

The Block Beautification Project:
One Artist's Work to Help Make West Baltimore Beautiful

The Bon Secours Community Works is a nonprofit organization striving to enrich west Baltimore communities through housing, and health and community development initiatives. In 2007, I graduated from a four-week job-readiness program from the Bon Secours Community Works Center. I was the only student to have an interest in art. Until the Bon Secours program, my career interests had veered towards illustration, namely creating comic book characters. However, At Bon Secours, I was introduced to Ashley Milburn, a community artist/activist from East Baltimore, who presented me with the opportunity to make public artwork. Mr. Milburn threw down the gauntlet and challenged me to produce community artwork in 2009. At first, I was reluctant to accept the challenge since I had concerns surrounding the vandalism of public art. Vandalism is a constant problem wherever there are murals or sculpture(s) in public spaces around Baltimore City. Despite these concerns, I chose not to cower away from the challenge, and this would lead me to my work with the Positive Youth Expressions, Inc. Educational Institute (P.Y.E), a local charter school in Baltimore City.

I answered the call to produce my first public artwork after further meetings and discussions with Ashley Milburn. I made three, small scale, chipboard models of human-life figures merged together. These figures reflected famous African American artists. I also created illustrations of various models for future sculptures. There was one model in particular that would define my plywood style of public artwork. I had defined my signature based on the style of African, geometric-style artwork created by Aaron Douglas, an African American painter who was well known during the Harlem Renaissance.

By 2010, my mission was to produce a trio set of six-foot, human-like plywood sculptures to be installed in three different locations within the Bon Secours community, titled *Clemons*, *What I Said*. The project was my first public installation as a lead artist. As an assistant artist, I had participated in designing and painting a mural titled *Waverly Village*, located on the corner on Greenmount Avenue and 33rd Street in Waverly, Maryland. In 2011, the opportunity not only gave me the chance to display my talents as an up-coming artist within the community, it also allowed my artwork to be copyrighted by the United States Copyright Office as of February 2011. I gained another opportunity to create more public artwork with Alternate Roots, a community arts/activism organization based in Atlanta, Georgia. There was a three-day arts festival called Rootsfest for which I produced a sculpture, *Clemons, Aqua Swan*.

Timothy Bridges, a community organizer from the Bon Secours Community Works, recommended me to be the artist designing and cutting out flowers for the students of Positive Youth Expressions Educational Institute in July 2015. Mr. Bridges was familiar with my public artwork within the Bon Secours community four years earlier. The Bon Secours community hopes to destigmatize West Baltimore and the people who live in the communities after the negative press surrounding the Baltimore riots in April 2015, instigated by the arrest and death of Freddie Gray within police custody. Constant imaging of urban blight is the central theme for West Baltimore, even though there are still good people living within these communities.



The Fayette Street Outreach Garden is the starting point of many flower sculptures that will be displayed within the Bon Secours Community. Photographs by Kenneth Clemons, September 1, 2015.

Before I started the Block Beautification Project, I saw plenty of blight in a neighborhood that showed signs of neglect and decay. There had been a couple gang-related shootings in the area. Tremendous amounts of trash accumulated in the numerous vacant lots. Rats occupied the trash-ridden alleyways, which had layers of garbage that projected horrible odors. The heavy presence of drug dealers could be felt on every two or three blocks within the neighborhood. A number of houses not only showed signs of decay, but were also most likely condemned. Pitiful sights of crumbling sidewalks were present on most blocks. Not surprisingly, the people living in this neighborhood had sad, depressed faces, as if they suffered from mass low self-esteem.

My work as a community artist with the Bon Scours community and the students from the P.Y.E has led me to investigate this question: "What visible signs of care and liveliness would I see after installing plywood sculptures of flowers, created by the P.Y.E students in that community, and painting images of window panes and doors on plywood?"

