

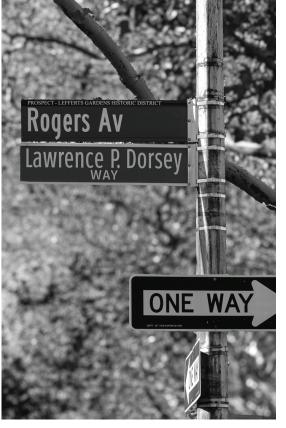
# Whose Street? Dorsey's Street

**In honor of my grandfather,** who established Dorsey's Fine Art Gallery, the city co-named the block of Rogers Avenue between Fenimore and Hawthorne Streets, "Lawrence P. Dorsey Way."

The art gallery opened in 1970, during a time when Black artists and women had difficulty exhibiting their work in major galleries. Mr. Dorsey welcomed artists of all backgrounds and provided a safe place for them to show their work. The gallery has always been an art haven and gathering spot to network, learn, grow, and develop impactful relationships.

Mr. Dorsey's passion for culture and art existed throughout his life. As a young adult, he collected paintings, sculptures, art books, and local artifacts from the international places he traveled to. Photography, drawing, and writing were a big part of his life. He created a two-ring leather binder filled with essays he

**BY NAIMA WOOD** 



wrote during his college years, which highlighted the contributions of Black leaders, politicians, and artists. There are also sketches in the binder that he drew, including one of Booker T. Washington.

Mr. Dorsey had a passion for creating art through food. Originally from St. Louis, Missouri, he excelled at

knowledge about art made it easy for

artists to trust and work with him. The

gallery became an important meeting

place for emerging and established

artists to network."

making St. Louis-style sauces and opened a barbecue restaurant called The Pig 'n Chick Bar-B-Q in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. After years of success with the restaurant, he closed the business

and partnered with a good friend to open a bar on the corner of Rogers and Lefferts Avenue, called Bklyn & Slim Bar. He met his business partner when they worked together on a transatlantic ocean liner. His friend's nickname was Brooklyn, and he was Slim. The business became a popular neighborhood bar that was always packed with regulars who lived or worked nearby. People still

talk about the fun they had hanging out there. It became the place for committee meetings and community events. The business was successful, but Mr. Dorsey found it heartbreaking to serve many of the same customers nightly. He saw families being destroyed by alcohol addiction, and he didn't want to contribute to the destruction and devastation caused by addiction.

In the 1960s, Mr. Dorsey met Mr. Silver, an art framer who owned a frame shop on Flatbush Avenue near Lefferts Avenue. Mr. Silver taught him the art of framing and offered him an apprenticeship. When Mr. Silver retired in 1970, Mr. Dorsey bought the art business from him and moved it a few blocks away to Rogers Avenue. He renamed it Dorsey's Picture Frame and Fine Art Gallery.

Everyone was welcome! Underrepresented artists had opportunities to show their work in the gallery. Mr. Dorsey's charming personality and knowledge about art made it easy for artists to trust and work with him. The gallery became an important meeting place for emerging and established artists to network. Young adults often walked into the gallery to get their undergraduate or graduate college diplomas framed. Others came into the gallery with art they had purchased while on vacation. He used these opportunities to expose his customers to artists represented by the gal-

lery and taught them the "Mr. Dorsey's charming personality and importance of collecting artwork and supporting local artists. Some came into the gallery not knowing anything about art, and soon after, they developed impressive art collections that included important

> works from some of the world's top artists. He was intentional about educating young people and immersing them in the art community at pivotal points in their lives.

> Making art accessible to all was the gallery's mission. Collecting artwork has had significant barriers for working-class people, such as exorbitantly high prices. Mr. Dorsey helped customers

start their fine art collections by offering flexible payment options. He allowed customers to make payments, even if all they had was five dollars to put down. Customers could take as long as they needed to pay off their art purchases. Some paid their balances in a few months, and others took five years

or more to pay them off. This flexible payment plan helped many get started with developing important fine art collections. Mr. Dorsey was an integral part of the community, who supported his neighbors and "bought local." They all cared deeply for him.

The gallery hosted an annual holiday art auction benefit and donated 100% of the proceeds back to the community. Mr. Dorsey partnered with Kings County Hospital to donate toys, blankets, money, and framed artwork to the pediatric

center. He commissioned painter, sculptor, and poet Emmett Wigglesworth to paint murals in public spaces for young children.<sup>1</sup> Mr. Dorsey also commissioned painter, sculptor, and printmaker Otto Neals to create a life-sized bronze sculpture titled "Discovery" in the courtyard of the Brooklyn Children's Center.<sup>2</sup> He was passionate about making art accessible to children so they could have a different view of themselves and the world.

