



PROJECT SPOTLIGHT BY:

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# ASpire: No Limits

Mural Arts Department  
**Public Art & Civic Engagement**

Artist  
**Ernel Martinez**

Program Director and Project Manager  
**Cathy Harris**

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“ASpire: No Limits” exemplifies Mural Arts’ tried and true process of working with neighborhoods to tell the stories of figures who are and have been significant community assets. For Point Breeze, a neighborhood in Southwest Philadelphia, that figure was its own Dr. Shawn L. White, aka Air Smooth. An MC, recording artist, and producer, Dr. White played a prominent role in Philadelphia’s 1990’s hip hop culture. He influenced many of Philly’s hip hop artists, including Tariq “Black Thought” Trotter and Beanie Sigel. Dr. White’s lifework, however, was centered on health promotion—most notably, HIV/AIDS prevention among young African American men. Dr. White deployed innovative engagement strategies, for instance leveraging the barbershop as a site of intergenerational conversation among African American males.

Designed by Ernel Martinez, the mural communicates Dr. White’s life as an MC and rapper. It incorporates words to both convey Dr. White’s love of words and also uplift and inspire young people. It combined a portrait of an African American man with modern design elements and appealed to a wide variety of community residents. “ASpire” celebrates Dr. White’s legacy and serves as a beacon of neighborhood pride. It creates an inspiring

narrative of his life, especially valued by his two young sons and other young African American males. It depicts one of Point Breeze’s African American men doing something positive for the community and includes a map of Point Breeze in the design.

“ASpire,” however, had and has a life far beyond the mural, itself. Developed as part of the Community Murals program, Mural Arts combined mural creation with programming that continued Dr. White’s mission. Young people, for instance, participated in a series of eight conversations at Jazz U Up Barbershop. They heard about Black male role models’ professional journeys and talked about sexual health, conflict resolution, and goal setting. They painted mural panels on the sidewalk.

Below, we share the story of how the mural came together, with the lens of illustrating one of Mural Arts’ most successful approaches: targeted engagement with a specific segment of the community around an issue that particularly affects that community. We draw out lessons learned and impacts.

## Who:

# Artist, Family, Project Manager, Partner Organizations & Community

“ASpire” brought together a mix of collaborators, partners, and participants with the ideal backgrounds, experiences, connections, and passions. Some of this came via careful planning. Some was good luck. Mural Arts started out with a budget of \$40,000 for the project but increased the budget to \$65,000 when the vision for the programming elements expanded. Others looking to do something similar should note that this figure does not include the portion of a project manager’s salary devoted to making this project happen and Mural Arts’ administrative and operational costs.

**The artist:** Erel Martinez had completed a number of Mural Arts murals before “ASpire” began, including The Roots mural “Legendary,” immediately before. Martinez brought his cultural competency in working with marginalized communities and his training in fine art aesthetics.

Martinez also embodied one of the mural themes—that of lifting up African American men as role models—as a Black man visibly working on the site and leading the mural design process.

Whereas Martinez’ skills as a muralist working with communities played a role in his selection, his collaborative relationship with Nicole Fisher, mother of Dr. White’s youngest son, was key to the success of this project.

**The family:** Fisher has passionately preserved and communicated Dr. White’s legacy for his sons. She served as the executive producer of “From Man to Man,” a documentary about Dr. White’s life that preceded “ASpire.” Martinez collaborated closely with Fisher to create the mural design. Through many conversations with Martinez, Fisher shared who Dr. White was. He credits her with summing up Dr. White’s life in a way that allowed him to formulate the imagery and collect the words for the mural. Fisher also designed the Refuge Workshop (described below) to mirror Dr. White’s own engagement strategies.

**The manager:** Cathy Harris brought over fifteen years of experience at Mural Arts to skillfully manage all of the logistics, from budgeting, filling funding gaps, and payments to ordering materials and coordinating team members. Harris was adept at managing the community design review process with diverse groups of stakeholders. Harris also leaned on the connections and cultural

**“The title of the mural, ASpire, says it all... that it wants those young people to aspire to greatness. We want those young people to commit themselves to greatness and to achieve all that they can as well.”**

**– Ernel Martinez**



competency of others in her network who had experience relevant to the project goals, including Tariq “Black Thought” Trotter, Kevin Brown, Will Little, and Nicole Fisher.

**Partner organizations:** “ASpire’s” crucial organizational partnerships allowed the team to reach target communities and implement engagement strategies. For Mural Arts, sometimes bringing together project partners resembles matchmaking or curating an exhibition with multiple artists. Serendipitously for “ASpire,” Harris had recently met Will Little of the Redemption Forgiveness Peace (RFP) mentoring project. She learned about a program he was already running out of the Jazz U Up and Shear Talent barbershops with fellow barber Derrick Young. Harris connected Little with Kevin Brown of KBI Solutions Nonprofit Consulting, who identified mentors for the Barbershop Talks. Little and Brown’s organizations jointly ran the arts-based Barbershop Talks. Other partners allowed “ASpire” to connect to local youth. Universal Companies, for instance, connected the ASpire team to local youth through the schools it runs (Audenreid High School and Alcorn Middle School) and also provided the Refuge Workshop venue. Other partners, including the Youth Violence Reduction Project, helped reach young African American males. The staff of City of Philadelphia Councilman Kenyatta Johnson, Epic South, and other community partners on the steering committee helped boost the signal for community outreach.

