



RIPON COLLEGE PROFESSOR Rafael Salas dips his paint brush as he paints a mural in the 200 block of downtown Ripon. He hopes it uplifts those who view it. *Ian Stepleton photo*

Professor painting mural downtown

by Ian Stepleton
ians@riponprinters.com

A devastating fire.

Empty storefronts.

A developer being sued by the city.

It's been a difficult time for downtown Ripon. But one local artist hopes to raise Riponites' spirits — almost literally.

Rafael Salas, a Ripon native and art professor at Ripon College, is creating a larger-than-life mural on the south wall of 220 Watson St.

Working alone atop a bucket truck, Salas will put paint brush to stone all summer long, enabling the community to follow along with the creation of "The

Long Way Home."

"The inspiration came after the fire," Salas said. "I thought about the idea in January — a project downtown, something that would be quite visible, would be an attraction for downtown, which seems to be able to use it."

Salas elaborated further on the Ripon College website.

"The inspiration to create this artwork began in response to recent events in downtown Ripon," he wrote. "I am referring most significantly to the Watson Street fire on Dec. 11, 2013, and the destructive outcome of the Boca Grande development project. This mural will

See MURAL/ page 16

MURAL Work continues all summer *continued from page 1*

remind us of the proud heritage we share but also of the trials we encounter."

Salas began by approaching Troy Farrell, who owns the building on which the mural is being created, as well as Ripon Main Street Manager Craig Tebon.

"[Farrell] was all excited," Salas said, noting Tebon embraced the idea as well. "He seemed to support it as a public initiative to bring attention to downtown."

With those two on board, Salas spent the next few months perfecting an image he felt would lift the spirits of fellow Riponites.

"The first design I made ... is a little more imagined, a little more allegorical," Salas said. "I took it to a few of my colleagues, and they didn't get it. It's a poetic imagination of the Midwestern landscape. It looks to me like the view I see out of my window, which sees the Ceresco prairie out of my office, but put into an artistic representation."

"People's critique was that the design should communicate a little more clearly."

Instead, he settled on a design that incorporated Ripon's roots: Ceresco's Long House.

According to the college's website, "*The artwork will describe a sense of elevation, lifting and transcendence in the face of conflict. It portrays the original Long House, built to create a communal society of Utopian ideals on the Wisconsin prairie. The optimism that originally inspired the creation of Ripon itself is reflected in the visual placement and monumental height of the mural. However, though the*



RAFAEL SALAS WORKS atop a cherry-picker as he paints the wall adjacent to Farrell's Fine Furnishings. *Ian Stepleton photo*

image evokes a sense of nobility, it also illuminates a contrast to that aspiration in the supports and buttresses that shore it up.

"My goal is that viewers will find inspiration in this artwork, but will also acknowledge the troubles we have had and challenges that we face in our community. I designed this mural for the Ripon community and for Ripon College together. We share the same legacy and must move forward together, as well."

Sketches of the mural, as well as other related examples of his artwork, can be viewed at the Arts of Daycholah Gallery in Green Lake, 526 Mill St.

Last week, Salas began the arduous task of actually creating the full-size version on the Farrell's wall.

"I had a contractor come in ... He primed and painted the back-

ground to a color of my specification," Salas said. "Then I created a grid to be able to scale up the smaller study."

He'll continue working throughout the summer on the mural, expecting to finish it by August. The project is funded through a \$1,400 grant from Ripon College as a way to enhance the campus community.

Reaction of passers-by "has been surprising and really wonderful," he said. "People's responses have been universally positive. Been getting [a lot of] thumbs up ...

"That's awesome — that's what this is really about."

As he explained, Salas isn't doing this for personal recognition. It's about the community.

"I hope that people recognize it for what it is: a conversation about ourselves," he said. "I hope they'll find inspiration in the artwork."