Students from the P.Y.E Educational Institute and I are committed to the Block Beautification Project. The project's main objective is the revitalization or beautification of the

Bon Secours community. Even though the project consists of public art sculptures, it will also include banner signage, vacant home exterior improvements, sanitation, and plantings. To be rid of urban decay and the look of rot and despair that some urban cities and neighborhoods possess are also goals. The project is currently at the starting stage in terms of producing artwork at a community garden, and there is much work to be done. The following are my personal observations of what I have seen during the progress of the Block Beautification Project (also known as the Anchor Grant Beautification Project).

What I did Start?

There were deadlines issued in terms of installing artwork. I am proud to say the artworks were completed and placed onto the properties before the deadline. Mr. Bridges informed me about the type of flowers selected for the public artwork; in addition, he was adamant about the use of the iris flower, which is Bon Secours hospital's blue and white logo. It had to be included in the public artwork. There were some supplies that were bought from the budget of the Anchor Grant Beautification Project, and there were some supplies that I already possessed. Paula Jacoby-Garrett, a freelance writer from Nevada states, "No matter the size or budget or your park and recreation centers, there is an opportunity to include public arts into your sites— Be creative with space and look for opportunities to place art in unexpected areas." I believe Mr. Bridges trusted me to be as creative as I wanted in working on the Anchor Grant Beautification Project.

Procuring supplies was a key step in the project. Lionel Terrell, the manager of the Clean and Green team, was responsible for picking up the supplies after I made the list. The plywood (12 x 24) boards were purchased from Home Depot store at various prices, depending on the type of plywood. The jigsaw blade and the head visor were on loan from the community center. The jigsaw blade is the tool utilized to cut the images from plywood, and the head visor provides

eye and mouth protection from saw dust. Lionel bought numerous cans of glossy exterior paints, ranging in cost from twenty to twenty-three dollars. A painting kit that included two rollers, a paint tray, and a paint can opener cost twelve dollars. The fifty-dollar workbench was not only used to draw the flower images but also to cut out the images that lay in a horizontal position. I was given two to three pieces of sandpaper sheets, which were used for smoothing out the rough edges so the plywood cut-outs were splinter-free. A pair of work gloves for hand protection cost ten dollars. I supplied my own pencils and black permanent markers to draw out the images. The students from the P.Y.E already had paintbrushes from school. I would draw the flower images and the window panes/doors images on the plywood boards outside of the community center only when the weather was nice and warm.

What Happened in the Classes and Community?

The first time I engaged the students from the P.Y.E. Institute was on September 15, 2015. The students were between seven to fourteen years old and attended either elementary or middle school. The students were excited about the project, but were less responsive to my instructions than I expected when I met them for the first time. Some students were somewhat shy and played around the classroom even though their teacher was present. I developed a way to promote enthusiasm when painting the artwork. I would give a cry, similar to a call and a response technique, which inspired positive energy. For example, I would have the students shout out with joy and excitement each time I asked them with a question. The students from the P.Y.E Institute painted the first three plywood flowers within an hour.

The first three plywood flowers were installed onto the gates of the community garden, which is on the corner of North Pulaski Street and Vine Street, on October 23, 2015.

Congressman William "Pete" Welch from the ninth district came to lend a hand drawing the flowers onto the 12 x 24 plywood boards.

The students from P.Y.E. Institute are painting the first three flowers in the auditorium. Photographs by Kenneth Clemons September 15, 2015.



I think the beautification project is a way to reconnect with the community by showing a handful of people working together to make a change. I anticipated that we were going to draw three images of flowers, but instead, we drew six images of flowers. "I have always believed that art needs to be seen or displayed to be important. After all, ours is a 'visual' art," said Kimberly

Wheeler, an art teacher from Nederland, Colorado. I understand why Kimberly Wheeler emphasized the importance of installing visual artwork to the public; it is because public artwork can promote vitality within the community. The Clean and Green team were there to clear out any weeds, trash, and litter that were inside the garden.

