

Last Best News (<http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/05/voices-from-the-valley-tyson-middle/>)

# Voices from the Valley: Tyson Middle

By: **SHERRI CORNETT** | May 20, 2018



Ed Kemmick/Last Best News

At a recent session in North Park, Tyson Middle worked with students from the Lincoln Center programs on creating spray-paint art.

Voices from the Valley is an occasional series of conversations between Sherri Cornett and Billings-area leaders who are committed to creating a vibrant community for all.

Tyson Middle is inspired by art and trains, by the young people he mentors and by his 3-year-old son, Jaxon, who joined us for this conversation.

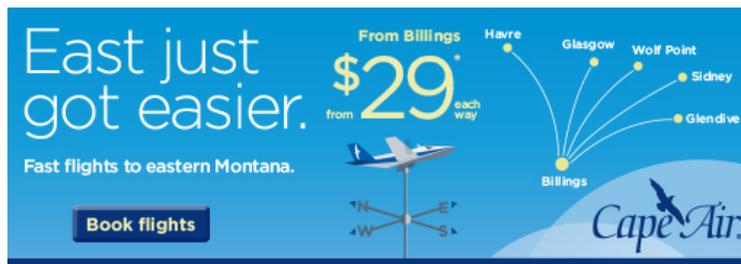
Tyson and his mother co-own Underground Culture Krew, where he sells high-end spray paints to crafters, painters and graffiti artists. He grew up in Billings and Greybull, Wyoming, developed his work ethic on his family's farm, and earned a psychology degree from MSU Billings.

**Sherri Cornett:** Tyson, besides running your shop, we have seen you creating murals and other art with students at elementary schools and at Lincoln Center, running events at Summerfair and Alive After Five, working with Tumbleweed and the March Against Drugs and Violence. And, I heard you were recently invited by social workers in Fulda, Germany, to work with children there.

**Tyson Middle:** Working with youth is my passion. Most kids want to be seen, to be noticed and to be heard. Many of these kids come from a too-common background — drugs in the family, some born in prison, or parents not at home. One kid I mentor has a mother who has been in and out of prison his whole life. They are often looking for someone to guide them, give them some feedback.

**Sherri:** You have found that graffiti art is an entry point to reach out to them?

**Tyson:** I have seen so much positivity with it. One teacher at a Lincoln Center event told me that her student was really finding his dream. Give them time, the resources, encouragement and the proper ways to do whatever it is, in this case graffiti art, and kids can soar. This is one of the most freeform, forgiving art forms and is easy for kids, who are often self-critical. You make a mistake, you cover it up and try something new. We talk with them about this being public art, the history of it, that there are rules and unwritten guidelines.



<https://goo.gl/mjhWkW>

**Sherri:** How did you get into graffiti as a creative outlet?

**Tyson:** It was a combination of trains and history and my grandfather, who would take me to see Sally at McIntosh Art and buy me art supplies. Our family has a lot of train history — being engineers and conductors — and I spent a lot of time at the depot watching the graffiti go by on the cars. The sound of the trains, the noise, the braking, the coupling, the smell ... there are few other things that put me at peace like that.

**Sherri:** There are, of course, sub-cultures, whose behavior can shed a negative light on that larger group. How do you respond to people who equate all graffiti art with gangs, violence and drugs?

**Tyson:** First, one of my favorite quotes is by Kurt Cobain: "I'd rather be hated for who I am, than loved for who I'm not." Some people transfer their anger to me, especially when someone swings through town and tags a bunch of public property. It is sometimes hard for them to understand that not all graffiti is the same. Many kids are just painting a stylized version of their names as an "I am/was here" statement. I can't control all kids — wouldn't that be a super power? — but we definitely advocate for the legal opportunities, how to express oneself within the legal codes and to do so on permission walls, places where it is legally OK to paint.

**Sherri:** I have seen walls that have been commissioned or set up for graffiti in cities like Atlanta, San Francisco and Denver. How did the permission walls in Billings come about?

**Tyson:** Initially, with someone who can see the potential, like Kee Dunning, who owns the property where the "Toy Story" wall is now. That wall is about suicide awareness. Some walls are paid for with grant money. Other permission walls come about because of property owners letting or wanting us to paint over illegal graffiti. We are working with police officers and neighborhood groups to give kids other walls, to hopefully deter some of the illegal stuff.

**Sherri:** As you talk, I sense a bigger goal.

**Tyson:** My wish for the graffiti scene is that we could all play nice together and hang out. We could build together instead of tearing each other down, put our heads together and organize, elevate it and create community. In order for something to have longevity, there needs to be more positive than negative. We need to be open to other people's ideas, whatever their age, and encourage each other: "If you stick with this, stay out of trouble and keep your head clean, you are going to do some amazing things in life with art."

**Sherri:** That's a nice dream for our larger community also.

**Tyson:** Yes, it is!



With degrees in political science and art and a long history of advocacy work, Sherri Cornett's passion for dialogue and community has found outlets in the national and international social-justice-themed exhibitions she curates, her own art and the organizations and causes into which she contributes her energy and leadership. After 14 moves, Cornett finally found her home in Billings in 1993. [www.sherricornett.com](http://www.sherricornett.com) (<http://www.sherricornett.com/>).

**Comments**

4 comments

Sherri Cornett

