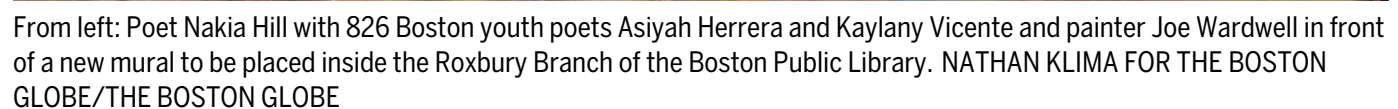


By Cate McQuaid Globe Correspondent, Updated November 24, 2021, 12:00 p.m.



9/16/22, 9:37 AM

she was stunned. Her words ran in oscillating colors across a vivid backdrop of Malcolm X Boulevard:

“Home to me is a piece of sidewalk/ Between two little worlds,/ Corner store jams, /
And Stony brook shade, and /Jackson sq squabbles.”

“Wow,” said Herrera, 20, during a visit to Wardwell’s Dorchester studio earlier this month. “It’s like, ‘Oh, that was the thing that we were doing in front of the computer screen for hours and hours and hours.’”

The project is a collaboration among Wardwell, poet Nakia Hill, and the young poets of the [Youth Literary Advisory Board](#) at 826 Boston, a writing, tutoring, and publishing nonprofit in Egleston Square, part of a nationwide network cofounded by writer Dave Eggers and educator Nínive Calegari in 2002. Hill directs 826 Boston’s Youth Writing Program Innovation and Partnerships.

Herrera, Hill, and five other writers have been meeting remotely since early in the pandemic and composing poems about Roxbury for Wardwell to include in the mural. Installation was completed on Nov. 20.



826 Boston youth poet Asiyah Herrera photographs her portion of a new mural inside the Roxbury branch of the Boston Public Library. NATHAN KLIMA FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The three-part cityscape hangs 12 feet above the floor in the main library space and is visible from Warren Street. It's the first public art installation in the newly [renovated](#) library. Two more are in the works; the second will be a mural by Jeremy "Sobek" Harrison. The third has yet to be commissioned.

ADVERTISING



The mural is Wardwell's first public art project, funded by the city of Boston's Percent for Art program. It depicts the neighborhood from Roxbury Community College to Nubian Square. The poems describe the community and lament changes brought on by gentrification, such as last year's destruction of a [beloved mural](#) of Nelson Mandela.

In some ways, it's a classic painting by Wardwell, who also has an exhibition at [LaMontagne Gallery](#) up through Dec. 18. He weaves together text and landscape in simmering colors and bold fonts. But in the past, the painter has drawn text from music and slogans — for instance, lyrics from Mission of Burma's "Fame and Fortune" are emblazoned across "[Hello America: 40 Hits from the 50 States](#)," his mural at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art.

This time, the painter collaborated directly with writers, giving them studio tours and progress updates over Zoom.



Poet Nakia Hill (left) with 826 Boston youth poets Asiyah Herrera (second from left) and Kaylany Vicente (right) and painter Joe Wardwell in front of a new mural to be placed inside the Roxbury branch of the Boston Public Library. NATHAN KLIMA FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

“I really love the idea of using the murals and the work that the poets are doing as a way to get voices out there that may not get the attention they deserve,” Wardwell said.

“It’s truly just love letters to Roxbury,” said Hill, a former artist-in-residence for the city of Boston. “I hope that community members are able to see themselves in the students’ words.”

Her poem, “A Nubian Notion,” fills the central panel. It begins, “Pride wrapped around us like an emerald necklace/ High upon a **Mission Hill**/projecting a bright beam of light/ clinging to the essence of our communities.”

The painter and the poet first met in February 2020.

“It was one of our last in-person meetings,” Wardwell said. “And we hammered out this project in like an hour and 20 minutes.”

“We would watch videos or read other poems and take those poems apart and think about home as a concept. And then Roxbury as a concept,” said Herrera, now a freshman at Simmons University.

Kaylany Vicente, 16, a junior at John D. O’Bryant School of Mathematics and Science, was excited about seeing her poem, “Yup it’s Roxbury!” at her neighborhood library. It includes the lines, “No city can be as real as you./ Slap you in the face but hug you at the same time.”

“The library is like a second home to me. I love going there with my friends and just playing games on the computer. To actually have a part of me there,” she said, “I still can’t believe it.”

The original plan was for a one-panel mural, but when Wardwell examined the space, he proposed expanding to three, without changing his \$250,000 budget, which also includes a print portfolio featuring the poems, which will be given to the poets and sold to benefit 826 Boston.



Painter Joe Wardwell (right) shows a print portfolio related to the library mural to (from left) poets Kaylany Vicente, Asiyah Herrera, and Nakia Hill, inside his studio in Boston. NATHAN KLIMA FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

“I just really wanted to be able to make my first public work something that was big and beautiful for the city,” he said.

“It’s visually stunning and of the neighborhood,” said David Leonard, president of the Boston Public Library. “Joe and Nakia leverage the written word, and to do that in the library seemed like the perfect fit.”

Hill and Wardwell hope to partner on other community-centric projects.

“This collaboration is a great model to exemplify how artists should collaborate with

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isn’t reflective of the people who live there.”

Meeting Wardwell in person for the first time, Vicente thanked him.

“He’s a big artist. He could have worked with anybody else who could have put him even more mainstream,” she said, “but he decided to work with us.”

“The project and working with you guys got me through the last two years,” Wardwell said. “The thanks goes both ways. It’s probably the most rewarding thing I’ve done to date.”

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Wonderful article and what a great piece of public art formed from collaboration between so many talented people.



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11/27/21 - 10:07PM

I can't wait to visit the renovated library and see the stunning mural. Thank you for this heart-warming article.

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