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### Local artist, WKU students team up to commemorate Jonesville neighborhood

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Intern Cecilia Morris (above) holds a smaller rendition of the mural commemorating Bowling Green's Jonesville community created at the Kentucky Museum on Wednesday as Western Kentucky University art professor Mike Nichols, interns A Riley O'Loane and local artist Alice Gatewood Waddell (below) work on the mural.

photos by Grace Ramey/[photo@bgdailynews.com](mailto:photo@bgdailynews.com)

Stretching over a wall in the lobby of Western Kentucky University's Kentucky Museum, a vista unfolded Wednesday that offered a glimpse into a community lost to time.

The mastermind behind the project, local artist Alice Gatewood Waddell, worked carefully to give the scene shape. This week and next, Waddell and WKU art professor Mike Nichols, along with several student interns, are completing a highly durable buon fresco to commemorate Jonesville.

The African American community, which Waddell remembers as a neighborhood having “something of everything,” was displaced in the 1960s to make way for WKU’s expansion.



Waddell, who didn’t live in the community but often visited her grandparents there, remembers how little its residents received for their homes and businesses, which stood where WKU’s athletic complexes now stand.

For Waddell, the completed fresco will be one of the few testaments to Jonesville on campus. The community “can be appreciated through art,” even if it wasn’t valued in its own time.

“I hope it’s just the start” of other Jonesville memorials on campus, she said. “When people look at it, it’ll bring back memories for a lot of people that have ties to Jonesville.”

Blurring the lines between dreams and reality, the surreal scene is rooted in Waddell’s memories of Jonesville. In the foreground on the left, two Black children are pictured pointing, with their gaze directed at a WKU red towel seen fluttering in the breeze in the frame’s top right corner. The girl is wearing a pure white dress evocative of Norman Rockwell’s “The Problem We All Live With.” Her legs taper off, almost as if she’s grown stilts to get a better look at the looming hilltop above.

For Waddell, it’s symbolic of an institution that was always clearly visible yet far away and above her own world.

“As kids, we always wondered what was going on up there,” Waddell said. “We didn’t see Black people on that side of the street really. It was just such a contrast between the campus and the neighborhood that always made us wonder.”

On the right-hand side of the scene, a man in a corduroy suit and hat is seen embracing and comforting a woman who clutches a suitcase in her free hand. All the figures in the scene are faceless silhouettes, but the sense of dejection between the two is clear, captured in their posture.

“They’re leaving,” Waddell said. “It represents the demolition of the neighborhood.”

The advantage of a buon fresco is its permanence, even over other kinds of frescos. There are surviving examples that date back to the Bronze Age Aegean civilization of the Minoans, Europe’s first advanced civilization and based on the island of Crete.

The Jonesville fresco will use five layers, said Nichols, who is an artist and specializes in frescos. The key, Nichols said, is painting while the outer layer of plaster is wet; otherwise, the finished work will have no more permanence than a chalk drawing on a driveway.

Unlike oil or watercolor, the paint itself lacks a binding agent, relying on the wet plaster for that. Once dry, however, it has the same resilience as stone.

“You have to be quick,” Nichols said, stressing that there’s only a small window of time, depending on the humidity in the air, for the painting to occur. “It will go up like a jigsaw puzzle basically.”

The process is painstaking, but for the students involved in the project, it’s a rare opportunity to learn an art form that isn’t taught consistently in many places.

Nichols has had students working on the project since April, and they had to craft their own materials from raw ingredients. Purity is prized above all in the process, since dirty ingredients laden with impurities would rob the finished work of its longevity.

Riley O’Loane and Aisha Salifu, both juniors at WKU, said they’ve developed a deeper appreciation of the medium.

As Waddell’s intern throughout the process, Salifu said she’s enjoyed soaking up her expertise. Salifu said she’s also learned to appreciate history more deeply. “History is important is what we’re really trying to get across,” Salifu said.

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