

Wilhelmina Rolark Honored with Stanton Elementary School Mural

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Urban theory suggests once a person's likeness is found keeping watch of a city, in still-life on the brick canvass of a building, they have officially earned their status as urban heroes. The newest, and perhaps most eagerly anticipated mural, of D.C.'s own Wilhelmina Rolark, was recently unveiled, inside the halls of Stanton Elementary School in Southeast.

City Year, an international service organization that supports youth tutoring and mentoring by those aged 17 to 24 for children and neighborhoods across the United States and in South Africa, sponsored the day-long project.

"The goal of the mural project was to portray local leaders from the Southeast D.C. community so that the children at Stanton Elementary School would be inspired by the individuals from their own community," said Lia Payne, program manager, Civic Engagement Team, for City Year.

According to Payne, students chose Rolark as among the most influential in their young lives and that of their community.

"Mrs. Rolark is a true inspiration and we were glad to be able to teach the students about her life and legacy," Payne said.

Painting Rolark had additional meaning for Adria



City Year is made up of tutors and mentors, whose D.C. corps members provide critically needed services to some of D.C.'s most underserved youth. At Stanton Elementary School on Sat., Dec. 6 City Year volunteers Adria Anderson and Kellen Singleton painted murals of prominent people from Southeast D.C., including former Ward 8 Councilmember Wilhelmina Rolark. Photo by Victor Holt

Anderson, a member of the City Year team, who helped paint the mural.

"As an African American woman, I felt a connection to Mrs. Rolark and it felt good to be able to highlight her work through painting this mural. It seemed fitting that people from all different backgrounds came together on Saturday to paint it -- it is a testament to Mrs. Rolark's work in the community," Anderson said.

Rolark and her husband, the late Dr. Calvin Rolark, founded the United Black Fund, a non-profit organization that provides funding to community-based organizations. Wilhelmina Rolark served as the group's General Counsel, where she won major legal battles against United Givers Fund and the Civil Service Commission discriminating against Black and other minorities.

She represented residents of Ward 8 on the Washington, D.C. city council where she went on to serve four consecutive terms. While on the council, she chaired several committees including the committee on

Employment and Economic Development, Public Service and Consumer Affairs and Judiciary. Wilhelmina Rolark also served on the Sentencing Guidelines Commission of the D.C. Superior court.

Her stance against discrimination—particularly against women, African Americans, young people and the disadvantaged—were considered ground-breaking. Having practiced law in the 1940s, Wilhelmina Rolark was pivotal in documenting the racial injustices of the American legal system, while coming to terms with the limitations set by the legal profession against female attorneys. She was most vocal at a time when her silence was not only sought, but also mandated.

Across the city, Washingtonians, seemed touched by the idea of a mural honoring Wilhelmina Rolark. For many, her legacy as a civic leader and activist is filled with personal acts of kindness.

“I was right up here on High Street and could remember her constantly telling me to ‘have more pride’ about the way I carried myself,” said Charles Eason, 47. “I knew I had a watchful eye on me trying to keep me from getting into things and she always had time to listen to me... and fuss at me. She deserves a mural, plus some.”

Wilhelmina Rolark’s image joins those of other leaders in the Southeast community, such as Frederick Douglass, Calvin Woodland, and Ophelia Egypt, painted the same day.

The use of murals, according to City Year, is a means of beautifying D.C. schools in different ways. As an aid to the learning process, they also serve to bolster self-esteem.

“It’s important that children have an inviting learning environment. After we complete a mural project, it’s so exciting to see how ecstatic and proud children are to see their school environment brightened,” Payne said.

The mural was completed during the service project on Saturday, in about seven hours time, with seven volunteers working specifically with the Rolark mural.

“It was also a great chance to be able to honor her legacy and specifically emphasize the role strong African American women have played in supporting the Southeast DC community,” Anderson said.

The mural is located on the second floor of Stanton Elementary School, located at 2701 Naylor Road, Southeast, D.C.