**Community:** Over 200 community members participated in “ASpire,” particularly young African American boys and men. Mural Arts created a host of meaningful opportunities for community members to participate in the mural project. These varied and numerous touchpoints were a key part of the project’s success.

First, neighbors contributed ideas that helped shape the mural design and increased their investment in the mural process through community meetings. A hallmark of Mural Arts’ Community Murals approach, the project team holds meetings with the neighbors and stakeholders to communicate about the mural and collect input as the project progresses. For “ASpire,” Mural Arts leveraged partner organizations to disseminate the invitations and also distributed flyers door-to-door over a four-block radius from the site. They held the meetings in the community garden in front of the wall where the mural would be installed. In the first meeting, Mural Arts shared Dr. White’s story and explained the significance of the location. At the second meeting, Martinez presented his proposed design and the community contributed their ideas. At the final meeting, the project team focused on planning the dedication and a block clean up.

Project partners (Fisher, Art Sanctuary, and Mural Arts’ arts education program) united to offer the day-long, Refuge Workshop. Mural Arts invited young African American males from three target

age groups from three organizations: Alcorn Middle School (10-13), Audenreid High School (14-17), and the Restorative Justice Guild (18-24). On June 21, 2014, participants began the day by writing an “I am...” statement on a chalkboard. They posed with it for portraits taken by photographer Lamont Wilson. In between portraits, they painted mural panels with Martinez. Seven African American men, recruited by Fisher, led workshops. They ranged from poets (Greg Corbin, Philadelphia Youth Poetry Movement) to business leaders (Abdullah Basheer, Quality Motors of Germantown) to community activists (Saadiq Garner, Philadelphia Human Relations Commission and Will Little, Redemption Forgiveness Peace). After cycling through workshops on personal vision mapping, self-efficacy, and personal responsibility, the participants shared reflections. They wrote new “I am...” statements and had the opportunity to pose for new portraits—A creative way to document the changes the participants experienced in their self-image.

Mural Arts also coordinated “ASpire’s” engagement with its Restorative Justice Guild. The guild gives formerly incarcerated individuals and young adults on probation the opportunity to reconnect with their community while developing job skills. Guild members helped paint and install the mural, and participated in Barbershop Talks, the Refuge Workshop, and three guild member-specific writing workshops that complemented the Refuge Workshop. During the workshops, a storyteller from First Person Arts helped participants use writing to discuss where they were in their lives, where they wanted to go, and what they would need to do for their story have their desired ending.

Through Barbershop Talks, young men, and eventually some young women, participated in a series of conversations around sexual health, conflict resolution, and goal setting. Held at Jazz U Up Barbershop and organized by Will Little of Redemption Forgiveness Peace (RFP) and Kevin Brown (former Mural Arts project manager), these events mirrored Dr. White’s own engagement strategy. They built on Dr. White’s insight about the barbershop as a site of intergenerational conversation among African American males. Organizers invited successful African American

men to come speak to the group of young people about their work and how they got to where they are today over a series of 8 events culminating in October 2014. Speakers included individuals with as diverse roles as associate principal bassist with the Philadelphia Orchestra (Joseph Conyers), illustrator with Marvel Comics (Jarreau Wimberley), stage and screen actors (Brian Anthony Wilson and Johnnie Hobbs, Jr.), and owner of Whimsicles, a line of all-natural fruit popsicles (Salim Weldon). Participants also painted mural panels on the barbershop’s sidewalk. The participants were invited through the existing RVP program at the Jazz U Up barbershop and Mural Arts programs (e.g. Restorative Justice Guild). Participants started bringing their friends to these well attended workshops, which is how the group grew to include a number of girls.

To further develop participants’ sense of ownership of the mural, Mural Arts combined the engagement activities described above with its paint day structure, where any individuals can help paint the mural, regardless of their skill. For a paint day, the mural design is printed on panels of mural cloth and coded using a paint by number system. For “ASpire,” Mural Arts held paint days in focused engagements like the Refuge Workshop and the Barbershop Talks, and also in settings aimed at broader involvement, such as the 2014 Roots Picnic. With its heavily text-based design, “ASpire” was particularly conducive to paint days. Not only are words easy to paint, they also provide painters with an opportunity to readily engage with the content while painting.

During mural dedications, all the people who have helped make the mural have an opportunity to celebrate, and the project is connected to an even larger audience. Mural Arts recognizes funders, sponsors, and all of the hard work that partners have put in. For “ASpire,” Mural Arts created a dedication attended by nearly 200 people around the theme of words and music. It included performances by poets and singers. People from Dr. White’s past and organizations where he worked further communicated his legacy. To help drive home the point about wellness, Mural Arts made resources for natural food products and healthy eating available during the dedication.



ASpire: No Limits process portrait.  
Photo by Lamont Wilson.



