

## **The Block Beautification Project: Three Years Later**

Three years ago, I was commissioned to be the lead artist of the Anchor Grant Beautification project, which I wrote about in 2017 for the *International Social Science Review*. Since then, there have been even more opportunities to partake in creating community (or public) artwork, from painting murals in different communities in Baltimore City alongside well-known muralists to creating plywood dancing sculptures for an annual ball. Even though I had been producing artwork elsewhere, my thoughts returned to the original artwork that I created with the youth and I wondered if it was still standing. I visit West Baltimore to spend time with relatives and friends and attend community meetings at Bon Secours Community Works. I took these visits as opportunities to revisit the community and see the original artwork alongside the latest amazing artworks that bloomed within the Shipley Hills community.

As I revisited the plywood artwork in those neighborhoods, the conditions within some areas in these communities were pretty much the same as they were before—trash-ridden properties, rat-infected alleyways, and rows of vacant houses. Although it was not a pleasant sight to see occasional blight that plagues most poor communities, it was awesome to see familiar faces in the community that take pride in maintaining the neighborhood. Before each visit, I recognize there are three possible statuses of our artwork. It was most likely that the artwork was still there, but the artwork may have disappeared (or worse, been vandalized), and some brand-new installations of public artwork may have appeared in the neighborhood, which I knew had occurred in at least a few places, as I also had a hand in the recent installment of newer public artwork. However, there was a fourth possibility I had not accounted for...

*The Tour Begins...*



**The 1500 Block of West Lexington Street was the very first location that I visited upon the tour in West Baltimore. Photographed by Kenneth Clemons, May 28, 2019.**

The plywood doors and windowpanes on the 1500 block of West Lexington Street are still intact. I was pleasantly surprised that the paint was still fresh and vibrant with the Bon Secours Hospital logo still clearly visible. Even though the bright navy blue and white painted images were present on the plywood boards, the vacant homes remain a reminder of the bleak outlook of the block. On one side of the block, there are residents in the homes but the homes are vacant on the other side. I do recall one resident was quite pleased when we were painting these images the first time.



**The plywood artwork remains the same on the corner of South Pulaski St and the 2100 Block of West Baltimore Street. Photographed by Kenneth Clemons, May 28, 2019.**

Next I visited the corner of 2100 West Baltimore Street and South Pulaski Street. The plywood artwork is also in great condition with all the boards present. What I remember most about doing this artwork was the difficult challenge of measuring the shapes and painting the door and windowpanes images on a downhill slope.



**Images of windowpanes painted on plywood boards appears on both opposite properties on the 2100 block of West Baltimore Street. Photographed by Kenneth Clemons, May 28, 2019.**

Now this was an unexpected bonus! Imagine my surprise when I saw these boards of which I had no recollection. Perhaps I may have overlooked the boards when I was writing and photographing the article back in 2017. These sets of plywood artwork were mounted right around the corner of plywood artwork of 2100 West Baltimore Street and South Pulaski St. In fact, these boards are on opposite sides on the same block.



*And now for the bad news.....Unfortunately.*



**About three vacant houses still had the door and windowpanes painted on plywood boards on the 1800 block of West Saratoga Street. Photographed by Kenneth Clemons, May 28, 2019.**

Some of the houses on the 1800 block of West Saratoga Street have been demolished and hence the plywood artwork is gone. I was somewhat aware that the houses were in bad shape or condemned. I just wish that it was some way to save or preserved the artwork from those homes,

as the artwork could have been used for another vacant property within the community. If only there was some notification that was given before wasting away good artwork.



**The area has been taken over overgrown weeds (or plants) and trash of the Fayette Street Outreach garden. Photographed by Kenneth Clemons, May 28, 2019.**



**The plywood flowers that once were mounted on the gate of the Fayette Street Outreach garden are no longer present on the corner of North Pulaski Street and Vine Street.  
Photographed by Kenneth Clemons, May 28, 2019.**

Another blow was the absence of the plywood flowers that had been mounted on the gates of the Fayette Street Outreach garden on the corner of North Pulaski Street and Vine Street as the garden was uprooted. Fortunately, three out of the nine flowers were saved from the wreckage. I hope that I am able to reproduce those flowers once again and remount them on the gates of a garden in the near future. The area that once was beautiful has gone back to a trash-ridden, dump site. It is truly upsetting to see these pictures in light of President Donald Trump's controversial remarks a few weeks ago about the residents of Baltimore City. Regardless of what President Trump said, Baltimore is a great city that is filled with great people who produce awesome artwork. We have to work to keep moving forward in terms of making our urban neighborhoods a great place to live even without the usual push of gentrification.



