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Providence artist chosen to build Bristol slave trade memorial



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Artist Spencer Evans (middle), alongside Dr. Bernard Freamon, Professor of Law and Director of Race and the Foundations of American Law Program at Roger Williams University School of Law, and Bristol Middle Passage Port Marker Project co-chair Stephan Brigid, at the announcement event on Sunday.

JULIE BRIGIDI



Posted Wednesday, February 7, 2024 12:11 pm

By Christy Nadalin

A bronze statue born from the mind of Providence-based artist Spencer Evans has been chosen to forever memorialize Bristol's connection to the dark history of the slave trade, which will be erected at Independence Park some time within the next 18 months.

For several years now, the members of the Bristol Middle Passage Port Marker Project have worked diligently to see a monument erected on the Bristol waterfront that will acknowledge the history of Bristol's participation in the transatlantic human trade and its effects on African and Indigenous peoples. About 18 months ago, that site, just north of the flagpoles at Independence Park, was approved by the Town Council.

Last fall, a jury of artists selected three finalists, all Rhode Island artists, to present their designs for the memorial. Each created a model of their vision, and the three models were placed on display at Rogers Free Library, where the committee sought and received comment from the public. Over 200 members of the community offered their input.

Armed with this wealth of opinion the committee, along with a team of advisors, went into final deliberations, a process that Committee co-chair Stephan Brigididi said lasted about three hours.

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"It was a fierce competition; it was very difficult for us," he said.

The winner of the commission was Spencer Evans, a Providence-based artist, figurative draftsman, painter and sculptor who aims to tell detailed stories by using the imagery of specific moments. The goal of his work is to contextualize relationships between internal conflict and external circumstance based on his life experiences.

Evans is a three-time Webby Award winner, two-time Cannes Lion award winner, two-time Design & Art Direction winner, two-time ADC Gold Award Winner, and a Campaign Media "Power of Purpose" Gold Award winner. He is also an Assistant Professor of Drawing at the Rhode Island School of Design and serves as Programs Head of the Experimental Foundations Studies Division.

His work, "Our Ancestors Come With Us" will include three bronze figures — two adults and one child. Both adult figures will have their bodies facing Bristol Harbor, the first will be a woman. The position of her body will serve as a metaphor for the Pokanoket women who stood at the Cliffs of Sorrow waiting for their stolen families to return. The second figure, a man, will symbolize every African ancestor and descendant who possesses the viscerally sensational reminder that they are not in their home land. However, both their gazes will be fixed toward the child, as the second points inland at the direction that the child is moving.

In a statement with the submission, Evans wrote, "My concept for the memorial is based in the love and respect for my ancestors who endured the middle passage as well as a life in bondage long enough to be emancipated, which resulted in generations of descendants being able to live and thrive on this land today. My concept is also rooted in the same respect for the ancestors and descendants of Pokanoket people who lived in harmony with this land before any of us. Due to this love and respect, this project will not depict trauma. Our people are much more than stories of suffering, both of these groups have rich cultural identities without the lens of oppression and in spite of it."

The big reveal, with a crowd of over 125 community members, politicians, and stakeholders, was held Sunday, Feb. 4 at Pivotal Brewing in Unity Park.

"It was a fantastic event — it could not have been better," said Brigidi. "It was gratifying to know that the public was so supportive."

Fundraising, which was brisk during the event, will continue throughout the year. Evans received a \$3,000 honorarium for the commission. Ultimately the project is expected to cost about \$100,000, mostly for the cost of the bronze, so contributions to the project (BristolMiddlePassagePortMarkerProject.org (http://www.BristolMiddlePassagePortMarkerProject.org)) are very welcome.

The group will be appearing before the Town Council at their regular meeting on Wednesday night, Feb. 7, for the Council's approval of the design. Following that, regulatory hurdles include obtaining approval from CRMC, RI Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission, and the local Historic District Commission will be required. The entire process, including the casting and siting, is expected to take 9-18 months.

"I'm incredibly inspired and excited to be a part of Bristol's mission of reconciliation," said Evans. "The fact that I get to use my gift to honor my Ancestors and the Ancestors of the Pokanoket people as a way to enhance the sense of community in the town through history is what gives me a visceral feeling of pride. I look forward to getting to know Bristol more, and vice versa."

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MEET OUR STAFF

Jim McGaw

A lifelong Portsmouth resident, Jim graduated from Portsmouth High School in 1982 and earned a journalism degree from the University of Rhode Island in 1986. He's worked two different stints at East Bay Newspapers, for a total of 18 years with the company so far. When not running all over town bringing you

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the news from Portsmouth, Jim listens to lots and lots and lots of music, watches obscure silent films from the '20s and usually has three books going at once. He also loves to cook crazy New Orleans dishes for his wife of 25 years, Michelle, and their two sons, Jake and Max.

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