The annual holiday art auction benefit was traditionally the largest event of the year for the gallery. Artists donated their artwork to be auctioned. It provided collectors an opportunity to purchase fine art below the regular cost. There was always a fabulous holiday feast available for all to enjoy

"Mr. Dorsev commissioned Otto Neals to create a life-sized bronze sculpture titled "Discovery" in the courtyard of the Brooklyn Children's Center. He was passionate about making art accessible to children so they could have a different view of themselves and the world."

at no charge. Mr. Dorsey used his culinary skills to prepare most of the food himself-glazed ham, roasted turkey, barbecue chicken, fried fish, spaghetti, green beans, a variety of salads, and deviled eggs sprinkled with paprika. My mom

told me she'd peeled hundreds of boiled eggs over the years! There were also tons of mouth-watering desserts and lots of wine flowing! People came from all over. There was always lots of laughter and good vibes. The record player continuously played the



1. Emmett Wigglesworth (1939-Present) Muralist, painter, sculptor, fabric designer, poet, and civil rights activist from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He is known for his abstract and colorful murals. Mural commissions include the New York Cultural Council, the Metropolitan Transit Authority, Kings County Hospital, and the Brooklyn Children's Center.

2. Otto Neals (1931–Present) Painter, sculptor, and printmaker from South Carolina and raised in Brooklyn, NY. His public art can be seen throughout New York City, including bronze reliefs on 135th Street marking the Harlem Walk of Fame, a mural at Kings County Hospital, a bronze sculpture in the courtyard of the Brooklyn Children's Center, and a bronze sculpture titled "Peter and Willie," in Prospect Park's Imagination Playground.

sounds of Ray Charles, Dinah Washington, Nancy Wilson, and, of course, the Mighty Sparrow. These were fun times! People came to the holiday event just to eat, but they got so much more.

\* \* \*

I OCCASIONALLY CONDUCTED gallery business with my grandfather during high school summer breaks. I had a memorable art business meeting with Elizabeth Catlett, a prominent Black female sculptor and printmaker, at her Manhattan apartment. The concierge at her apartment building led me to the elevator once they confirmed that Ms. Catlett was expecting me. I had a white envelope I was to hand over when I met her. She was very kind and sweet, and greeted me with a hug. I introduced myself and handed her the envelope. She immediately looked annoyed after she opened it. She was looking at a check my grandfather had written to her.

"This is the wrong amount," she said.

"Don't worry. I will make sure we correct it."

"I've explained to Mr. Dorsey many times over the years that he is undercharging the gallery's commission. The commission rate is too low and not even close to what other galleries are charging. I will call and speak with him about it. He has always been very stubborn about stuff like this."

She then shifted the conversation and smiled while letting me know that her granddaughter and I shared the same name—Naima. I was surprised to learn this since my name is not very common.

"Was she named after John Coltrane's song 'Naima'?"

### "Yes!" "So was I!"

She was excited to show me a picture in a magazine of a large bronze sculpture she had created titled 'Naima' after her granddaughter. The sculpture is the head of a strong, beautiful young girl with captivating eyes and her hair pulled back. Meeting with Ms. Catlett was one of my most memorable interactions with an artist. Her work is stunning, her personality was so pleasant, and I've always admired her bold activism of highlighting and uplifting Black people and women in her artwork.<sup>3</sup>

My grandfather worked long hours, but family was important to him. He made time to create fun experiences for my sister and me. During my primary school years, my immediate family and my grandfather lived together, so he served as a role model for me. My grandfather and I were very close,



3. Elizabeth Catlett (1915–2012) Sculptor and printmaker from Washington, DC, who later became a Mexican citizen. She is best known for her depictions of the Black-American experience, often focused on race and feminism. Her art is in museums around the world, including the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC; the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York; the High Museum in Atlanta; the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City; and the National Museum in Prague.

and he was just as influential in my life as my parents. We had a lot of family traditions, and my grandfather knew my sister and I loved the Easter holiday. He always gave us large baskets filled with candy, and included a five-dollar bill. Every Easter, my hair was done with lots of bouncy spiral curls, and I wore a pastel-colored dress. My grandfather drove through the neighborhood to pick up our friends and take us to the Brooklyn Children's Museum. This was a great tradition since the museum was interactive, educational, and fun.