*Progress Onward, New Growth.....New artwork.*



**A beacon of hope (Fayette Street Outreach) opens its doors to the Shipley Hills community at 29 North Smallwood Street. Photographed by Kenneth Clemons, May 28, 2019.**

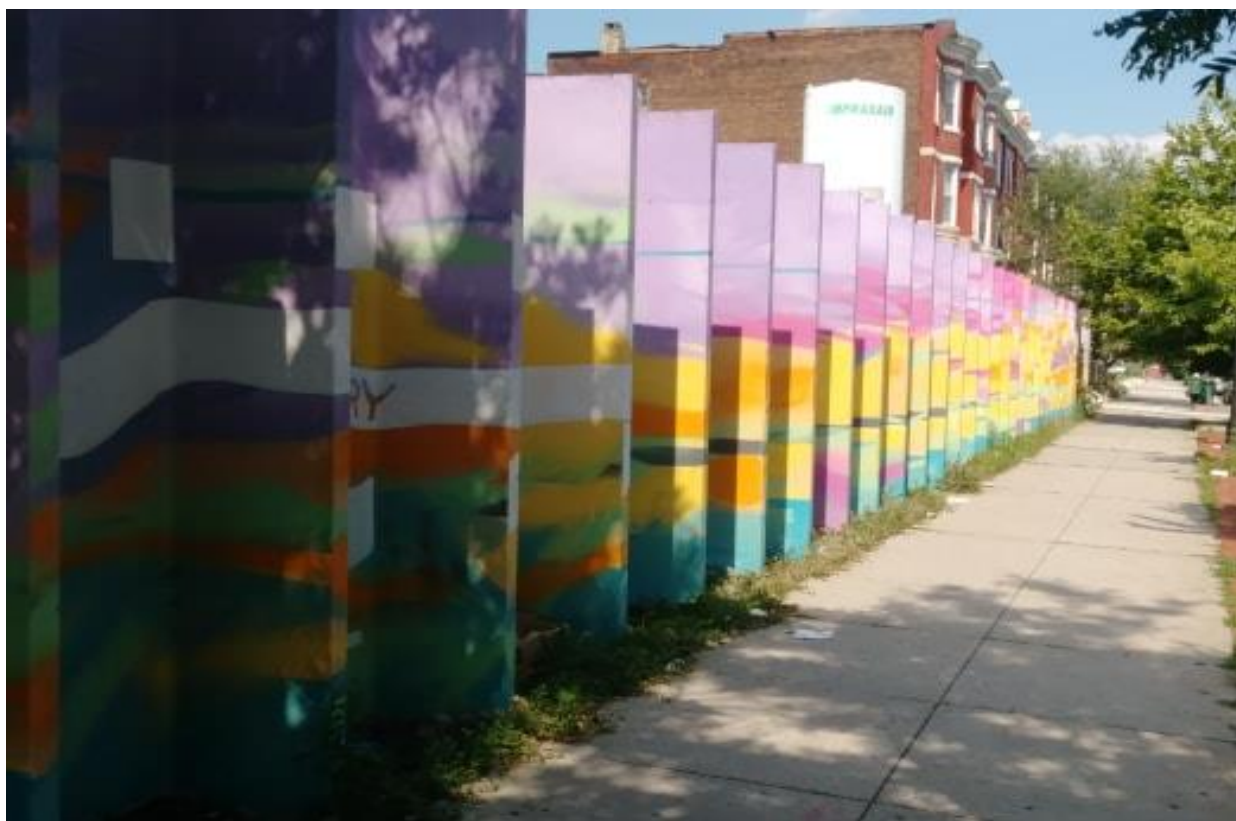
A new place opened in early April 2019. Fayette Street Outreach (FSO) is located on 29 North Smallwood Street. The Fayette Street Outreach is a non-profit organization that provides services for the low-income families, including job placement programs, GED classes, and learning to code. The center also hosts community meetings from time to time. Edna Manns-Lake, founder of Fayette Street Outreach notes, “We’re, like, a beacon in the middle of an ocean



that people can come to for rescue.” The Outreach is a positive force in the community, as residents learn to grow vegetables and then have access to fresh healthy food within the community. The FSO hopes to raise money, and accepts donations to fund many classes and to hopefully obtain seven vacant properties on north Smallwood Street, where they would open a food training program/catering hall. The building was the birthplace of one of my plywood sculptures that I created back in 2011.



**Colorful mural that signifies the 100 celebration of Bon Secours Hospital on the 2000 block of West Baltimore Street. Photographed by Kenneth Clemons, May 28, 2019.**



**Bright, lively, and vibrant colors are displayed in rhythmic patterns onto the hospital parking lot property. Photographed by Kenneth Clemons, May 28, 2019.**

As I made my way towards the community center, I stumbled upon a very colorful mural on the hospital property parking lot. The vibrant, bright colors displayed and danced on these walls as if they have a life of their own. Artists Whitney Frazier and Crystal Micriotti spray painted the mural, which was produced through a partnership between Bon Secours Hospital and Kaiser Permanente to celebrate the one-hundred anniversary of Bon Secours Hospital. I believe that the partnership between the two organizations was another form of revitalization—of a healthier West Baltimore.



