

SIUE Fine Arts Student Duenne Schlarman Honors Brooklyn's History on Mural

by Nicole Franklin
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EDWARDSVILLE - Out of the artistic strokes of varying browns, the shades of burnt orange, the canary yellows and somber grays, emerges a remarkable, pictorial story and heritage – still unknown to many – that illustrates the history of America's oldest Black incorporated town.

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's [Duenne Schlarman](#), a Master of Fine Arts candidate, long-time artist and veteran educator, recently completed a mural inside of the Senior Citizens Center in Brooklyn.

“I was extremely honored to have been asked to do this mural,” said Schlarman. “I read and researched heavily for this project. It was a tremendously heartfelt and emotional experience for me.”

The SIUE Successful Communities Collaborative (SSCC) allocated a portion of an Illinois Invocation Network grant to fund the mural, according to Connie Frey Spurlock, PhD, SSCC director, professor of sociology and interim director for the Southern Illinois University System’s Office of Community Engagement.

“The mural captures the great and rich history of Brooklyn,” said Dwight Fletcher, Brooklyn mayor pro tem of the St. Clair County village of 700, also known as Lovejoy.

“I love Brooklyn. I have lived here all my life,” the 71-year-old continued. “I’m dedicated to the city for all its good and bad. I tell people, ‘Brooklyn is not on me. Brooklyn is in me.’”

Before sitting down with her ideas and sketches, Schlarman met with Aurelia Teletia Jackson, Quinn Chapel AME Church pastor and Vera Banks, Brooklyn mayor, to hear about the village’s rich and notable past, and listen to their thoughts about the proposed artwork.

“I didn’t know that Quinn Chapel had been a big stop of the Underground Railroad,” said Schlarman. “I don’t think many people realize it either. So, Pastor Jackson and Mayor Banks wanted the church to be part of the mural. And Mayor Banks specifically asked me to draw a lawn jockey.”

There are unverified stories that lawn jockeys were used to signal if a house was safe or not for freedom seekers, according to Schlarman.

What Schlarman knows for sure is the bravery and tenacity of the freedom seekers, and she wanted to convey that to the observer. “I used a warm pallet of colors to show the longevity that the escaped slaves went through, and to portray the struggle,” she said.

Regarding creating the mural, the artist said she had a brief battle of her own – with herself. “I had a lot of concerns as a white person, as to whether I was the appropriate person to do the mural,” confessed Schlarman. “I didn’t want to offend anyone.”

But after her extensive research, meetings with city and community leaders, and her interest in the subject matter and history, Schlarman decided to take on the task.

“I felt I could be passionate about painting our history and represent it, because this is American history,” she punctuated.

Two creatives who Schlarman said influenced her work are Black renaissance painter and graphic artist [Aaron Douglas](#) and Black contemporary sketch artist [Kara Walker](#).

Fletcher offered his praise for the artwork and the artist. “It is very well done,” said Fletcher. “When I look at it, I get chills. I see part of our history come to life. She did a great job.”

“I appreciate her giving her time and energy to try and help lift up our community,” he continued.

From another perspective, Frey Spurlock sees the mural as the tip of the iceberg of tourism and revenue streams for Brooklyn.

“I’m hoping that this mural can be like a domino effect that will bring in people to the community, to learn more about the rich history of Brooklyn,” she said. “And to engage more with the community and create more of a connection.”

For more of Schlarman’s artwork, [click here](#).

[SIUE Successful Communities Collaborative \(SSCC\)](#) is a cross-disciplinary program that supports one-year partnerships between the University and communities in Illinois to advance local resilience and sustainability based on community-identified environmental, social and economic issues and needs. Our mission is to connect Illinois communities with the students and faculty of the University.