Another tradition we enjoyed was to go to Junior's Restaurant & Bakery in downtown Brooklyn. My grandfather told me he used to take my mother there when she was young. This was one of my favorite places to go. I usually ordered a cheeseburger, french fries, a milkshake, and, of course, a slice of cheesecake.

Once I got a little older, my grandfather began taking me to the golf range at Marine Park. He was a huge golf fan and played as often as he could. He drove a 20-year-old silver Mercedes that he bought

used, and often said, "Let's go for a ride in my Mer-saaay-deeeez." Usually, we went to the driving range to hit golf balls. I always found it difficult to hit the ball and often made excuses about the golf club not being the right size for me as the reason why. My grandfather said that there was a specific technique and set of skills needed to swing a golf club correctly. He tried to teach me and always said, "If you know how to swing correctly, you can hit the ball with anything, even a broomstick!" I am



glad he introduced me to golf because he inspired me to take lessons to learn the proper technique of swinging the club.

Spending time with my grandfather—watching him conduct gallery business and interacting with artists and the community—has helped prepare me for my role as gallery

"During my primary school years, my

immediate family and my grandfather

lived together, so he served as a role

model for me. My grandfather and I

were very close, and he was just as

influential in my life as my parents."

director. When Mr. Dorsey passed away in 2007 at 88 years old, a group of artists and art collectors joined together to manage the art gallery. The art group hosted exhibits, classes, and book signings. The art

group also continued the tradition of hosting the gallery's annual holiday auction benefit for the next 15 years.

I began managing the art gallery at the end of the summer of 2022 and successfully completed a major renovation of the space. The updated gallery has museum-quality lighting and clean, spacious white walls. Artists can feel proud to exhibit their artwork in the gallery. The renovation included developing an art library with an extensive col-



NANCY TRFIIRFR

lection of rare art books. The backyard area has been transformed into a garden oasis and is now a part of the whole gallery experience. I manage

"I began managing the art gallery at

the end of the summer of 2022 and

completed a major renovation of

the space. The renovation included

developing an art library with an exten-

sive collection of rare art books."

the art gallery according to my vision while never forgetting the principles my grandfather taught me. He was always kind and respectful to everyone and conducted business with a high level of integrity. I am delighted to honor my

grandfather's legacy by continuing to provide a beautiful space for artists to showcase their work and educate the community about fine art. I now run with the vision and have mastered the skills of hitting balls with a broomstick.

\* \* \*

## Whose Streets?

HISTORIC PROSPECT LEFFERTS GARDENS has a long tradition of art, culture, and community. It is the home of significant landmarks and traditions. The Lenape People originally inhabited the land. The Dutch later settled in the area. We fight for the right to honor the enslaved African Ancestors interred in the Flatbush African Burial Ground. We also celebrate Lefferts Historic House, Prospect Park, Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn Botanic Garden, Ebbets Field, Empire Roller Skating Rink, Yemeni Delis, Little Caribbean, J'Ouvert, the Caribbean Day Parade, the children in the community who jump rope, play hopscotch, ride their bikes and scooters, play basketball, roller skate, and ice skate. The streets of many accents and multi-milliondollar homes adjacent to working-class apartment buildings.

My GPS navigation tells me Dorsey's Fine Art Gallery is on Lawrence P. Dorsey Way. It always gives me a sense of pride when the navigation voice on my phone announces the gallery's address.

My grandfather—art framer, art dealer, art collector, art gallery owner, restaurant owner, bar owner, veteran, husband, father, grandfather, great-grandfather, brother, son, basketball player, football player, neighbor, friend, mentor, community advocate for children, an icon in himself— started this story over fifty years ago when he

founded the art gallery. I continue the story to honor his legacy with my own signature and essence.

### Naima Wood earned a Bachelor of Business Administration from Georgia State University and a Master of

Business Administration from Mercer University and has had a successful career as a Global Human Resources leader working with a variety of organizations. She is continuing her family's legacy of managing Dorsey's Fine Art Gallery, founded by her grandfather, Lawrence P. Dorsey. Currently enrolled in NYU's Arts Management program, she is one class away from completing the certification. Naima also serves as a committee member of Brooklyn Community Board 9 and volunteers with the Maple Street Garden. She enjoys morning walks in Prospect Park with friends, as well as roller skating, ice skating, and playing golf. She travels internationally to meet new artists and collect artwork and loves visiting family in Atlanta.

## It Was My Crown Heights, But Not My Parade

Cougars

BY MARI RIVERA