

WHY THIS PHOENIX ART PROJECT TRAVELED TO CAPITOL HILL

Sofia Krusmark Arizona Republic | USA TODAY NETWORK

An art project/protest that started at Phoenix Art Museum has made its way to Capitol Hill, just as intended. It's called the Violet Protest, a collection of more than 13,000 red and blue quilted squares meant to bridge the red vs. blue political divide in our country, Phoenix artist Ann Morton, the project's founder, said. "My discomfort with the inability of Congress to govern because of the increasing political divisiveness weighed on me," Morton said. "We're the ones electing our congresspeople. The change comes from us." The project was on display at the Phoenix Art Museum from March 10 to Sept. 5, 2021. On Nov. 15, all

13,000 squares were loaded onto a U.S. Postal Service truck for shipment to Capitol Hill.



Morton with Congressman Greg Stanton during his visit to the Violet Protest exhibition at Phoenix Art Museum. AIRI KATSUTA/PHOENIX ART MUSEUM

What is the Violet Protest?

Political advocacy is not new for Morton. Neither are group projects.

In a previous project, Morton crafted handkerchiefs for an exhibition at the Lisa Sette Gallery. Each one used proofreading marks to draw attention to the harsh words of former President Donald Trump. The project went viral, Morton said. This was one of her first projects after receiving a master's degree in fiber art.

The City of Phoenix commissioned another project Morton led in which volunteers came together to knit 28 large squares which, when pieced together, formed an image of desert flowers. Once the project was completed, the quilt was disassembled and Morton handed out the pieces to people experiencing homelessness.

"That's what gave me the idea that I could really cultivate a project for something like this," Morton said.

In March 2019, Morton began recruiting creatives from across the country for the Violet Protest. Participants

The hope for Congress

All 13,000 squares have been delivered to Capitol Hill. The shipping cost was more than \$8,000, Morton said. But it was worth it, she added.

The hope for the project is that members of congress would experience exactly what Morton and the volunteers have experienced through working on the project together: Unity.

'Quilts touch people in very private personal ways,' Morton said. "You remember that quilt you had or do you remember watching your grandmother hand-knit your favorite sweater? They have a connection to people that other things don't and when you see the diversity and creativity in the squares themselves, I hope that the lawmaker would really take stock in what we're saying.'

Reach the reporter at sofia.krusmark@gannett.com. Follow her on Instagram @sofia.krusmark.

did not need to be artists for this project. Morton was looking for people who valued the principles behind it: Respect for others, citizenship, compromise, country over party and corporate influence, courage, candor, compassion and creativity, Morton said. "I felt like not only is it up to Congress, but for each one of us to reach across the aisle, to talk to that neighbor who might not feel the same way we do, or that family member that might have different political ideas," Morton said.

Soon, Morton had gathered more than 2,200 volunteers and artists from all 50 states to make squares for the project.

The Packing Process

People flew from all across the country to see the squares in the Phoenix Art Museum. Visitors came from as far away as Vermont, Washington D.C., Oregon and Texas to see their knit squares hung side by side with thousands of others.

Once the project was taken down in September, the packing process "Quilts touch people in very private personal ways," Morton said. "You remember that quilt you had or do you remember watching your grandmother hand-knit your favorite sweater? They have a connection to people that other things don't and when you see the diversity and creativity in the squares themselves, I hope that the lawmaker would really take stock in what we're saying." began, Morton said.

The project moved to Park Central, where 50 volunteers began packaging individual boxes for each of 540 lawmakers, 100 in the senate and 440 in the house. Throughout October, volunteers methodically packed up 25 squares for each lawmaker, making sure to label each box with the title and the name of the artist who created it.

Volunteers didn't know each other's political views, Morton said — she still doesn't know what percentage participated from each political party — they just worked together to complete the 540 boxes.

"We only talked about our common wish for decency, and civility in our law," Morton said. "It's important that we talk about all the values that we believe in as Americans. At the core of our beliefs are these values."



Stacks of Violet Protest squares sorted by state awaiting packaging. ANN MORTON



Ann Morton at the back of the fully-loaded truck taking 540 Violet Protest boxes to the U.S. Post Office in Phoenix, AZ. Photo by: TANÉ CLARK