

## Mural, mural on the wall...

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Artists from across Montreal converged in Pointe St-Charles this past month to develop a collective mural telling the story of Abdelkader Belaoui, an Algerian refugee who took sanctuary in St-Gabriel's Church over two years ago. Belaoui's struggle for status in Canada has captivated many in Montreal, drawing attention to a grassroots campaign for justice that has often used artistic expression to protest the government's silence after repeated requests that the blind refugee be granted citizenship. From concerts to street stencils and now with this collective mural, artists have played a key role in supporting Belaoui's public campaign for regularization.



photo: Ion Etxebarria

### EXPLAINER BREAKS DOWN MONTREAL'S MURAL ON SANCTUARY AND STRUGGLE.

**1** Abdelkader Belaoui's struggle extends far back, beyond the increasingly militarized borders of Canada, to North Africa. Belaoui fled the violent civil conflict in Algeria in 1996 that took an estimated 100,000 lives. As a blind man, Belaoui first journeyed to New York City, living for a number of years selling telephone cards. However, he was never granted permanent legal status in the U.S. After the tragic events of 9/11, Belaoui again was forced to flee the U.S., arriving at Canada's border as a refugee fearing the well-documented institutionalized persecution facing Arabs and Muslims in the U.S. Today, Belaoui is struggling for status in Montreal. "I'm just one person from thousands and thousands without status today living in Canada," explains Belaoui,

"this mural tells not only my story but is a symbol for all those non-status people living in Canada calling for status, for dignity and justice."

**2** As a collective effort, the mural presents works from multiple artists from Montreal who came together to offer their artistic insights, including visual artist Freda Guttman, celebrated photographer and novelist Rawi Hage, Iranian photographer Shahrzad Arshadi and activist Sarita Ahooja, among many others. It depicts Belaoui's journey, and features the Montreal cityscape and small markings that count down the days he's been in sanctuary. Artistic expression has been an essential element to the ongoing campaign to liberate Adelkader Belaoui, who released a self-produced hip-hop CD from inside the walls of sanctuary earlier this year. "This mural is great because it is a creative way to protest injustice," explains Belaoui. "Although it is impossible for me to see the mural, it is still really important for me to know that artists are coming together, as art is really important in my life and my struggle - it can express all the serious feelings that we carry in our hearts through this long struggle for justice." The mural will be on display at the Dissident Art exhibition (55 Notre-Dame West in Old Montreal, metro Place d'Armes) throughout September. For more information, visit [www.artdissidentart.com](http://www.artdissidentart.com).