

Lifestyle

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Here: In Garfield

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Photo and Story by Steve Mellon



"Transformation Sculpture Garden" on Black Street in Garfield. At right, volunteer DeV Vaughn Hopkins, 10, who lives nearby, checks out details of the sign.

Even in a small Polaroid photograph, the kid stands out. He's tall and skinny and is wearing a bright red shirt. Others in the picture stand with their arms at their sides, looking more serious. His arms are raised above his head. He's clowning.

That's how Elena Hiatt Houlihan and Christine Bethea remember him: a lively young man, one you don't forget. Elena and Christine, her assistant, lead a community project -- sponsored by Construction Junction and Pittsburgh Center for the Arts -- in which a group of at-risk kids collect discarded junk and use it to build sculpture. You can see the results on the 5400 block of Black Street in Garfield -- nine eye-catching designs in a landscaped garden that was once an overgrown lot.

The lively kid in the red shirt had the idea of making a sculpture of a person lying in a chaise longue, listening to music. He'd collected some of the material he'd need and seemed excited about the project. But then he stopped coming.

The things he'd collected -- an old aluminum chaise longue with a deteriorating plastic cover, a few stereo speakers -- remained in a corner, untouched.

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Elena and Christine weren't alarmed or even concerned. Kids sometimes wandered in and out of the program.

One day in June, Elena asked if anyone had heard from Ronald.

"Oh, he's dead," one kid said.

You may remember the news coverage of the murder. It occurred around 6 p.m. on May 30. Ronald Sisco, 15, was sitting on his bicycle, talking with a group of kids in a car on

Orlan Place in Penn Hills. Another car arrived and someone started shooting. Sisco died of multiple gunshot wounds.

Christine was shocked to hear that Ronald had been killed. Elena wanted to cry. Kids in the program reacted much more calmly.

"We wanted to stop and have a vigil for him," said Elena. "But for the kids, it was just another day in the life."

The sculpture in the Black Street garden is eclectic and unusual. There's a dinosaur whose head is made from the base of a stairway. Several feet away is a large totemic mask with a headdress made of fan blades. Then there's a robot with a body of galvanized heating pipe and a computer motherboard.

Ronald Sisco's piece of a person lying on a chaise longue is not among them, but the young man will have a presence. A photograph of him is being incorporated into a sign at the garden's entrance.

Christine says she wants kids taking part in the Reclamation/Transformation Sculpture Garden to realize that "just because something looks like junk, that doesn't mean it is." Many of the items used to build sculptures were picked up on forays into Garfield's alleys on trash day. While the kids were working, they'd sometimes talk to Christine and Elena about their hopes and dreams. One wants to be a chef, one a history teacher, another lawyer.

Ronald Sisco serves as a reminder that dreams can be cut short.

There are other reminders. One boy wandered up to the garden on a recent day, when Elena and Christine and a few volunteers were painting the garden's sign and putting a few finishing touches on the sculptures. He overheard a discussion about Ronald's death.

"My uncle got shot in his car," the boy volunteered.

"Oh, is he OK?" Elena asked.

"No, he's dead."

For a moment there was no sound but the rush-hour rumbling of cars along nearby Black Street. Then Elena and Christine and the volunteers resumed their work. The boy remained, wandering among the once-discarded items that had been made colorful and unique.

(Steve Mellon can be reached at smellon@post-gazette.com or 412.2
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