



ART REPRESENTING THE VICTIMS OF AMERICA'S GUNFIRE EPIDEMIC TAKES THE STAGE AT ARTPRIZE IN GRAND RAPIDS, MI

Nearly 9K Soul Boxes honor lives lost to gunfire in Michigan

SEPT 2021 GRAND RAPIDS, MI - The [Soul Box Project](#), a national community art project collecting handmade origami memorial Boxes from across the country, will be distinguishing itself from more than 900 artist entries at the international [ArtPrize](#) competition and festival in Grand Rapids, Michigan - by not only drawing attention to the national ARTivism movement it's inspiring - but also honoring Michigan lives lost to gun violence.

The 18-day ArtPrize event focuses on art and why it matters in a series of unconventional exhibits. The competition allows visitors to vote on the art projects and artists to determine what they find most impactful. The Soul Box Project will display 8,800 Soul Boxes on a huge atrium wall to represent the number of Michigan gunfire deaths and injuries in just three years – including violence, defense, accidents, and suicides. These Soul Boxes will be on display from September 16 - October 3, 2021 at [The Atrium at Uccello's](#) in downtown Grand Rapids.

The Soul Box Project is art at its simplest, yet with a powerful message. Fold two pieces of paper into a 3 x 3-inch box, embellish it and remember a life lost or injured by gunfire. Each Soul Box holds a space for one life lost or injured. When put together in large art installations, the Boxes help people visualize the impact of gun violence, the vast number of lives lost and what they meant to other people.

This artwork should resonate deeply in Michigan, where there's been a lot of gun violence in 2021. Nine people were shot to death from January through July in Grand Rapids, according to the [National Gun Violence Memorial](#). From May through mid-August in the cities of Flint, Detroit, Fruitport Township and Saginaw, 10 people died and 24 were injured ([List of Mass Shootings in the U.S. in 2021](#)).

"What we are trying to do is have someone walk into these displays and have an 'ah-ha' moment," says Leslie Lee, a studio artist from Portland, Oregon, and founder of The Soul Box Project. "It might mean a person goes home and locks up a gun. Or a mother talks

to her kids about the futility of anger and retribution. Or a gun club adds another safety class. Or a voter writes to his legislators. Every one of those actions is a step that could save lives.”

Lee was compelled to take action following the October 2017 deaths of 59 people at the Route 91 Music Festival in Las Vegas - [the worst mass shooting in modern U.S. history](#). “We need to appeal to each other on an emotional level if we want the current gun culture to change,” says Lee.

Here’s how it works: people fold paper and send the Boxes to Lee. She then creates large art installations to draw attention to the loss we all carry. To date, the project has amassed over 195,000 Boxes. Lee designed the Project to be a source of solace and empower people to consider their personal actions and responsible gun use as a reflection of their values, priorities and beliefs.

[Experience the Soul Box Project online](#)

“Statistics may tell us facts, but they do not show us the incredible pain from lives lost to gun violence,” says Lee. “We need to respond.” Recent years have shown alarming trends:

- In 2020, Michigan was among the states with the largest per capita increase in [gun sales and gun-related deaths](#).

- A national study from the [Violence Policy Center](#) shows that Michigan's death rate by guns increased just shy of 13% from 2009-2016. The research also showed the state ranked higher than the national average for homicides with firearms. Nationwide, gun-related deaths across the country have increased by 17% since 2008.

- So far this year, more than 54,000 people were killed or injured across the U.S. whether by homicide, suicide, mass shootings, incidents involving officers and suspects, under defensive or unintentional circumstances, according to a daily count by the [Gun Violence Archive](#).

The troubling statistics are what keep Lee committed to growing this moving visual display. She has fueled a national ARTivism movement about people, not politics, and has spread awareness and healing to nearly every state in the US. Following the ArtPrize exhibit in Michigan, the Project will hold its largest exhibit to date - 200,000 Soul Boxes on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., in October.

“This effort is much like the impact of the [AIDS Memorial Quilt](#) on display in the same location more than 30 years ago,” Lee says. “Just like those fabric panels, when a person sees hundreds of thousands of Soul Boxes, they will be moved to create change.”

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