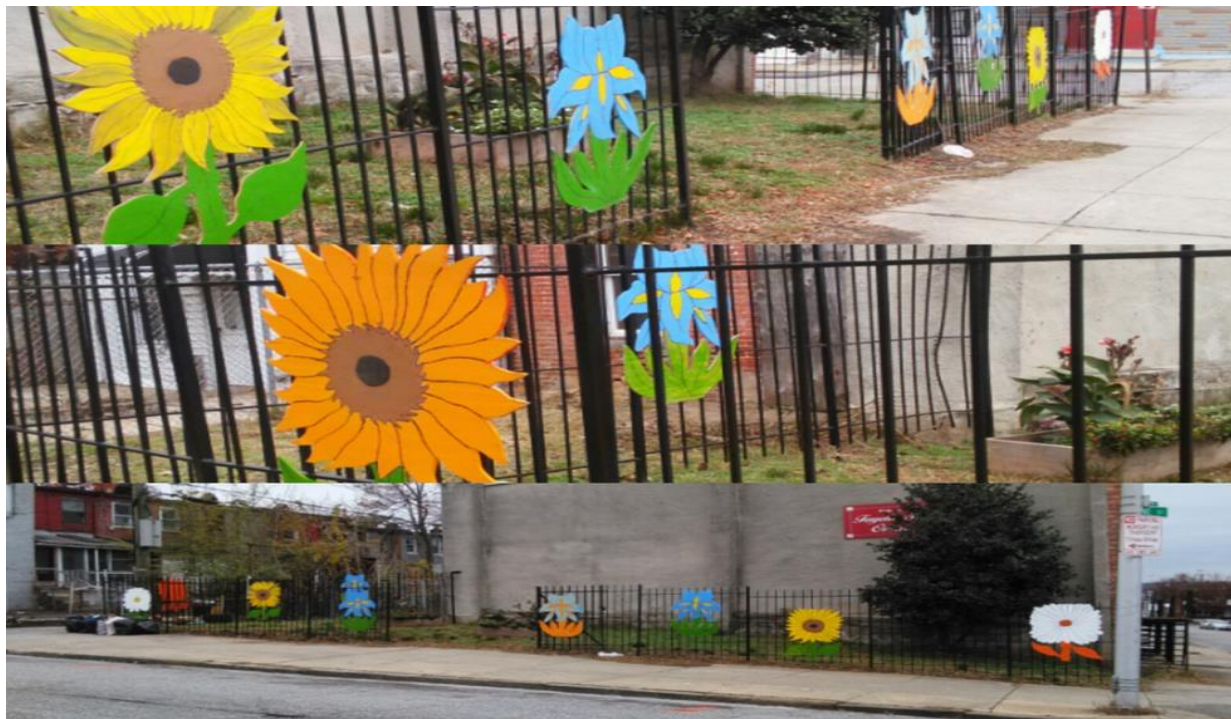
The students from P.Y.E. were more than ready to paint when I returned with unpainted plywood boards on November 18, 2015. The six plywood flowers took two days to complete, since the paints were running low and had to be restocked. The students became aware of their personal commitment to the art project. At this point, the students from the P.Y.E would remember my name each time I entered the classroom. "Mr. Kenny!" greeted one of the students happily. Another student mentioned that he took his mom to the community garden, and he told



Councilman William "Pete" Welch, Community Organizer Timothy Bridges and myself alongside the students from the P.Y.E. are drawing on the 12x24 plywood boards at the community garden site on the corner of North Pulaski Street and Vine St. Photographs by Kenneth Clemons, October 23, 2015.

her that he had participated in making the artwork.

The students painting technique quickly improved. The students were becoming more responsive to my directions. The students suggested a wish list of flowers they wanted me to draw and cut out. A rose, tulip, and a Black-Eyed Susan were some of the choices they mentioned. The only flower that remained the same within the Block Beautification Project was the iris, Bon Secours hospital's logo. The students were more than happy to assist me in dumping out the water and cleaning the paintbrushes. The students eagerly awaited the next set of flowers or the next art assignment.



The P.Y.E students were more focused on the plywood artwork. The students were bold when they suggested a wish list of flowers they wanted me to draw onto the plywood cut-out boards. Photographs by Kenneth Clemons, November 18, 2015.

What Happened after the Installations?

