Point, said the storefront would mirror his organization's harm-reduction work.

"This *is* harm reduction," he said. "This is meeting people where they are, accepting people as they are, understanding that people, no matter what other issues are going on in their lives, can express talent."

The challenges that come with that were evident even at the grand opening celebration.

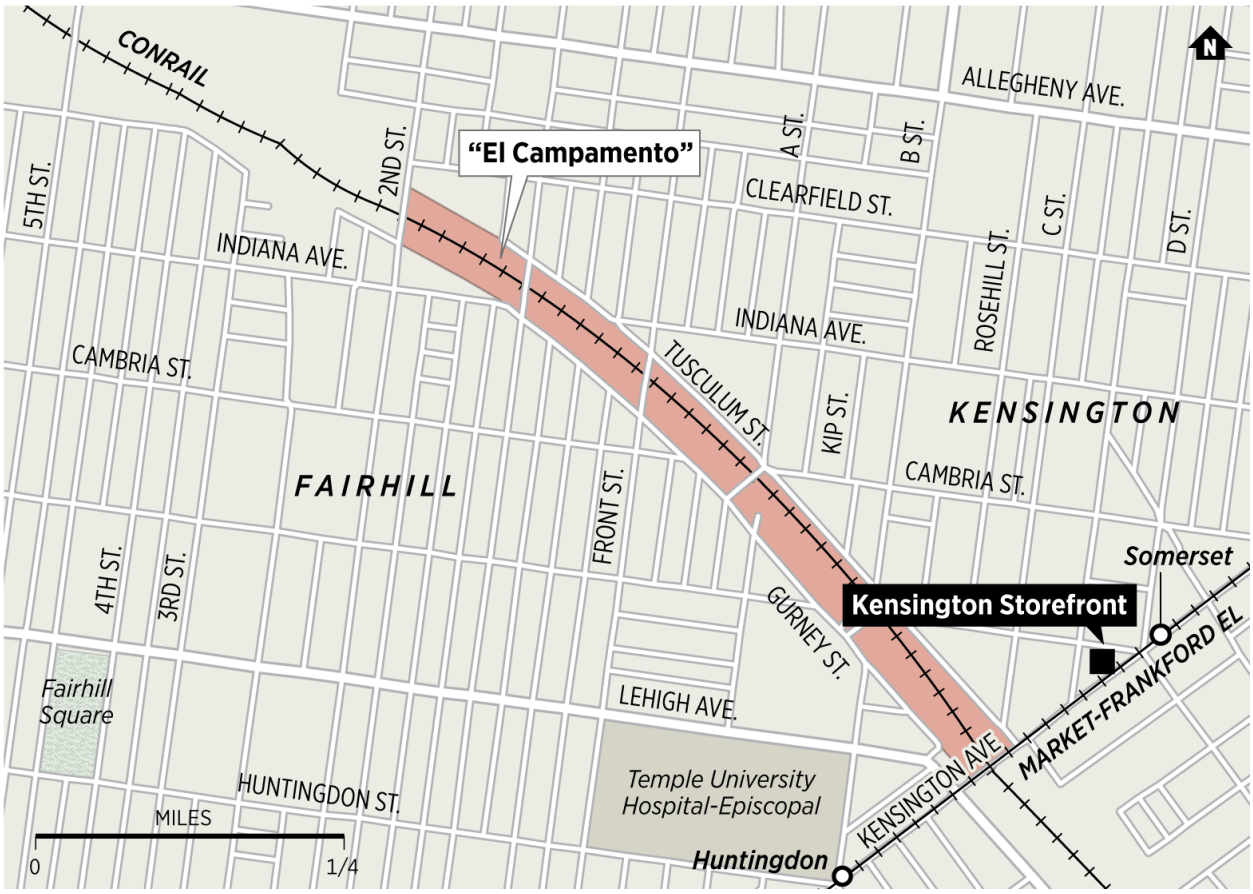
In the bathroom, posted policies included typical stuff, like, "Wash your hands" -- but also, "Do not use drugs in the bathroom" and, "You have five minutes, after which you will be asked to leave." At the refreshments table, a large pile of hoagies disappeared quickly as a stream of hungry passersby walked in, stuffed sandwiches into their pockets and under their arms, and left. (A half hour later, the table was tidied and replenished; a Mural Arts staffer slipped on gloves and began serving the food in an orderly fashion.)

michelle gustafson / Staff Photographer
The grand opening of the Kensington Storefront.

Rosalind Pichardo, who lives down the street, was not there for the hoagies. She runs a program, Operation Save Our City, for families of murder victims, and she welcomes this new neighbor.

"With the opioids and the violence in the city, this is the perfect place [for Mural Arts]," she said. "I live it, I breathe it, I see it every day. I love that they're finally coming into Kensington, where this is really needed."

Activists and officials spoke of the neighborhood as one that had been abandoned under previous administrations but that is beginning to get the attention it direly needs. The city has launched a coordinated effort to grapple with the community's longstanding problems, like the encampment of drug addicts along the Conrail tracks nearby and the proliferation of unlicensed, overcrowded, and exploitative recovery houses.



Staff graphic

The Kensington Storefront is just below the Somerset station of the Market-Frankford El. Nearby, a swath of land owned by Conrail has become a haven for drug users, who have built a tent city sometimes called "El Campamento."

Or, as City Councilwoman Maria Quiñones-Sanchez put it, "This administration is not in denial anymore." (Though that's not to say the city is funding work in Kensington at the level Sanchez believes is necessary.)

The city-led effort is called *El Barrio Es Nuestro* -- "the neighborhood is ours."

That's a theme at the storefront, too.

"One of the directives we've been given is about reclaiming space, which is relevant to the community that's been impacted and the people that are struggling with addiction," said Laure Biron, who directs the Porch Light program.

It's all that Dennis Payne, a neighborhood resident and activist, can ask for. He pointed down the block, to New Kensington CDC's potentially neighborhood-anchoring new development, Orinoka

Civic House. He wondered whether that, plus the new Mural Arts storefront and other new developments, would be enough to stamp out the drug trade there (or at least to push it someplace else).

"I'd like to look at it as another brick of light," he said. "With more activity taking place in this area, other undesirable activity will be scared away. When you have more good people coming into bad areas, bad areas become good areas."

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