

# FRUITS OF THEIR LABOR:

THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF PUBLIC ART By Stacey Rowe



A collaborative work in progress by Shawn Dunwoody and Eder Muniz at Frederick Douglass Library



Central Library (Bausch & Lomb Building) murals in downtown Rochester

In May of 2015, Shawn Dunwoody and local nonprofit Greentopia launched a grant-funded neighborhood beautification and public art movement at the intersection of Jay and Grape Streets. Inspired by the location's street names, the Fruit Belt Project employed young Rochester artists. The two businesses that were painted—College Club Beverages and Stop One Meat Market—noticed an increase in traffic and sales. Neighbors remarked the area was quieter. People who might have avoided the site due to its unsavory reputation were volunteering to help or passing through and taking pictures—all goals Dunwoody envisioned when initiating the effort. By the time the murals were completed that November, grant funds were exhausted. Still invested in the people and businesses in the neighborhood as well as other struggling communities in Rochester, Dunwoody felt the need to forge ahead on his own. “We changed the identity of the corner,” he says, “and people wanted more.”

Much of the project's success came from Dunwoody's connections in the community, and he continued to use the power of collaboration to move the public art needle forward. The subsequent months brought a flurry of activity as he promoted Scavenger Pump—a hunt for clues and design-inspired shoes to gain access to the

Memorial Art Gallery's *Inspiring Beauty: 50 Years of Ebony Fashion Fair*. He also worked with Rochester Institute of Technology students and Type High Letterpress owner, Tony Zanni, on inspirational letterpress posters to benefit the Fruit Belt Project. Dunwoody joined forces with Causewave Community Partners to create a mural for their rebranding event and spoke at their annual breakfast. He then delivered the commencement speech at Monroe Community College. New murals were designed in partnership with the Rochesteriat (a local website), Rochester Public Library, the Harley School, Rochester Area Community Foundation, and City Blue Imaging.

Through it all, Dunwoody and his young apprentices were captured not only by the local media but by the cinematography talents of David Marshall (Blue Sky Project Films) as well. Marshall partnered with writer Christine Christopher to produce *Confronting the Wall*, a documentary following Dunwoody and his Fruit Belt crew to Philadelphia to see the Philly Paint Project. This eventually led to a joint art effort with WALL\THERAPY muralist Eder Muniz in Salvador de Bahia, Brazil. The film aired on public television station WXXI last September.

While the murals certainly made an impact on these neighborhoods, they had

an even greater influence on their young creators. MCC student Kokenas Singletary describes his experience as eye opening. “It helped me mature, not only as an artist, but as a person. As a kid with nothing but a few sketches under my belt, I was given the opportunity to learn and work directly alongside Shawn, Daze [Chris Daze Ellis, also of WALL\THERAPY], and Eder. I've also witnessed how art can bring people together from different cultures and communities.” Singletary elaborates: “Growing up in the inner city, I never imagined that art would give me the opportunity to travel across the world. Heck, prior to all of this, I'd never even been on a plane! Together we have built lifelong memories, and I'm truly grateful for just being part of it. We were able to shed some light on the community and spread positivity through the use of vibrant colors and uplifting words. It feels pretty good to ride around the city and point out the different pieces we've done.”

Regarding his work on the murals, Ephraim Gebre says, “I'm not sure where I would have been. Shawn helped me and gave me a path. I was able to meet new people and network.” Gebre took classes with local sculptor Olivia Kim, which led to an internship, and he recently assisted Jason Barber with the Roc Girl Gang exhibit at Rochester Brainery. His newly

Photos by Michael Hamilton

developed skills also helped to land him a summer job as a site manager at a local painting company. Like Singletary, Gebre explains how his travels influenced him. “People stopped and interacted with us,” he says, “and they acknowledged how we were making their community better. If I can come all the way from America to paint, maybe it will inspire them to pick up some trash!” A senior in high school, Gebre plans on continuing to develop his art skills and relationships with mentors. He is considering attending college as an art major.

Before working with Dunwoody, Karina Sáez-Bula thought about pursuing cosmetology and generally kept to herself. She says, “This experience helped me to open up more, meet people, and have fun. Prior

to this, I only had swimming. I think it’s better to have multiple ways to relieve stress if one falls through.” Sáez-Bula is now enrolled in the MCC advertising program, where she’s learning graphic design. “I used to draw and only show a couple people,” she says. She credits the project in helping her to build confidence about her art—completing a mural for her senior project and participating in an art show with her graduating class. Sáez-Bula visited Stop One Meat Market over the summer and saw a few of the neighbors. They told her it was nice to have so much color in the neighborhood. “I would recommend any young artist do this type of work,” she says, “It’s a great experience that shapes you.”

The Fruit Belt continues to evolve with the development of the community garden. In partnership with CCSI, Dunwoody’s green thumb assistance runs the gamut: apple trees from Broccolo Tree and Lawn Care, a butterfly beltway from Seneca Park Zoo, murals and raspberry plants from the Harley School, raised beds from College Club Beverages, solar panels from ROCSPOT, seed packet design from RIT, and assistance with planting from School 17. “People know this is something good—they aren’t going to mess with it,” says Dunwoody excitedly, “No one is even throwing trash around—the city finally brought the garbage cans back!”

Dunwoody has additional endeavors in the works, including a collective coopera-



Ephraim Gebre and Shawn Dunwoody chat in the Fruit Belt Project community garden on Grape Street.





Ephraim Gebre pictured with Words to Live By mural at the Rochester Public Market

tive called Market Share in the Central Park neighborhood. The initiative will focus on education, mentorship, and use of creative space. His working relationship with the Rochester Public Library also continues. Recently, he and Muniz reunited to paint a mural outside the Frederick Douglass Library on South Avenue. Dunwoody's portrait of Douglass gets a touch of vivid flair from Muniz, with some added words of inspiration from students at School 12. The self-taught Muniz primarily lives in Brazil but divides his time between there and Rochester's South Wedge neighborhood. Like Dunwoody, he loves bringing life to communities with his colorful art. He was pleased to share his Salvador neighborhood with the Fruit Belt artists and filmmakers. He explains that with paint and supply donations from Sherwin-Williams, obtaining passports and visas, and travel time, the effort to paint a 100-meter block in six days meant a lot for his neighborhood as well as the artists, "Shawn and I know the value of this experience for the kids," says Muniz, "You really had to be there to understand."

For Muniz, art is something pure and meant to be shared with others. The joy he gleans from creating work lies in hearing the uncensored responses from the people who see his work every day, "You can never tell how people will react," he

says, "but it has always been positive. I like to hear what they have to say—especially children!" Most importantly, he wants people to understand the passion, dedication, and inspiration it takes to be a career

artist. "Being an artist is not easy. It's hard work. People have to realize there's beauty in doing things not just for money—we do it because we just have to do it." <sup>(585)</sup>



Karina Sáez-Bula in front of the first mural project she worked on with Dunwoody at the Ibero building on East Main Street