



FOR THE GENERATIONS

Sculpture honors female FAMU student activists

Story and photos by Amanda Karioth Thompson, Arts Consultant

Tallahassee's Civil Rights Movement unfolded against the national backdrop of societal upheaval in the 1950s and 1960s. At the forefront were Florida A&M University (FAMU) staff, students, local leaders, and activists who organized protests, sit-ins, bus boycotts, and marches to challenge deeply rooted structures of racial inequality.

Black women students from FAMU such as Wilhelmina Jakes, Carrie Patterson, Patricia and Priscilla Stephens, and many others emerged as key figures in the dismantling of longstanding racial barriers. Their collective efforts led to the desegregation of public spaces and schools, reshaping Tallahassee's social fabric and leaving a legacy of courage and resilience in the ongoing fight for equal rights.



“For the Generations to Fulfill the Dream” by artist Alisha Lewis.

Sixty years since the passing of the Civil Rights Act, Tallahassee artist Alisha Lewis continues the work of these brave women with her creation of “For the Generations to Fulfill the Dream.” Located on FAMU Way, near the South Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. roundabout, this life-size, bronze sculpture depicts a determined young woman holding a book in one arm and a protest poster under the other. The artwork pays homage to the female students of FAMU and the role they played in the fight against racial discrimination.

As a child growing up in Jacksonville, Lewis dreamed of becoming an artist, a history teacher, or the President. She remembers “on career day in the first grade, I dressed up as an artist. I wore overalls and did the whole bit.” She was born into a family of naturally gifted artists, though none of them pursued art as a career. Lewis’s mother was offered a scholarship to attend art school in Connecticut, but her age and societal limitations presented a challenge.



**Lewis used oil based clay to sculpt the life-sized figure.
PHOTO PROVIDED**

“She was 12 or 13 at the time. They said they’d hold the scholarship for her until she was 16. This would have been the late 1960s, early 1970s. Employment was limited to being a nurse or a teacher for Blacks in the South. My grandmother worked occasionally as a seamstress and my grandfather worked for an electric company. Both had aspirations for their five children and being an artist wasn’t thought to be a viable career option for my mother. This led her to obtain degrees in other fields such as education with the highest being a doctorate.”

Inspired by her family, Lewis took a demanding load of college prep courses throughout her grade school years. She enrolled in as many art classes as her schedule would allow, all at advanced levels. Her art instructors were encouraging, and Lewis recalls a high school art teacher who “spoke life into me and my art. She connected me with artists that looked like me.”

Making decisions about college, Lewis knew she wanted to study art. “Initially, my mom wasn’t supportive of that, but she reflected back on her own experience and decided she wasn’t going to repeat it.”

Lewis attended the University of Florida and earned a BFA in Ceramics with minors in Art History and African American Studies. She went on to earn a master’s degree in the Business of Art and Design from the Maryland Institute College of Art. While in graduate school, Lewis worked as an elementary art teacher. She also founded a business, Brown Girls Unite, after her oldest daughter noticed a lack of artwork and books featuring characters of color. Lewis began creating materials to address the issue and started teaching classes to empower girls of color through art and art education.

After three years in the classroom, she decided to focus on her own art and began creating new works and applying to various exhibitions and public art opportunities. Lewis moved with her family to Tallahassee in 2021. In the habit of searching out interesting art opportunities, she came across the Call to Artists for the History and Culture Trail Project.

The Blueprint Intergovernmental Agency's History and Culture Trail project seeks to recognize and honor the historical contributions and cultural impact of the communities adjacent to the FAMU Way Corridor, an east- west roadway from South Monroe Street to Lake Bradford Road.



The artwork celebrates the female FAMU student Civil Right activists.

Part of the Blueprint Capital Cascades Trail Segment 3 Project, the History and Culture Trail represents a \$1.2 million investment that leverages a \$397 million Blueprint infrastructure investment in the Southside. After years of extensive research and community involvement, informational panels will be installed along the 1.5-mile trail to display images and historical material about the neighborhoods, businesses and individuals who lived and worked in the area.

The Trail will also include 12 new pieces of public art, the most significant infusion of outdoor public art in Tallahassee-Leon County history. These works are vital in further enhancing and interpreting historical accounts while offering additional opportunities for engagement.

The inclusion of art into any environment plays a significant role in sustaining cultural identity and creating a sense of place. The return on investment is substantial. Public art serves as a tourism driver, encourages lasting economic growth, and contributes to business development. It fosters community pride, connects citizens to their shared history, and makes cultural heritage a tangible community asset.

Though Lewis was immediately drawn to the project's mission, she was hesitant to apply. She had never done a large scale, outdoor public art piece before. Her family encouraged her to give it a try. Lewis's proposal was accepted, and she is one of seven artists invited to create artwork for the History and Culture Trail.

Lewis sought advice from experienced artists and dove into the preparatory work for the sculpture. She examined archival photographs from the height of the local Civil Rights movement. Paying close attention to detail relating to styles of hair and clothing, she refined her original design.



The protest poster was inspired by an archival photo from the time period.

“One of my favorite parts about the artwork is the research behind it. I started getting into the different protest events that were held across the city and who led them. So many of them were teenagers.” The face that Lewis sculpted for the figure was modeled after her 18-year-old niece.

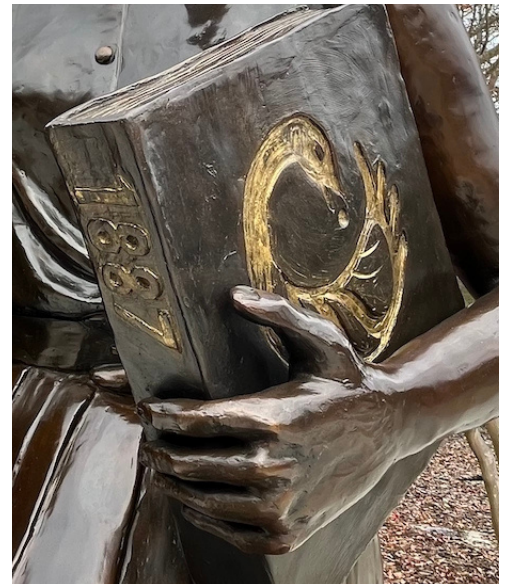
Under the figure’s right arm, is a sign that reads ‘We Shall Win By Love.’ “I found a photo of that protest poster in the archives. It shows the full humanity of Black women and Black people. To approach others with empathy and love.”

A book is tucked into the crook of the figure’s left arm. Its spine shows the date 1887, FAMU’s founding, to emphasize the importance of the University as an institution of higher learning, a gateway to Black social and economic advancement, and a keystone of community activism.

The Sankofa symbol on the book’s cover signifies drawing wisdom from history for present and future growth. “The sculpture reminds viewers about the women of the past and informs their steps moving forward.”

The figure is climbing steps to remind us that “the journey is not over. It’s unfinished. The bottom step is flush with the ground to invite people to approach and join in the effort. It’s meant as a message to viewers. Equality is not unattainable, and you can be part of the solution.”

“My internal guide as an artist is highlighting the history of Black women in America. This artwork is about those who showed their agency, power, ingenuity, innovation, and bravery to step up during the Civil Rights movement.”



The book is finely detailed with gold highlights.

To learn more about Blueprint’s Capital Cascades Trail Segment 3 Project, click here: <https://blueprintia.org/projects/cct-segment-3-amenities/>