

# MILLWOOD Mural INSPIRES COMMUNITY

by LINA SALEH

Art is always defined as an expansive concept that can encompass nearly everything. The question that defines public art, however, is why should it ever be restricted to canvas boards and the walls of museums?

If you've ever taken the time to glance around when venturing into downtown Columbia, you'll run into an armful of public art displays. From "The Yardmaster" railway mural in the Vista on Gervais Street, to the embracing palmetto tree sculpture on Laurel Street, and the "A Girl Reading" metal sculpture inside the Richland County Public Library, downtown Columbia is bursting with colorful murals and sculptures that help bring life to the city.

More recently, this sort of artistic new life was brought to Millwood Avenue, after local non-profit arts organization One Columbia took to revitalizing the area with a new mural.

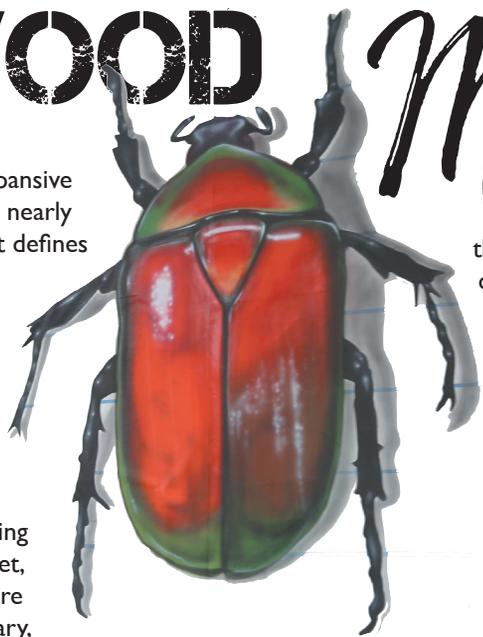
"The mural on Millwood had an actual project there that was started several years ago, but it was never finished, so it was actually just painted over to start this new mural," Lee Snelgrove, the Executive Director of One Columbia said. "We gathered together a couple of local artists like Cedric Umoja and others, and gave them as much freedom as possible when it came to designing this project."

Cedric Umoja, the leader on this project, is an artist originally from San Francisco who eventually traveled down south to be based out of Columbia. Umoja describes his art as a "hybrid of fine and street art...symbols, neo expressionist forms and graffiturism," and considers the main focus of his art to be to shine a light on connectivity and purpose within the human race.

Working alongside Umoja were two other artists; Brandon Donahue who is based out of Nashville, and Karl Zurflüh who is based out of Charleston. While both artists share a graffiti and street art centered style similar to Umoja's, each artist has their own differences in how they choose to carry it out, with much of Zurflüh's previous work containing more of a comic-like style, and Donahue's combining hip-hop culture and repurposing mundane city materials for sculptures.

Along with this partnership between the three established artists was a partnership with the neighborhood association on Millwood Avenue, which took a strong liking to the project.

"The neighborhood in Millwood is very proud and their neighborhood association is very proud of where they live, so this kind of mural will help them reinforce



that pride and showcase that pride to other people outside of the neighborhood," Snelgrove explained.

This pride for public art doesn't only extend to the people who live near it, but also reaches those across the city of Columbia, explained senior and PCA visual art student Caroline Kacsur. "There are a lot of murals downtown and I think it's really amazing," Kacsur said. "The public can go and see it whenever they want to and it's free for everyone."

While this mural managed to capture the attention of students at Northeast as viewers, it also allowed for senior artist Ariel Flowers to experience working on a public art project first hand.

"I was mostly just trying to assist in any way I could, filling paint, spray paint, cleaning things up, outlining the wall with black paint, just things like that."

Flowers, who shared a personal connection with the artist, used the experience of creating art for the community to build herself up in a positive way.

"My mom's boyfriend {Umoja} is the artist who worked on the mural, and he knows I'm an artist, so ever since he came into our lives, he's kind of been pushing me to make more artwork," Flowers said. "He's helped me to be out there in the world as an artist."

While public art has helped to enhance the lives of individuals like Flowers and Kacsur, it also benefits the overall community of Columbia.

"It has a big impact in terms of providing an identity and a point of recognition for that community so that people from outside that community recognize them and give them a personality from out of that mural," Snelgrove said. "It enhances a space that wasn't beautiful before and now is looking better and makes people nearby feel like they're living in a nicer place that they can be proud of."

For Kacsur, this sort of public art not only reveals the identity of the community, but also paints a picture of the artist's love for the city and their appreciation for people who live in it. "When people put up murals and paintings, it just shows mainly how much they care and how adamant they are about it."

This devotion and attention to the community oftentimes receives positive responses when it comes to the transformative effect that art can have when displayed freely for the public. "The people in the neighborhood would come a lot to look at what was happening, and most of them seemed really positive about it," Flowers said. "It was interesting to see everyone come by and say that they loved seeing what we were doing and that they loved the art, and were happy we were making something better. It was really gratifying."

Alongside the positive impact that public art can have for those within the Columbia community is the effect that it can have on those outside of it. "By having these kinds of murals and sculptures all throughout the city, we're likely to see more tourism and economic benefits from public art, because people actually travel around and come to the city because of the level of art that we have," Snelgrove said.

Cities such as Philadelphia, which has long been described as a creative hub for community art, is considered to have one of the largest public art collections in the country and has a source of tourism for the arts based specifically on this extraordinary visual assortment, which it accredits to its history of civic involvement in the city's culture. Philadelphia acts as an example that public art can help to showcase the thriving creative and artistic activities that are blooming within a city.

"By showing we're a creative place, it will make people want to come here and go to things like the philharmonic or the art museum, because they've seen some of the exciting stuff going on in the murals and sculptures."

While the mural on Millwood is on its way to being complete, there are plenty of already finished public art displays across Columbia worth taking the time to see, as well as newer projects that are on the road to becoming part of the community.

"There are artists working on a mural at the corner of Taylor and Assembly street on a parking garage, there's an artists working on a mural on the side of the Cannon Garage at the corner of Taylor and Sumter Street," Snelgrove said. "We have a lot more mural and sculpture projects in the works that will happen later this year, and some that are due to be finished anytime now, and soon those pieces of public art will be a part of the city."

The photographs on this page represent a selection of artistic elements from the mural on Millwood Avenue.

Photos by Casey Collins

