

NINA MOINI: This week marks six months since an ICE officer shot and killed Minneapolis resident Renee Good. The shooting pushed the Twin Cities' response to the ice surge into the international spotlight. Half a year later, the residents of the Central and Powderhorn neighborhoods in South Minneapolis are still processing the events of the shooting and everything that came after it.

A group of artists have invited residents of the area to construct what they're calling grief altars, to be placed on street corners around the city. One of the organizers, Conor Cusack, spoke to NPR's Ellen Finn about it at a public grief altar build in Powderhorn Park last night.

ELLEN FINN: You are part of this project called Landscapes of Grief that came together during the ICE surge.

CONOR CUSACK: Yeah, myself and my two collaborators, Dio and Louis were organizing in our neighborhoods, doing rapid response, doing mutual aid. We started to have conversations about what the memory of this moment would be and how we as individuals, but also as communities and neighbors, are supposed to make sense and make meaning of this very distinct time of violence and oppression and living every day in fear of our neighbors being taken away or in fear of being attacked by ICE and wanted to do something that allowed people to connect with each other through their grief, to help shape what that memory will look like next year and in 5 years, and in 10 years.

The first iteration of this project was three altars that we made just ourselves and put up around town that are intended to be spaces for people to leave offerings and to stop in the neighborhood and reflect on what they have lost and what they are grieving from the ICE occupation. And this next iteration of the project is to make more altars that have more community hands involved in creating them. So we are today painting little square, wooden tiles that will be mosaicked onto the sides and the front of these altars. And the altars will go up around the Powderhorn neighborhood, which is our neighborhood, but also throughout Minneapolis and St. Paul as visible markers of what happened.

This is not specifically memorials to Alex and Renee, although they are very important people who live on in our memory and who we want to continue to honor and memorialize and commemorate, but also know that there are some really amazing people and projects already doing that, the stewards of the memorials on Portland and over on Nicollet. And we wanted this memorialization project to really focus on the individual experiences of neighbors because we all lost something. Whether it was a family member or whether it was a sense of safety in our neighborhood or whether it was a friend, there is a lot of things that we are grieving that are also very different. And we wanted to create a space and a project that really brought those things together and explore the complexity of grief, especially as we're still experiencing violence and surveillance and abductions from ICE.

ELLEN FINN: It's been about six months since the Twin Cities became really visible to the country and the world after Renee Good was killed. I'm wondering, just from your perspective, how this city has changed in these six months.

CONOR CUSACK: People are still processing the change, but you see it here in Powderhorn Park. Normally, there are hundreds of people out on a night like tonight. It's beautiful. It's not raining. We've got a nice cloud cover.

There are people out playing volleyball. There are people out picnicking. There are people grilling, barbecuing, whatever it might be, playing at the pool, on the playground. And it's way emptier than it otherwise should be. There's a sense of emptiness, I feel like.

I walk around and I feel like I sometimes encounter ghosts, whether it is walking past a place that was like especially traumatic for me and from a day of patrolling and doing rapid response, or if it is just this acknowledgment and knowledge that someone was probably abducted on that street corner. Because it's hard to move around in this neighborhood, in Powderhorn or on the south side of Minneapolis, and not go past the street corner where someone was taken.

ELLEN FINN: Over the past six months, do you think there's positive things that have changed in this neighborhood or things that the neighborhood has gained?

CONOR
CUSACK: One of the guiding principles of our work as organizers and artists is abolition. And I think it came up most recently as this unified statement of ICE out of here, ICE out of everywhere. It looks like people coming together who didn't each other, who don't each other, who are meeting and painting and engaging in this thing larger than themselves, this sense of grief, this sense of memory making, this sense of where do we go from here and trying to build something new through that.

One of the things that we're trying to do here, and then I think that I've seen throughout the cities, is continued connection between people who maybe otherwise were separated from each other. And there are many, many, many ways in which people are continuing to connect and continuing to connect beyond just relationships of rapid response or mutual aid or bringing groceries or giving rides. It's language exchange. It's doing art projects. It's watching the World Cup together. It's going to the food truck of the person of a friend you met. Those are the ways in which I see people living together in different ways.

ELLEN FINN: Can you explain where you think that these altars will go?

CONOR
CUSACK: Dio, Louis, and I have had ideas of places that are meaningful to us as individuals, but also we as meaningful to the communities that we live and work in. And so some of those places are where there was a large event with ICE, so thinking about Cuatros Milpas, Roosevelt High School, where Greg Bovino and ICE came and attacked and terrorized students and teachers, and also just street corners around our neighborhood where we know neighbors who were taken, but are also asking people for their own perspectives because we are only three people, and we want this to be reflective of the broader community's experience.

ELLEN FINN: When people are walking down the street and they run into one of these altars, what do you hope their reaction is? Or what do you hope they get out of it?

CONOR
CUSACK: My hope is that their relationship to the place changes. We think a lot about this idea of psychogeography, which is just how there is an invisible landscape of emotion and experience that lives on in the world and lives on in our landscapes. And my hope is that these altars are a portal into another layer of the world and that people also feel validated in their experiences of knowing that this street corner, this neighborhood, this street was a place of trauma. And there is something beautiful that is acknowledging that that happened, rather than that experience living on as some sort of invisible, detached thing that cannot be known or understood by others.

NINA MOINI: That was Conor Cusack, a leader of the Minneapolis group called Landscapes of Grief, talking to NPR's Ellen Finn.