

# San Francisco Chronicle

## Walls that make good neighbors

By Caille Millner  
November 18, 2016



Photo: Evan Sernoffsky / The Chronicle

A woman reads messages posted on the Wall of Empathy on Monday morning at the 16th Street BART Station in San Francisco.

A week after the election, San Francisco has finally figured out how to respond to the looming specter of President-elect Trump. Walls have gone up all over town.

These aren't Trump's walls, thank goodness. For all of San Francisco's problems, this is not a place where residents feel like the answer to anything will be found in a "big, beautiful" barricade of our borders. Instead, San Franciscans have taken over public space with blockades of ... our feelings, written on bright, colored paper. The day after the election, the staff at Southern Exposure gallery (at 3030 20th St.) pulled out some blocks of Post-it notes, stacks of construction paper and markers. They placed these humble materials near the front door, and sent an invitation on social media for people to share "your words of protest, solace, anger, wisdom" in their storefront window.

Although Southern Exposure is tucked away on a sleepy corner in the Mission District, the spontaneous idea has taken over the gallery — filling both of the storefront windows, spilling into the exhibition space.

When I went by the gallery on Thursday morning, every inch of glass was covered with beautiful, thoughtful papers expressing a wide range of emotion.

“We have the test we need!” said one gallery-goer, while another expressed the too-long-denied truth that #BlackLivesMatter. Children — there’s an elementary school nearby — had drawn monsters; one respondent who must have been an artist had wordlessly torn a hole in the paper with just-right jagged edges.

“We wanted people to express how they were feeling with their own hands,” said the gallery’s executive director, Patricia Maloney. “We guessed that it was going to be cathartic for people.” It has been — both for the public and for the staff.

“It stops people in their tracks. Every time I look up from my desk, someone is stopped outside and taking pictures or reading the messages,” Maloney said. “And there have been some absolutely wonderful messages — ‘Justice may be late sometimes, but never absent.’ I make sure I read that one every single day when I come in.” I read that one, too — multiple times. Then I kept walking to the 16th and Mission BART stop, still thinking about the messages in the window.

One of the things I thought about was the fact that San Franciscans who spend time at galleries are a literate bunch, and their messages reflected that. There were lines from Walt Whitman’s “Leaves of Grass” (“Resist much, obey little. ... Once fully enslaved, no nation, state, city of this earth, ever afterward resumes its liberty”), and Bertolt Brecht (“In the dark times, will there be singing? Yes, there will also be singing about the dark times”).

While I love both of those writers, and both of those messages, there’s a part of me that’s still feeling ... raw. Furious.

I’m not alone. Because we are diverse and determined, San Franciscans have another wall for that.

The #wallofempathy at the 16th Street Mission BART Station is more public than the one at Southern Exposure gallery, and the writing material — Post-it notes — is smaller. On Thursday morning, all of the walls outside of the main station entrance were blanketed in a rainbow blizzard of notes, and walking up to the wall was a dizzy experience, like stepping into a snow globe.

I noted with some satisfaction that there was a great range of feelings on the wall. There are lovely, gentle messages — “*Todos unidos saldremos adelante* (united we will move forward)” was one. “Be the change you want to see” was another.

But there was also a wide response of our — let’s face it — angrier feelings. There were obscenities directed toward Trump, in a variety of languages. There were expressions of rage and fear. “Forgive but fight,” was one I particularly liked.

“I was floored by the response,” said Tamilla Mirzoyeva, a 28-year-old marketer and event planner in San Francisco, who co-created the wall with two friends, Muriel MacDonald and Melissa Goldman. “We didn’t have many expectations. We just wanted to do something beyond reading Facebook and articles online.”

Two days after the election, the three women talked about a post-election Post-it note assemblage in the New York City subway that they’d seen in a video. (The project, called “Subway Therapy,” was organized by a therapist named Matthew Chavez.) They called BART and the local police station, both of which gave them the thumbs-up. Then they spent \$100 for Post-it notes at OfficeMax, and the rest is history.

“It’s almost become a shrine,” Mirzoyeva said. “No one has messed anything up, people are helping to clean and retape the Post-its that have fallen off, everyone is being helpful and respectful.”

Creating a community experience she describes as “surprisingly spiritual” has been especially rewarding for Mirzoyeva, who’s an immigrant from Azerbaijan.

“It’s been really tough to sleep for us, for a lot of immigrant families who have survived totalitarian or violent regimes and moved here for their dream,” Mirzoyeva said. “It’s important to find things that are positive and uplifting — like this.”

See it for yourself. The 16th Street Mission BART wall was coming down on Friday night, but Southern Exposure gallery told me they’re leaving their wall up “as long as people need it.”

3030 20th Street San Francisco, CA 94110 Phone: 415/863-2141 Fax: 415/863-1841 [www.soex.org](http://www.soex.org)