The six plywood flowers were installed alongside the first three flowers onto the gate one week later on November 28, 2015. Mr. Bridges placed them on the gate, so the sight caught me

off guard when I rode the MTA #51 bus line to the corner of North Pulaski Street and Vine Street that morning. I was overwhelmed. The only thing that bothered me was the trash bags that were conspicuous outside of the garden, even though the inside section of the garden was clear of trash. I believe the Clean and Green Team had cleaned the garden prior to the dumping of trash outside of the garden.

The next step of the Block Beautification Project began on February 9, 2016. The students from P.Y.E did not participate in the second phase of the project. I was responsible for painting images of window panes and doors onto the plywood boards. The goal of the artwork was to place these boards on vacant houses' window panes and doors. The plywood artwork was a facade to cover the sight of decay from the boarded up houses. Three properties within the community were chosen to present this artwork to the public. The panels would be installed at 2112 and 2134 West Baltimore Street within the Fayette Street Outreach community, and 2137 West Baltimore Street within the Boyd-Booth community. The plywood panels had not yet been placed at the properties; however, many community properties will display this type of artwork

over a period of time. The vacant houses were already purchased from various homeowners in order to get permission to mount the painted images of plywood onto the properties.

Unfortunately my initial fears came true, and the plywood flowers installed back in September were vandalized as of March 7, 2016. Six out of the nine plywood flowers received considerable damage, with leaves kicked and ripped off; only three of the flowers were left untouched. Sadly, there was no way to find out who committed this act of vandalism. Nina J Morris, a geography professor from the University of Edinburgh, makes an interesting point about proper public artwork maintenance and shares experiences from a similar project:

Images of window panes and doors are painted onto the plywood boards. The objective of the artwork is to be mounted onto the windows of vacant properties within the communities. The artwork will give life to these



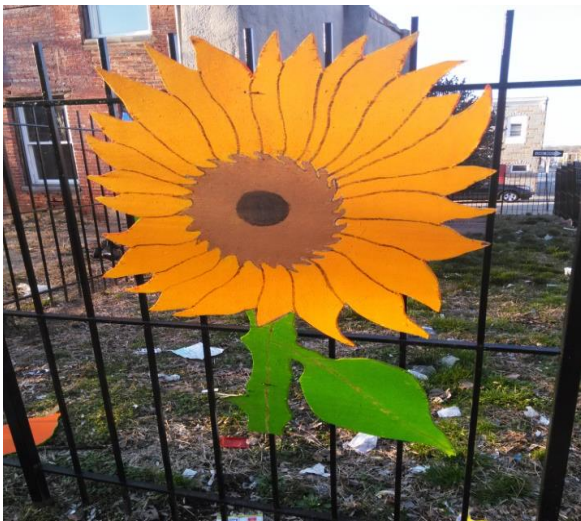
condemned houses. Photograph by Kenneth Clemons, February 9, 2016.

“For example, less than five years after their installation, all but a couple of the artworks created under the auspices of the Glasgow Five Spaces programme (a project contemporary with TAPG) had fallen into disrepair despite the programme’s appeal to more solid, durational materiality.” I did not know whether the beautification project sponsors had a budget to repair

the artwork, but I was not going to let the damaged public artwork that the P.Y.E students had done wither away and deteriorate. I attended a community meeting at a church on Tuesday afternoon, March 15, 2016 to address the issue of the damaged artwork, and I made a promise to salvage or preserve the artwork. I managed to preserve six plywood flowers that were damaged by making some slight alterations to make the artwork functional and presentable as of March 26, 2016.

Results

I had asked the question earlier: "What visible signs of care and liveliness would I see after installing plywood sculptures of flowers, created by the P.Y.E students in that community, and painting images of window panes and doors on plywood?" As much as I hoped for the better, art did not dramatically change the community. The conditions inside the Bon Secours



The flowers on the left had been damaged due to a recent act of vandalism. One of the leaves was either snapped or kicked off. On the right, the same received a new coat of paint, stronger black ink lines, and a few alterations so the flower sculptures are salvaged. Photographs by Kenneth Clemons, March 26, 2016.

community have not improved as much as the other communities outside of the perimeter. I feel like my assumptions about the positive change were inaccurate because I actually believed short-term changes would happen soon after the artwork was installed.

