

Angela Rivers Black History Mural

Project Background and CETA activities that led to the creation mural and continuity

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The black history mural on Park and Fifth, Champaign, IL, evolved as part of a federal Comprehensive Employment Training Act CETA program designed to provide employment for minimally employed citizens while at the same time generating tangible community improvements. Initial moves were made to create the mural in 1977.

Educational Resources in Environmental Science ERES, a not for profit corporation oriented to the interpretation and preservation of the natural and cultural landscapes, was a CETA contractor. As a CETA contractor ERES was encouraged to submit proposed project that met CETA low and modest income support guidelines.

There had to be an adequate number of professional personnel to act as leaders who were also out of work at the time. The contracting agency provided the space, materials and equipment and CETA provided a modest reimbursement for same. Where appropriate cooperating community agencies provided support funds.

ERES provided CETA inspired employment for a number of north end (African American community) citizens working on a range of community oriented projects. Many of the participants were young but there were also leaders who tended to older and knowledgeable. Some of the leaders also had community status and political clout. Like all such programs there were some limitations but basically the CETA program generated a lot of friendly associations and public service work. One limitation was that the employees would be provided for a short time so new participants would have an opportunity to be included. One of the challenges was that people with limited abilities who adapted to the work situation would be expected to recycled out of the employment situation when it seemed that those participants could benefit most from a longer association with the friends and capacities he or she had developed. There was included in our contract a social welfare aspect to our contracts. That aspect of our work was reported by David Schaffer who studied this aspect of our work as a part of his Master's degree in Social work. Schaffer's belief was that the opportunities ERES was providing community citizens was a form of well health and therefore a legitimate topic for social work research but it took Schaffer quite a while to establish the legitimacy of this aspect of "well health" as a suitable thesis topic.

The ERES/CETA employees included Mary Nash and one of her responsibilities was to identify potential projects. Mary and her husband Louis (not a CETA employee but a strong advocate for a number of black community issues lived in the north (black) community. Other ERES/CETA employees and associates included Nada Davidson, Eugene Britt and later Bennie Drake. Ivor Mathews was an indirect supporter. He was a community leader, not a CETA employee. Mathews and his wife were north end community activists. Mrs Mathews was the founder and leader of the Honeytut singers and dancers, a well known and respected club for young folk with the intent to encourage these young folk to be inspired, develop their talent, enjoy their comradery and further their education. The group also got a lot of cudos along with a formal marching band that was popular at the time. Ivor Mathews was a character. He bought the Lawhead School in the north end when it closed and used it as his warehouse. He also ran a recycle yard on north Lincoln. Mathews was legally well read and astute negotiator and thorn in the side of the City because he was often one step ahead of the City when it came to contests and like City's desire to demolish the Lawhead School. Local politician and City Councilman, John Lee Johnson was also an indirect supporter of our efforts.

Mary Nash asked if, as a CETA contractor, we could do something to help clean up the environment in the Beardsly Ave area east of the IC railroad and west of two nearby rather notorious housing projects, Mansard Place on the south of Bradley Ave and Burch Village to the north. Both housing complexes were rather dense federal housing projects. Both complexes have since been removed and replaced by more open settlements but in the same location.

I can well remember Roy Williams, another supportive community leader, berating the City for planning to replace the original buildings with a group of slightly more spread-out buildings all in the same place with the reasonable anticipation of drug and gang activities. The City went ahead despite these reservations and I think the City kind of solved the problem by not being very willing to allow title 8 low income occupancy. That meant that the new tenants had to have a better financial and character track record. The result of that in recent years is that many of the title 8 people have moved to East Urbana which is now a relatively raunchy community. One of our current Black employees has moved out of there because he didn't like to be hearing or dodging the occasional bullet.

An Aside: At the time Elizabeth and John? founders and operators of the Empty Tomb, a free clothing and resource distribution center lived at Burch Village at the time because they felt they wanted to meet that sort of commitment. As a caucasian couple in an otherwise totally African American community that was not an easy commitment and they were harassed some for their efforts. They continue to direct the Empty Tomb Center provides free materials and services with largely church supported

Going back to Mary Nash. In order to investigate the environmental clean-up suggestion Mary and Louis invited me, as the Director of ERES, to a meet with a number of members of the community at their home. There were a number of black community leaders there, many of them young. When I arrived they were giving a conservative political candidate a hard time. There were discussions of guns and other things and the candidate was being made to feel rather uncomfortable. The conversation was loud and often across the heads of the candidates from one interviewee to another and in a purposeful north end dialect which was hard to discern even if one was familiar with it.

