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Kentucky Museum exhibit to honor Jonesville legacy

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The Jonesville buon fresco mural sponsored by the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation and created by local artist Alice Gatewood Waddell, Western Kentucky University professor Mike Nichols and WKU interns Aisha Salifu, Cecilia Morris and Riley O’Loane greets visitors to the Kentucky Museum on Tuesday, Sept. 27, 2022, as the new “Honoring Jonesville: Our People, Our Community, Our Legacy” exhibit gets ready to open Oct. 27. to the public on Tuesday, Oct. 27. The exhibit, the first project of the Jonesville Reconciliation Workgroup established by WKU President Timothy Caboni last spring, will feature a “What Happened to Jonesville?” exhibit, including oral histories from residents and descendants to honor the African American community from the historic Jonesville district. (Grace Ramey/gramey@bgdailynews.com)

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In a new Kentucky Museum exhibit, Western Kentucky University is reckoning with its role in the destruction of Jonesville, a thriving Black neighborhood, over a half-

century after its final property was sold.

“Honoring Jonesville: Our People, Our Community, Our Legacy,” opens Oct. 27 Oct. 27 and features a “What Happened to Jonesville?” exhibit, including oral histories from Jonesville residents and descendants. It is the first project of the Jonesville Reconciliation Workgroup, established by WKU President Timothy Caboni last spring.

It comes at a time when many universities are “wrestling” with the “legacies of the past” in which they may have been complicit or involved, said Dr. Saundra Ardrey, WKU political science associate professor and member of the workgroup.

Jonesville was a 30-acre Black community historically demarcated by Russellville Road, Dogwood Drive and the railroad tracks.

Now, the land is home to Houchens-Smith football stadium, E.A. Diddle basketball arena and Nick Denes baseball field.

The community was founded in 1881 by formerly enslaved people who had fought for the Union after Emancipation. By the mid-1900s, it had grown to about 500 residents and featured thriving neighborhood businesses, churches and community spirit.

In the late 1950s, Jonesville became the target of a WKU land grab for expansion, under the pretext of “urban renewal.” After the five privately-owned Jonesville

properties WKU was eyeing refused to sell, the WKU Board of Regents started condemnation proceedings.

Condemnation is a process by which an entity can take private property for public use by arguing that the land is needed for the greater good and the previous owners are compensated.

The five properties were only the first in a series of systematic condemnations and sales despite strong Jonesville opposition that ended in 1967 with the destruction of Mt. Zion Baptist Church, the last Jonesville property.

To make matters worse, former Jonesville residents were not fairly compensated, as many of their homes were deemed “blighted” for small issues that artificially lowered their property’s value. Some were forced to sell for as little as \$100.

Now, the conversation is how to best address this past injustice, whether through monetary reparations or other kind of acknowledgement, Ardrey said.



“It destroyed a very vibrant neighborhood. (Jonesville descendants) have always wanted some kind of reckoning,” she said.

Alice Gatewood Waddell is a Jonesville descendant and Bowling Green Human Rights Commission executive director. She remembers visiting her grandparents often in Jonesville and feeling the unspoken separation between the neighborhood and WKU.

Alongside WKU art professor Mike Nichols and several WKU interns, Waddell painted a fresco mural to be displayed in the exhibit on a wall facing the former Jonesville neighborhood.

“The inspiration came from experience of life in that community,” she said. “I was very familiar with the spirit of that community.”

The mural, a “touchstone” of the exhibit, will greet visitors as they come in, said Kentucky Museum director Brent Bjorkman.

Waddell hopes that this exhibit and future Jonesville Reconciliation Workgroup projects provide an educational experience for students “so that history does not repeat itself.”

“If you don’t know any better, you can’t do any better,” she said.

The goal of the project is two-fold, Ardrey said: to recognize the achievements of Jonesville that contributed to Bowling Green and to allow WKU to do “a little soul-searching.”

She emphasized that this is only the beginning. The workgroup is planning conferences in the spring, historical analysis discussions and some kind of undetermined recognition in the space Jonesville used to be based on input from resident descendants.

“This is not just a one and done,” Ardrey said. “The president really wants to open a conversation.”

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