

A monument to community, past and present

■ **Artist: Public art, like African Burying Ground Memorial, the 'antithesis' of elitist approach**

BY DEBORAH MCDERMOTT
dmcdermott@seacoastonline.com

PORTSMOUTH — For most of his life, Jerome Meadows has been working to ensure that art mirrors life in all its struggles, imperfections and joys. He sees art as not separate, not "elite, and not meant only for the elite" but something that can be understood by and have relevance for everyone.

It is a sensibility formed by his Bronx, N.Y., childhood, honed over years of academic achievement, political struggle and mature reflection, and that will soon find its expression in the African Burying Ground Memorial here in Portsmouth.

Meadows, who lives and runs a community art gallery in Savannah, Ga., was selected by the African Burying Ground Committee to design the memorial, which will be built atop the burial ground on Chestnut Street. Meadows' dream for the site was to create something respectful of the African slaves buried there and a testament to the sense of community in the city.

And everything in his background as a sculptor, an African American and a community builder indicates why the committee felt he was the right person for the job. Meadows said he can trace his first inklings as an artist to when he was a boy living in a sixth-floor tenement in the Bronx.

"My strongest recollection is sitting at the dining room table drawing horses," he said. "Now, I don't have to tell you, there were no horses in the Bronx. I'd never seen a horse. But it was enjoyable, safe and satisfying to go into that imaginary world afforded

an artist."

He said those horses stayed with him as a "metaphor for freedom" throughout his school years and into college, where he was selected to attend the Rhode Island School of Design, which in the 1970s wanted to increase its minority student population.

"It went from 1 to 10 percent of the student population overnight, so there was some adjustment on campus," he said. "That's where race and art started to come together for me. How can art be more relevant to society? I struggled with that in my work. Although I was politically active as a person, I wanted my artwork to symbolize the movement of those horses."

For 20 years after college, Meadows taught at art institutes and colleges, for the last four years as assistant professor of art at Howard University. "I had a wife and child. I had to be practical, and teaching was a nice middle ground," he said.

But he found himself begrudging his time teaching classes because it was taking him away from his studio. "Meanwhile, I had friends who were working at the post office five days a week and saying, 'You're complaining about this?' But I learned at RSD that being an artist is valuable in and of itself."

His first public installations started early in his teaching career, a public arts project in Albany, N.Y. As years went on, he found himself drawn further down that path. "I was keen on exploring sizes, materials and sociological approaches to culture," he said. "And I was smitten with the idea that someone would give me money



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Jerome Meadows

to do something large and place it in a community. I wanted to do more and more of that.”

Among his major public sculptures are the Martin Luther King Living Memorial in Anchorage, Alaska; Truths that Rise from the Roots Remembered in Alexandria, Va.; To Create the Beloved Community in Albuquerque, N.M.; and Carry the

Rainbow on Your Shoulders in Unity Park in Washington, D.C.

He said that although he is African American and many of his major works are concerned with his race's identity, he does not view them primarily through that lens. "The common theme among them all is community. And in most cases, those neighborhoods were predominantly African American," he said. "But the question of how art can serve society overwhelms any personal politics. And that question then becomes less didactic and more about universal values."

Public art, he said, "is the antithesis of an elitist, ivory-tower approach. Not only that, it represents things a community wants to celebrate."

That's certainly the sense he got when he applied for and received the commission to design the African Burying Ground in Portsmouth, he said.

Since the first bodies of African slaves were discovered on Chestnut Street in 2003, the city has been involved in finding a way to commemorate the spot. The burying ground committee is actually a municipal group, and the City Council last December unanimously approved \$100,000 in federal Urban Development Act Grant monies to begin fundraising efforts.

Meadows was faced with a site that was challenging in many ways. The street itself could not be blocked to residents who live there, it was on a slope and the committee had already chosen landscape architect Roberta Woodburn, of Newmarket, who had been working on plans.

"How do you transform this through street into something that's respectful of the cemetery that is there?" he asked. "It wasn't an option that it could be blocked, so how do you add traffic?"

AT A GLANCE

African Burying Ground

Where: Chestnut Street, between State and Court streets in Portsmouth

For more information: www.cityofportsmouth.com/abg/index.htm

Then, he said, he had to consider the pedestrian walking through the site, which sits between State and Court streets. "I'm always mindful of them. Where are they? What should they consider?"

The entry piece is a granite wall, featuring two life-sized bronze casts, one of a man representing a Portsmouth slave and one of a woman representing Mother Africa. Their arms reach out around the side of the wall, where their hands almost, but do not, touch.

"I toyed with that idea for weeks. Should I put one hand over the other, or one just around the corner of the wall?" He asked the committee, and its unanimous sense was that the first hands should nearly touch. "The African is being removed from Mother Africa, but here we are centuries later and they're finally reconnecting. It hasn't been accomplished yet, but there's a sense that it will be."

That sense of detail continues throughout the memorial, right down to the tiles that will be installed in the railings that will be designed by Portsmouth schoolchildren.

"It will provide them with an opportunity to learn about the history of African Americans in their city and inform them about the history of that site."