

Stevie Wilson DIY Youth Arts Residency

Summary Report | December 2022

For any artist, time to create is inherently valuable. Launched in January 2022, the Stevie Wilson DIY Youth Arts Residency supports young artists with time and resources to make art on their own schedule. Artists who self-identified as formerly incarcerated or criminalized designed self-guided DIY (do it yourself) creative residencies. Project NIA announced awards totaling \$50,000 in April. We're now thrilled to share more about the residency program and how eighteen artists spent some of their time over the past eight months.

From Harlem to Los Angeles, Wichita to Baltimore, artists painted, danced, and sketched. They wrote poems, took photographs, and designed coloring books. They worked with clay, fabric, and film, and designed public sculptures and street art. They visited museums, created healing circles, sat and sketched on riverbanks, and drew inspiration from new cities.



(above) residency artist Davona Watson

“Incorporating healing justice via dance movement within my residency allowed me to explore the fear and heaviness I felt both physically, spiritually and emotionally. One of the biggest accomplishments I can attribute to my residency program was finding safe community spaces to explore healing and create art. The more that I was able to care for myself and provide for my basic needs, the more I was able to participate in and access art spaces.”
- residency artist Davona Watson (Los Angeles, CA)



(right) Abigail with her public sculpture installation

“This award gave me the resources I needed to focus on my art and take myself seriously as an artist. Typically, I have to take on a heavy workload in order to make money, but I was able to pause from it to explore my artistic capabilities. I feel extremely lucky for this opportunity.” - residency artist Abigail Cook (Atlanta, GA)

Residencies focused on collective liberation, hope, and abolition. They centered love, freedom, community, healing, and rest. Residency applications were lovingly reviewed by a committee of formerly incarcerated artists. Detroit-based artist and selection committee member AyLaina Thornton shared, “These young artists blessed us with their vision but also with their vulnerability, their tenacity, and their commitments to the abolition movement and community.”

Named after Stevie Wilson—a currently incarcerated, Black, queer, writer, activist, and student—the residency program was created in recognition of their work organizing and leading study groups behind and across prison walls.

“I created art with residents of Casa Al-Fatiha, a sanctuary residence for LGBTQ immigrants. We shared it on social media within the LGBTQ immigrant community.” - residency artist Violeta (Chicago, IL) *(right) residency artist Violeta vending her paintings*

“I made it my goal to capture beautiful moments I witnessed. I initially wanted to post different political art and messages around the neighborhood, but realized it’d be more impactful to showcase youth joy and communal unity because people know of the violence and trauma that’s experienced in Black and brown communities, but not so much of the resistance experienced through shared laughs and happiness.”



(below) photograph by residency artist (Chicago, IL)



The DIY residency awards supported artists with monthly rent, groceries, cell phone bills, and missed wages. These funds helped artists safely travel, book bus and train tickets, and fill gas tanks. Artists bought new supplies, printed photographs, and launched websites. The residencies provided time to reflect, to seek and find inspiration, and to create.

“I was able to spend long days near lake Ponchartrain and near the Mississippi river. I draw inspiration from our natural bodies of water. I was also able to visit a few different art museums, which sparked inspiration for a few of my poems. I was able to visit different cities and speak to different people about race and gender, which influenced my writing. I spent time trying to write in new and creative ways.” - residency artist Chasity Kim Hunter (New Orleans, LA)

(right) Chasity at an event at the New Orleans Museum of Art



“Without this award I wouldn’t have been able to leave my hometown to be inspired and explore diversity in a different bigger city. It helped my emotional and mental wellbeing, and helped me find a different perspective.” - residency artist Shawna Bullen-Fairbanks



“I finally was able to get a camera and take pictures once again.” - residency artist Troy Hunter (Portland, OR)

(left and above) photographs by Troy Hunter



“Everything in the picture is reaching towards the sun...the tree branches, the rainbow, the imprisoned hands, the individual, the waves and even the words (*Restless, Resiliency, and Wandering Peace*) are slanted towards the sun. The sun in the painting represents hope to me. Hope is what keeps me going.”

- residency artist Shawna Bullen-Fairbanks (Bemidji, MN)



(above) painting by Shawna Bullen-Fairbanks



“It’s hard enough looking at these walls and trying to see Anything possible that’s meant for me
The smell and essence of something so simple such as a tree
I remember running towards after release and hugging a tree
A tree meant for my fallen brothers and sisters
A tree meant for me
And you, and them and us”

- from the poem “Injustice “Justice” System”
by Shawna Bullen-Fairbanks

(left) Shawna Bullen-Fairbanks

Selection committee member and Indiana-based artist Michelle Daniel Jones shared, “Giving these young people money so that they could pay their rent and utilities, buy groceries and supplies, and therefore have time to hone in and create art speaks to this residency’s efforts to invest in the next generation of artists who are community oriented and abolitionist in consciousness.”



The inaugural Stevie Wilson DIY Youth Arts Residency program was funded by independent donors. A significant donation—made in memory of Shaira Yasmin Ali— allowed us to nearly double the awards. The program was conceptualized and designed by Project NIA and Rachael Zafer. You can support the next generation of artists and help fund future creative residencies by making a donation to Project NIA at www.project-nia.org.