When the group finished with the political candidate they started roasting me in the same vein. I can well remember Louis hauling these young folk especially off of me with the admonition that I was not another political candidate but that I had been invited to discuss a possible local environmental project. Some left. We had an interesting discussion.

My feeling was ERES was not about to walk into the north end and act like God where we didn't belong and to do things like trash clean up even if we had CETA employees who came from the area. There were however some things we could do. Douglas Center was nearby so we could possibly activate a silk screen process that could be of interest and indirectly helpful. The possibility of a mural was also mentioned. The silk screen suggestion led to a series of sessions at Douglas Center. We made multiples of many different images and that was an exciting exercise.

Kathy Cender (now Martin) (She met Glenn Martin her husband on this and other projects) was an initiating project leader of the ERES Nurturing Neighborhood Awareness Project Eugene Britt was a north end was the community coordinator

The ultimate image was a high contrast silk screen picture of Eugene's head with an inserted high contrast picture of a geodesic dome with children playing that was on the lawn outside Douglas Center. To make this picture of the dome and children graphically designed the geodesic dome image into the area of Eugene's brain. Most all of this could be done at the Douglas Center because we could take the equipment there and demonstrate and have children realize how a screen can be blocked in various ways including by the use of a photographically prepared gelatin. We held several noisy workshops that were quite successful. They inspired further efforts and associations and some of the silk screen print energy spilled over later in north-end projects including a later mural. Many of Mary Nash's objectives had been met.

We spent quite some time trying to decide what project might come next. Eventually a mural project won. Kathy, Eugene and others then started to research how we could do this. CETA was prepared to have, a Chicago mural artist, Mark Regovan visit and advise us about murals as a paid consultant. He was quick to point out the operational difference between two major groups of mural artists. The first group, often Latinos, would come to town, select a wall site, paint a mural without permission and leave town with the mural as a *fete a complis*. This is the type of mural often observed on rail cars. We already had one such mural that appeared on the wall of a nearby Earth Works garage. The alternate was to find a site and arrange with a cooperative owner. That was a slow process because the owner and the community would want to know the content of the mural and whether it was acceptable. No artist wants to have his or her art supervised but, on the other hand, owners are reserved about the possibility of a phallic symbol or political statements ending up on their wall. This meant that an acceptable mock up was necessary. Regovan gave us many more suggestions including being prepared to prime the selected wall in such a way that the mural would not break down easily and become a community irritation. He also had suggested painting and other techniques. The Champaign Park District was consulted.

We were familiar with some local black history and it was felt that Black History could be a topic. CETA was prepared to help.

It was at about this time that we learned of Angela Rivers and her talents as an artist. She grew up on the north end as a daughter of a well established and respected Rivers family. CETA was prepared to hire Angela as the project coordinator and it was she, with the help of others who spearheaded the project including finding the site on Park and Fifth not far from her parent's home. We were very fortunate and pleased to be able to employ Angela and have her direct the project.

With the surety of Angela's supervision and the cooperation of Eugene Britt and Benny Drake, both African Americans, from the community were enlisted as co-artists and the project was launched. Angela designed the mural and CETA gave us two teams of young folk to paint the mural. The owner of the sitewas willing to the extent of providing toilet facilities even though that meant that people whom he did not know would have access to his workshop and warehouse. The painting of doors and windows also had to be negotiated.

The mural site chosen on Park and Fifth was in a respectable and visible neighborhood. A number of neighborhood citizens who were leaders in the community. The presence of several Churches in close proximity was also helpful.

The mural progressed. The morning team that was not totally excited about getting out of bed to paint a mural even though they were being paid. The afternoon crew was much more enthusiastic and sometimes didn't want to put their brushes down. Even so the energy tailed off at the end and Angela ended up completing the project herself.

As the mural came to completion many members of the local community would drive by and make encouraging and complementary remarks about the mural. On the other hand some citizens who could almost fall into the category of passing for white were not so sure. There was a feeling in some circles that the people depicted in the mural "were too black and the eyes too white" to quote Lucy Grey who lived across the street.

