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Suite Talk: Valerie A. Cooper, founding owner of Picture That Art Consultants

BY PHIL HALL

One of the most vibrant additions to Stamford's arts scene is the Black Lives Matter street mural painted on July 19 in front of the Ferguson Library on Broad Street in the heart of the city's downtown. The mural was spearheaded by Valerie A. Cooper, founding owner of Stamford's Picture That Art Consultants.

In this edition of Suite Talk, Business Journal Senior Enterprise Editor Phil Hall speaks with Cooper on the mural's creation and its role in the ongoing public conversations regarding social justice and racial disparities.

Let's start by discussing the genesis of the mural: When did the idea arise and how did it come to creation?

"The idea surfaced in the midst of the Covid pandemic and shortly after other larger cities started creating murals as a result of the Black Lives Matter movement being restarted by the George Floyd murder. I started seeing a lot of responses using protest art and the Black Lives Matter street murals were one of the largest protest art symbols across the country.

"We saw signs that had been done Charlotte, Cincinnati and D.C., and they were done different ways. I thought that Stamford wanted to put itself in a similar light as some of these larger cities in terms of being culturally inclusive, so the question was would our mayor and our board

of representatives have an appetite for the idea. I started presenting the idea during the late May and early June timeframe."

What was the initial reaction from the city when you presented it?

"The first two people that I worked with are individuals that I've worked closely with for 16 years on a black history, cultural art and literary program that I've run for the city's public schools. They embraced the idea 100%. There were several follow-up meetings with different constituents and the municipality itself, including the mayor – I worked closely with his chief of staff.

"I also reached out to business owners and real estate owners in the downtown area and I didn't get any opposition. With the police department, one of the first persons I called was a very dear friend of mine who works for the department and I wanted to know how he felt about it – in certain cities, tensions are high and conflict runs deep between citizens and the police force. But that was not the case here. In fact, my friend in the department is a forensic artist and was very instrumental in helping me with the location and getting it properly cleared with the police department."

The mural's design is very interesting, with each letter bearing a different style. Why did you go with that approach?

"One of the things you do as a curator, which is the hat I wore for this particular project, is making sure there were certain



Valerie A. Cooper, photo courtesy Picture That Art Consultants. The Black Lives Mural photo, courtesy Fritz Stamford

commonalities across the country. What was common are the letters and the words that the letters spelled 'Black Lives Matter.' However, as a curator you have the liberty to invoke unique renderings because you don't want it to be exactly the same.

We had 16 African-American artists from lower Fairfield County submit renderings of their design for each of the 16 letters."

How long did it take for the mural to be completed?

"The stenciling took maybe three hours, with a team of four working on that. The letters were sketched and the artists started painting. We needed two-and-a-half hours for it to dry.

Who financed this project?

"That's a good question. The budget evolved: A lot of the money came from donors who donated through GoFundMe,

which has a \$20,000 goal and is still active – you can still add to it. I put up a lot of the money upfront because it just had to be done, so my credit card has a pretty hefty balance on it now. We had outside constituents handling the budget to make sure there was transparency.

"The Ferguson Library and the Stamford branch of the NAACP are elite sponsors of the mural. One of the things that we have in the budget is a line item for maintenance. And we're hoping that at some point, the city has some seed money to give us to maintain it."

As a street mural that has traffic driving over it, is it safe to assume that it will require constant maintenance?

"It's already deteriorating, just because of the amount of traffic and the location. So, we're hoping that by next spring, there'll be a chance for us to update it."