

“Re-Energizing the Legacy of Frederick Douglass” through Sculpture

by Olivia Kim, sculptor

The 2018 Bicentennial Frederick Douglass Sculpture Project remains a shining example of what we can do together when we Unite for a common purpose. It was created with the cooperation of all political parties, many organizations and over 200 volunteers from the Rochester community and beyond.

Distinguished SUNY Brockport Professor Carvin Eison directed the statue project as part of the Douglass Bicentennial Celebrations in Monroe County, NY. The statue design comes from America’s first statue dedicated to an African-American- the 1899 bronze of Douglass by Stanley Edwards at Rochester’s Highland Park. Ken Morris Jr., living descendant of Douglass and Booker T. Washington, posed for the head and hands of the sculpture. The melding of the 1899 monument and the features of his living descendant symbolize how Douglass’ legacy is carried on today through Morris Jr. and his not-for-profit Frederick Douglass Family Initiatives (FDI) and Eison’s not-for-profit Rochester Community Television Media Center.

Artist Olivia Kim was hired by RCTV Media Center to make the statue design in clay and 13 copies of it in fiberglass in a matter of months. Funded by a grant from the Rochester Community Foundation, the statues would be publicly displayed for a 5-year period at historically significant locations throughout Rochester. For a sculptor, the task was leonine, as Kim was just hired as an art professor at the Rochester Institute of Technology. Yet miracles do happen, as over 200 volunteers generously contributed their hearts and hands to help her to make the project a reality. In two and a half months on July 19th, three statues were inaugurated by a United community. On September 15, 2018 all thirteen statues were completed. Four more were made for individuals and local institutions, including philanthropist Michelle Daniels, world-renowned Modern Dance choreographer Garth Fagan (for Fagan’s dance “The North Star”), Memorial Art Gallery/St. John Fisher College and the Rochester Institute of Technology.

Various vandalisms of the statues brought about local tensions, community discussions, international interest and changes to the American justice system. The July 5, 2019 vandalism had a strong political bent, implying that we are not yet free. Yet out of negativity comes positivity. Seeing the act as part of an effort to destroy public memory through attacks on our national memorials and monuments, the federal government (National Endowment for the Arts & National Endowment for the Humanities), City of Rochester, New York State and generous donors helped fund a bronze Bicentennial Douglass statue (inaugurated on October 2022) for the newly renamed Frederick Douglass Greater Rochester International Airport.

“Every time a statue goes down, one goes up.” Director Eison would say at reinstallation ceremonies...and they have continued to appear. The bronze monument “Salt of the Earth, Light of the World” (inaugurated July 2023) of President Lincoln and Douglass shaking hands now graces the skyline of the Cornhill district in Rochester on the riverside of Exchange St. (corner of Fitzhugh Place). It commemorates the secret second meeting of the two great men, and their cooperation to end slavery in America. In 2024 the City of Rochester purchased 10 Douglass statues from RCTV Media Center and Olivia has renovated them for public display. The Village of Pittsford is renting a Bicentennial statue as part of this year’s America 250 Celebration. And more are in the works!

“It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.” - Frederick Douglass

2018 Bicentennial Frederick Douglass
in bronze by Olivia Kim, 2022



Promoting positive expression, RCTV Media Center is holding an “America250- Frederick Douglass Freedom Is Creativity Contest.” You can print out the FREE downloadable form from the website below. You can join the contest, or simply use the Creativity sheet as a way to share your thoughts and feelings of what Freedom Is. This is a family-friendly contest, so please be considerate and share the wisdom in your heart!

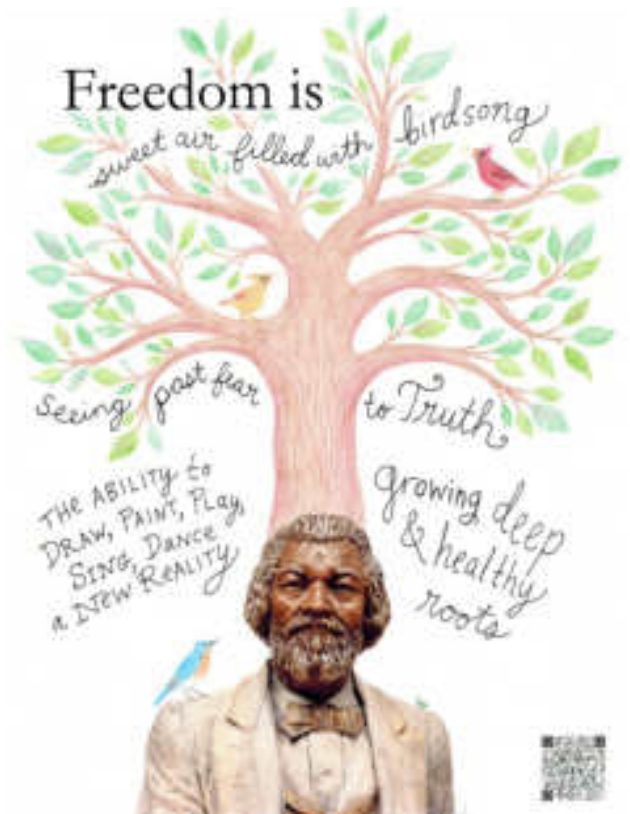
In honor of America’s 250th year of Independence & the “right to Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,” this article is a gentle reminder that our Union can accomplish just about anything.



Volunteers making Bicentennial Douglass Statues in fiberglass, 2018



“Salt of the Earth, Light of the World” in bronze by Olivia Kim, 2023



“America250- Frederick Douglass Freedom Is Creativity Contest” colored pencil entry by Aijung Kim, 2026



“Building Strong Children” design by Olivia Kim, 2026

To learn more about this project & the Freedom Is Contest, visit: www.RCTVMediaCenter.org/FrederickDouglass