Is it unfair to say that everything remained the same? I do not believe it is an unfair evaluation of the Bon Secours community (and my community) after the artwork was installed. In fact, I remember a couple of unfortunate events that took place within the community where I have lived the majority of my life. I mentioned that six out of nine plywood flower sculptures that students from the P.Y.E. Institute drew and painted were vandalized. There was also a shooting of a young black male in his early twenties who was killed in broad daylight in November 2015. The shooting took place about two or three blocks from where I live. Black males are occupying the same corners and selling illegal drugs outside the corner stores. In addition, drug dealers are selling their illegal products inside the carry-out stores while customers are making legal purchases. Drug users frequently go to these carry-outs or stores to look for the drug dealers who use those stores as bases or hubs. The vacant, rundown, or condemned buildings are still present within the. The alleyways around the corner from the community garden/artwork continues to be a trash dumping site where drug dealers and drug users occasionally hang out. On the flip side, there were a few positive responses to the plywood flower sculptures. Residents who attend monthly community meetings really loved the plywood artwork. Random citizens and residents who live in the community really admired the fact that I was touching up the artwork.

What's Next?

I want to see the students doing any art-related activities aimed at addressing the issues of the community. I wish to emphasize the importance of how and why everyone in the

community must take care of our neighborhoods because it is similar to our own personal well-being. I am going to continue producing plywood flower sculptures alongside the P.Y.E students to be installed within the designated community gardens. Carol Grant, artist and professor at Coppin State University, suggested some strategies that I can learn to reduce or prevent vandalism if it happens again, including producing a new flower design which is more difficult to rip or break off loose parts. I will mount new public artworks in the community in well-secured areas where people cannot reach them, unlike the first nine flower sculptures installed on the gate. In addition to mounting public artworks in a secure place, I want to have surveillance cameras installed in areas where public artworks are displayed. There will be two more community artwork installations similar to the community garden on North Pulaski and Vine Street. I plan to involve the students not only in painting the flowers but also helping me paint the plywood boards with images of the window panes and doors. I will continue to monitor the displayed plywood flowers and have the P.Y.E. students join in a “fix a flower” project on a monthly basis. I hope the African symbols art idea that I mentioned to Mr. Bridges becomes a reality, and will be painted onto the plywood boards. Mr. Bridges told me that another neighborhood organization would love to have me make more public artwork that is similar to the Block Beautification Project. The starting date of the potential project is unclear for the moment. By what I have seen so far from the Block Beautification Project, the best is yet to come.

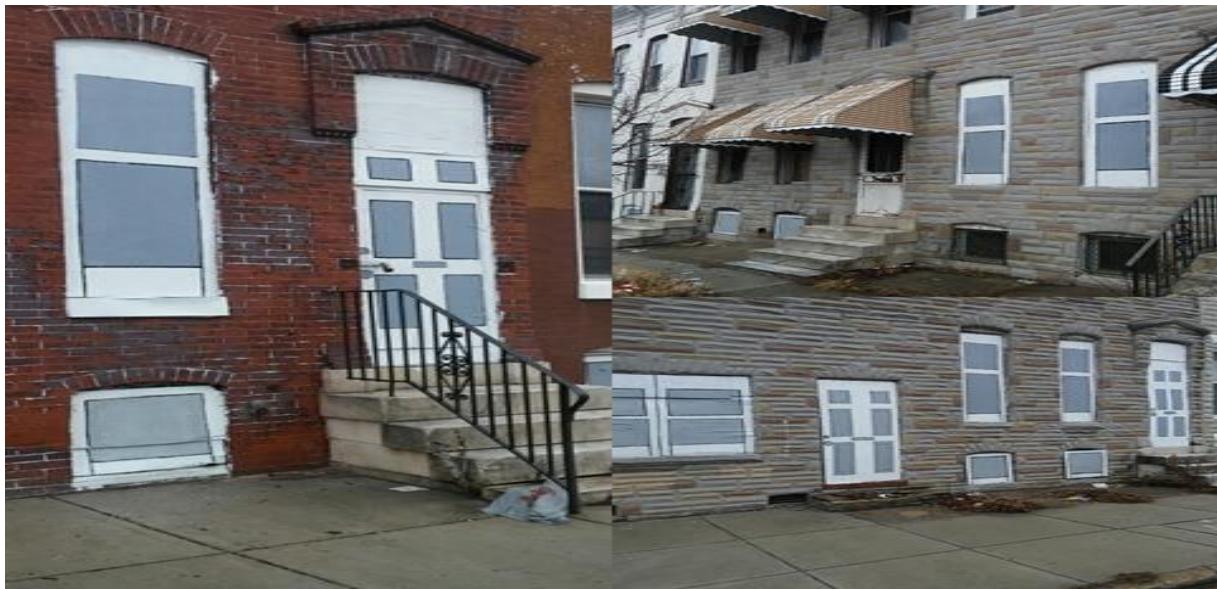
Updates from the Project.