A number of the participant artists were also members of the nearby Boy's and Girl' Club and they worked with Jackie Varner to extend the concept of the mural to murals on the gymnasium of the club.

At about the same time we had taken on another project which was the planting of a prairie on a vacant lot behind the Hiershfeld Furniture warehouse across from the Boy's and Girl's Club on Park and Second. There was a friendly extension of the mural event to the club and the prairie. We took field trips to established prairies and picked and processed seed.

Jackie Varner, the Club manager at the time lived in the neighborhood and his mother owned a house around the corner. He helped encourage the interactions between the mural and the prairie projects

The club members would have preferred a break court to a prairie. They would make rude comments to test one's cool and in a friendly manner they would teach one friendly lessons like not locking your bike to a light pole was not wise because when you returned there was no bicycle. Then laughing teasing perpetrators would explain that several boys only had to climb on each other's back and lift the locked bike up over the light and remove it. Then the bike would be returned with lots of humor. The nearby prairie project was a friendly positive.

Dave Cook, the manager of the Hirschfeld Furniture store on University Ave, who also served on the University of Illinois police force with Al Rivers, was also interested and involved and eventually he took a Reading the Landscape course ERES was teaching at Parkland at the time. The Hirschfeld store owned the warehouse where we were permitted to plant the prairie.

The neighbors were not so sure about the prairie. Jimmy who lived north of the prairie was frightened that there were snakes in the prairie. The pocket prairie also "looked like weeds" to many people. Eventually a member of the Taylor family who owned houses nearby decided that the prairie was an endagerment so she went to the City and complained. The City said she could have the site bulldozed and that is what happened. So after three years of prairie work a respectable prairie was converted to a semi trailer parking lot with the removal and modification agreed to by a different furniture warehouse supervisor.

There were several other things that brought us together with the community not the least of which was that Eugene and his wife lost a child to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome and we with sadness attended the funeral at the Parker funeral home.

Since then I have attended a number of north end funerals but I am always impressed and somewhat embarrassed by the lack of other Caucasians even though there are often ministerial and other community alliances.

On another project at Rantoul Louis Hunley, a Landscape Architect and another north end community citizen came to work with us a CETA employee and he spearheaded a landscape improvement project on a retired landfill and that project had many positive connotations. When we needed heavy equipment for that project, for instance, we hired Eddy Pelmore's construction company that had its base in the north end community.

Louis was a WW II veteran and a member of one of the first black contingents allowed to join the army. Even so the company was directed by white officers. Louis obtained his Landscape degree on the GI bill but didn't have a lot of success at gaining employment.

An interesting side issue was that ERES in its wisdom felt that the participant leaders in these projects should handle their own finances. To that end we established separate checking accounts that were signed by the project leaders. Unfortunately we shortly learned that although this was helping to establish fiscal responsibility the procedure did not conform to CETA accounting dictates and that procedure had to cease.

Thirty years later the mural has broken down some and the prairie is gone but the mural's around the gymnasium remain and the projects resulted in many positive and long term community interactions. In subsequent years CETA funding dwindled and the Nixon community action programs somewhat lost out to social welfare programs when there was a shortage of welfare finance.

The federal Community Employment Training Act has been superseded by a continuing Employment Training Act projects but it runs with much less support.

For a periods the Nixon Administration provided Community Service grants and ERES was able to lock into that support and do projects similar to the above but eventually that money disappeared or was taken over by welfare support programs. While the support lasted CETA was an admirable community action program and we enjoyed our involvement.

Today, much of the neighborhood we worked with has been dissipated as a huge Boneyard Creek restoration plan has removed many houses and relocated families. The Boneyard Creek project is positive but it also creates some difficulties for the interactions that surrounded the mural project. Many families have been relocated and the community environment is not the same. There is also a huge EPA style debate in the vicinity about the historic presence of a coal/coke gasification plant that has left leachate in the area and houses are now being sold to Ameren.

Still the community and the mural remain. It is our serious hope that something can be done to restore the mural. It is still visible and a positive in the community asset but a breaking down mural needs support or it will become a liability and an irritant.

We hope that Angela's visit will elicit some interest in the refurbishment of the mural.

Angela has occupied many professional art appointments and we applaud her contributions to this and other art projects. We also applaud her her commitment to the community in which she grew up.

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