ASpire: No Limits press conference,  
April 9, 2014.  
Photo by Tim Blackwell.



ASpire: No Limits paint day,  
August 18, 2014.  
Photo by Mural Arts Staff.

# Lessons Learned

Mural Arts drew on its many years of developing community murals to make “ASpire” a success. Here are some of the lessons learned embodied in this project.

**Put talented team members in place and seek strong partnerships:** The artist and project manager leveraged their experience, networks, cultural competencies, and training to significantly benefit the project. Strong partnerships brought resources and enhanced community engagement goals.

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**Offer multiple, meaningful opportunities for community members to participate in the artistic process:** The project team invited people to participate in this mural-making process in many ways--community meetings, paint days, and workshops in many different venues. Many different types of people had more than one touchpoint with the project.

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**Coordinate project activities around a clear goal for community impact:** In all of the elements of this project, from the mural design to the programming activities, team members focused on telling Dr. White’s story. They sought to inspire African American boys and young men and advance health promotion. The theme’s emphases on youth education, may have helped the community accept and celebrate it.



**Plan carefully to help ensure the community will embrace the mural:** Community members embraced the mural design. The project team credited involving multiple groups in the community, regular communication through multiple channels so that no one felt surprised by the final result, and a strong, inclusive design. Martinez thought the design allowed everyone to feel reflected or represented and to feel an affinity for the mural.

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**Location, location, location: chose a significant site and remain sensitive to community dynamics:** Mural Arts chose a wall in Point Breeze, because that is where Dr. White grew up and his family still lived nearby. Point Breeze was, and is, experiencing gentrification; team members kept this in mind throughout the process. They chose a wall that faced a community garden managed by a land trust, so the mural would not be lost to development. Old and new residents on the block, itself, came together to pitch in for a pre-dedication block clean up.

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**Strategically pool resources and seek cross-program synergies:** Mural Arts deepened “ASpire’s” engagement and impacts by leveraging its experience and organizational resources in other programs (e.g. working with youth in Arts Education and with recently incarcerated individuals in Restorative Justice). In hindsight, there might have been additional potential for alignment with Porch Light, given its focus on community wellness. Mural Arts’ cross-program approach both increased “ASpire’s” impact and furthered ongoing strategic initiatives.





ASpire No Limits paint day,  
June 23, 2014.  
Photo by Tim Blackwell.

# After the Paint Dries

The “ASpire” project embodied another hallmark of success for community mural projects—the team paid special attention to how the project would live on. To that end, the project team invested in multiple forms of documentation for this project: a video documenting the Refuge Workshop, a 12-page program booklet distributed at the dedication, and a website. These forms of documentation build on the “From Man to Man” documentary, to create a group of tools for telling the project and Dr. White’s story. Even so, team members reflected that there were opportunities for improving the distribution plan for these materials afterwards, especially for the Refuge Workshop video. Team members had hoped that the Refuge Workshop video could inspire similar activities focused on young African American men and wellness in other places.

Another important way that Mural Arts created an afterlife for this project was to create avenues to continue the relationships and connections made during the project. This is especially crucial when the goal of a project includes having an impact on young people. Individuals who came to the project through a Mural Arts program or a partner’s program could continue to be involved through those programs after the mural project is done. However, clear responsibilities for maintaining a connection with the specific young people involved

in this project could have made sure that no one slipped through the cracks.

Furthermore, this kind of project can feed into ongoing program investments in the same issue area. Shortly after the ASpire dedication, Mural Arts began working on a partnership within the Porch Light program called Building Brotherhood: Engaging Men of Color. This resulted in the “Colorful Legacy” mural. “ASpire” and “Colorful Legacy” overlapped in many respects, especially in team members like Gabriel Bryant (one of the Refuge Workshop leaders who leads the EMOC initiative) and the muralists Keir Johnston and Willis “Nomo” Humphrey (members of Amber Art and Design along with Ernel Martinez). There might have been additional opportunities for Mural Arts to bring more of the resources from “ASpire” into the Building Brotherhood program.

In “Aspire: No Limits,” Mural Arts used multiple avenues to create an inspiring narrative of Dr. White’s life and work. In this project, team members also seized on a strategic opportunity to make investments in the community issues that were close to his heart. In this way, Mural Arts contributed to efforts to preserve Dr. White’s legacy for his sons and other young African American males.

## Going Further

. ASpire program booklet available for download at:  
<https://www.muralarts.org/artworks/aspire-no-limits/>

. ASpire website: <https://aspire nolimits.com/>

. Refuge Workshop Video: <https://videopress.com/v/iXrTqwOX>



ASpire: No Limits process portrait.  
Photo by Lamont Wilson.

**“He was totally shut down when he came in-  
-didn’t want to share his story or input about  
himself... over the course of the project, he  
changed so much... He was in the Guild, so he  
worked here in the building for several months  
and he started coming by and he’s smiling now.  
He’s saying hi. He’s a lot more open.”**

**– Cathy Harris, Project Manager**





Ernel Martinez at ASpire: No Limits  
in-process, October 24, 2014.  
Photo by Steve Weinik.