As of July 2016, I have resumed the Block Beautification Project by painting more images of doors and windowpanes. The 1500 block of West Lexington St. now displays the painted images of doors and windowpanes on mounted plywood boards. I thought it was a great



The plywood boards on the vacant houses on the 1500 block of West Lexington Street. Photographs by Kenneth Clemons, August 20, 2016.

idea to use the royal blue primer to serve as the background color and the white paint primer serves as window panes and door design. The proposed color selection symbolizes Bon Secours blue and white Iris logo, which is displayed within the banners around the community and hospital building. The challenge of this task was quite difficult to complete since the plywood boards were already mounted onto the vacant houses. An additional problem that plagued the task of completing the artwork was the hot summer weather, as there was very little shade where I was painting. Nevertheless, I had some assistance from Shakira Foster, another manager from the Clean and Green Team, and a couple of students from the Youth Employment and Entrepreneurship Program (Y.E.E.P) to apply the royal blue primer. I managed to finish the public artwork by applying the white semi-gloss paint for door designs and window panes despite the humid weather. I am quite pleased that the artwork turned out better than I expected!



The original white background and charcoal gray color design are back on the 1800 block of West Saratoga Street. Photograph by Kenneth Clemons, January 21, 2017.

The next area where I had resume painting images of doors and windowpanes on the plywood boards of vacant houses was the 1800 block of West Saratoga St as of November 2016. Due to the shortage of the royal blue primer that was used on the plywood boards on the 1500 West Lexington St., I had to use the white primer and charcoal grey paint color. Thankfully, the warm, humid November weather made it very easy for me and a perfect opportunity to complete the public artwork. November in Baltimore usually sees the temperature drop into the low 50s; however, the temperature was in the upper 60s. The residents in the area would come by and ask or compliment me about the public artwork. Most of the residents were unaware of what and why I was painting on the plywood boards. I was more than happy to talk and explain the objective of the public artwork.

I completed my last series of painted images of doors and windowpanes on plywood boards, located on the corner of West Baltimore and South Pulaski Streets, as of April 2017. I could see before that this area would pose some challenges, since the houses are on a downhill slope. In addition, some of the pieces of the mounted plywood boards were quite bigger than the

standard 12 x 24 plywood boards. The plywood boards were just reachable for me to paint with a paint roller extender while standing on a six foot ladder. Residents from the area were curious and asked about (and complimented!) the public artwork. I remember one resident, originally



The last block of painted plywood boards on vacant houses is across from the Bon Secours Hospital. Photographs by Kenneth Clemons, April 29, 2017.

from Canada, who lived in the Shipley Hill community for numerous years told me about the history of the homeowners who once lived in those homes.

I am happy to report that after finishing up the public artwork, none of the plywood artwork has been vandalized, and they are all still standing despite the weather conditions. One humorous response to the artwork, shared by one of the residents, was that he thought the doors were real and he went up the stairs to see if anyone was home. Talk about life imitating art in the community!