**The church across the street from Bon Secours Community Works will be an extension of providing health services to the community. Photographed by Kenneth Clemons, May 28, 2019.**

I learned that St. Martin Church, which had sat vacant across the street from the Bon Secours Community Works, was recently purchased. The new goal of the church is to expand its community health services in West Baltimore; in addition, the church will address some of the ongoing problems that the community faces in regards to poor health, such as providing preventive and primary care services, behavioral health support, and wellness programs.





**The layout of the Urban Farm and Community Garden. Photographed by Kenneth Clemons, May 28, 2019.**

There is new life in West Baltimore in the form of the urban farm and community garden. An overhead view and a map of the urban farm is on display for any person who wants to see the layout of the community garden. Urban Farmer Rich Kolm is the main caretaker of the urban farm and community garden.





**Vibrant, bright colored metal containers are displayed within the community garden.  
Photographed by Kenneth Clemons, May 28, 2019.**



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**Mobil Market Trucks are in service to sell the home-grown fruits and vegetables from the urban farm. Photographed by bonsecours.com, May 3, 2019.**

Three large containers were painted with the community garden. I was contacted by Michael Rosenband, the person in charge of the project, who wanted me to help paint the metal containers alongside artists Whitney Frazier and Crystal Micriotti (who painted the colorful mural on the hospital property parking lot of the 2000 block of West Baltimore Street). This was the first opportunity for all three of us to paint on metal containers. I had the chance to use the paint sprayer machine, which was fun to use but tricky to handle. Those same bright colors and patterns that appeared on the mural from the hospital property are shown again within the design. Waves of unique shapes combine with light and dark earthy colors and images of plants and leaves all over the containers. I also assisted Whitney, Crystal, and a third volunteer in painting the Mobil Market Food Trucks in connection to access food project lead by Michael Rosenband and Bon Secours Community Works.



**A beautiful face emerges within the colorful leaves and patterns of the mural onto the metal container. Photographed by Kenneth Clemons, May 28, 2019.**

The third container added another local artist, Naomi Hanna, to the team as we added a huge face onto the metal container. Naomi Henna explained the inspiration behind the image was to honor a friend she met and knows who from another country. The image was a huge cutout that was painted on a paper that reserved for any form of paints. We also applied a clear sticky glue adhesive substance to hold the huge cutout onto the metal container. Soon after the face was hardened and dry, additional leaf designs with shades of yellow paint blended perfectly within the container





**A painting event consist of Aramark and Bon Secours workers/volunteers teaming up together to paint the plywood artwork for the community garden. Photographed by Kenneth Clemons, November 16, 2018.**





**An image of Cesar Chavez, an icon of Latino American civil rights/labor leader is mounted on the fence within the garden. Photographed by Kenneth Clemons, May 28, 2019.**



**The finished plywood artwork “Famous Faces of Urban Agriculture,” is mounted on a wooden fence of the Urban Farm and Community Garden across the street from Bon Secours Community Works. Photographed by Kenneth Clemons, May 28, 2019.**

I also had a hand in creating some new artwork within the urban farm. The artwork display, “Famous Faces of Urban Agriculture,” opened in November 2018. Originally, the event was scheduled for October 2018, but was rescheduled to November 2018 due to weather conditions. The original plan was to have the volunteers paint the mounted artwork within the garden, but instead, I chose to do the activity inside the community center. Michael Rosenband and I went shopping at Home Depot for the supplies such as plywood boards, primer, paint cans, paintbrushes, and plastic cups for the painting event. I was proud to be the lead artist, which meant supervising up to fifteen volunteers a day made up of Aramark and Bon Secours employees as part of the Day of Services Art Project. The artwork consisted of twelve plywood images that shared four of the positive messages (created by Sarah McCann), alongside famous faces of agriculture, including George Washington Carver, Cesar Chavez, Henry Blair, (and other notable figures), and some farming images. I created an easy “paint by numbers” method to help volunteers paint even if they did not have an artistic background. I had produced paint by numbers color guide sheets for volunteers to follow and match with the exact paint colors apply

onto the plywood images. The painting activity was completed in one day, with all colors matching onto the plywood artwork. Today, the plywood artwork is mounted on a brand-new wooden fence.

### *Conclusion*



**These two plywood boards hold very important messages despite the condition of the community. Street Photographed by Kenneth Clemons, May 28, 2019.**

I quite pleased with the growth, revitalization, and progress of West Baltimore. I want to say that I am happy to continue to either assist to paint alongside with fellow artists, and to lead a painting activity with volunteers. A few pieces of my artwork no longer exist (or were removed to another location I do not know about). However, these losses have not caused me to



lose hope. As I was walking through the neighborhood, I came across two plywood boards on the vacant homes that carried an important message. I view these two boards as indicators of hope. Even though the nearly-decayed boards were surrounded by plants and trash, I admired the boards despite the wear and tear they clearly showed. The artwork may not be professional, but the messages are clear: aim to make a mindful impact by caring for the community and take pride in one's neighborhood.