

Political art: Soul Box Project aims to memorialize lives lost to gunfire

LIZZIE HYDE
STAFF WRITER

Portland-based artist Leslie Lee recognized the nation's problem of overlooking individual events within our gunfire epidemic. On Oct. 1, 2017, in Las Vegas, 59 people were killed and 44 wounded in a mass shooting. Struck with a feeling of overwhelmed grief, Lee decided not to read yet another article about lives lost to the gun violence. Later that day at the gym, the TV broadcasted the tragedy on full display.

"I was appalled, but not only at the massacre," said Lee. "I was appalled at myself for dismissing this tragedy for my own comfort. If this was becoming the new normal what were we, as a nation, going to do about it?" Gathering the artistic tools at her disposal, Lee replaced her feelings of helplessness with action and mobilized. She began the Soul Box Project.

The Soul Box Project's mission is that it "raises awareness of the U.S. gunfire epidemic by counting and honoring victims, offering healing participation to those seeking solace and providing dramatic visual support for all initiatives working for a safer, more civil society."

People are invited to create small origami boxes, each representing a victim of the gunfire epidemic, which will contribute to a traveling art installation comprised of 200,000 boxes.

The boxes pay homage to the 169,719 people shot since 2014, and 22,000 gun-assisted suicides, which are all statistics courtesy of the Soul Box Project itself. This project has taken the national stage, and has already collected 13,500 individual boxes since June.

A smaller installation has been displayed at the Art Reach Gallery in Portland. The display, comprised of 735 boxes representing children younger than 12 shot in 2017, created the type of visceral cognisance Lee wants the project to invoke. On Feb. 15, the Soul Box installation will be displayed in the lobby of the Oregon State Capitol. Willamette students and community members are invited to march in solidarity with victims and spread word of the project.

When Lee delivered her Convocation address at Willamette, she emphasized that the project does not advocate explicitly for gun safety legislation. Rather, the project hopes to raise awareness of the gun epidem-



Aby Jaeger ('21) opens the Convocation in Cone Chapel (right). A display of Soul Boxes showcased by Leslie Lee (top left). Students have the opportunity to create their own Boxes (bottom left).

ic—even among groups vehemently opposed to gun safety laws.

Lee hopes that the traveling installation could be displayed in places like NRA conventions, encouraging the group to adopt stringent safety guidelines.

The Soul Box Project is akin to the AIDS Memorial Quilt, a community art project that, as Lee stated, "began in 1985 and eventually filled the National Mall in Washington, DC with 37,440 individual panels in 1992."

Lee's "example of the AIDS quilt was certainly a factor in bringing attention to the crisis that was HIV/AIDS at that particular time in our history" says Chaplain Karen Wood,



EMMA BURGESS

"but so was Larry Kramer and ACT UP (The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), a group that engaged in non-violent direct action, demanding the attention of the political and medical establishments."

Some members of the Willamette community question this non-political approach. Convocation student Aby Jaeger told *The Collegian*, "While I disagree with Leslie's statement with how the project isn't political—in my opinion gun reform is political by nature—I also think the project is a way to engage people who are gun enthusiasts with the issue and the cost of having such open access to guns."

Wood believes the project has potential to raise awareness to the issue. "I think about the demonstration and walk-out that occurred here last year in the wake of the Parkland school shootings, and this makes me confident that the issue is on the radar here. That said, all sorts of efforts—artistic, as well as political—are useful as we try to move our communities into productive conversations about gun violence."

Willamette student Emma Burgess sees the non-political strategy as wise and necessary for opening up the conversation to gun enthusiasts. "I think it's smart. We don't have to convince the people who are already

anti-gun, we have to communicate why gun control is important to people who consider guns a form of safety and citizenship. We are not her target audience, we are who she is looking for support."

Anyone can make their own Soul Box and mail it to P.O. Box 19900, Portland, OR 97280. Make boxes using medium weight paper in 8 1/2" squares. For a tutorial on making your own Soul Box, or for more information, visit SoulBoxProject.org. Follow them on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram @soulboxproject.