There are eight new splashes of color against the cool gray mesh of the Contemporary Art Museum facing North Spring Avenue. Upon closer inspection, visitors may recognize heroes with present and past ties to the neighborhoods around the Museum: James “Cool Papa” Bell, a left-handed pitcher for the St. Louis Stars in the National Negro League with a street in JeffVanderLou named for him; Congresswoman Maxine Waters of California, a graduate of Vashon High School; Josephine Baker, a performer of international fame and daughter of Mill Creek Valley (an African American neighborhood razed by the city in 1959 and now referred to as “Midtown”); and Lois Conley, Founder, President, and CEO of the Griot Museum of Black History in St. Louis Place.

These eight banners are a result of two years of planning, teaching, and involved partnership between five different local organizations and schools. The brainchild of Dr. Rosalind (Roz) Norman, founder of GatewayGIS, the Neighborhood Banner Project was prompted by the building of the new NGA (National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency) west campus at the

credit line

Courtesy the artists of Herbert Hoover Boys and Girls Club and Kevin McCoy.
It’s so important that [our history] not be forgotten,” facility was named for a Black attorney who raised funding from an Institute of Museum and Library Services grant. Despite the project being hampered just as it was getting off the ground by COVID and a year of virtual learning, the initiative produced eight banners honoring four St. Louis heroes of the past and present and three north St. Louis neighborhoods. Participating students came from the Herbert Hoover Boys and Girls Club in JeffVanderLou, Vashon High School in JeffVanderLou, Cardinal Ritter College Prep in Covenant Blu Grand Center, and Carr Lane Middle School in Carr Square.

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“Dr. Roz relates, wondering aloud how many people know that Congresswoman Maxine Waters represents California’s 43rd congressional district and is serving her 15th term of office. A St. Louis native, she graduated from Vashon High School before moving with her family to Los Angeles. She is the most senior of the twelve African American Congresswomen and was named as one of Time magazine’s 100 Most Influential People of 2018.

We would also like to acknowledge the work of students at Grand Center Arts Academy who worked with Resident Teaching Artist Simiya Sudduth. Due to some complications arising from virtual learning during the pandemic, their files were lost.

Dr. Roz hopes that the banner project can be the first step in ensuring that the history of the community is not lost while introducing students to some of the tech skills that are not as widely available to north St. Louis schools. As lead designer on the project, Kevin McCoy related what a difference it made for students to see a Black graphic designer, since graphic design is a field where African Americans are woefully underrepresented. At the end of the banner design workshop, a middle school student informed McCoy that he would like to study design in the future and requested that digital design be a regular part of the Boys and Girls Club curriculum.

“There was something very unique about how these communities of color were able to still not just survive, but bounce back from so many inequities,” Dr. Roz has dedicated herself to ensuring that generational knowledge and information continues to be shared and passed onto the next generation. She doesn’t want to see these neighborhoods buried as they have been and are continuing to be in St. Louis and all over the country. A phrase that captures the essence of her mission is an old Mexican proverb: “Ellos intentaron enterrarnos. Ellos no sabian que aramos semillas.” (“They tried to bury us. They didn’t know we were seeds.”)

Visitors can view the students’ work on the outside of the museum, facing North Spring Avenue, through September 18, 2022. At the end of the exhibition, one set of banners will be gifted to the classrooms of the student artists who created them, and one set will be handed over to the St. Louis third Ward Alderman, Brandon Bosley, for future public display. We encourage you to continue this initiative by discovering, researching, and celebrating African American heroes in the community through your own creative process.

James "Cool Papa" Bell
JeffVanderLou Neighborhood
Designed by the artists of Herbert Hoover Boys and Girls Club and Tamara Jackson, Jayden Land, and Aaliyah Perkins
Resident Teaching Artist: Kevin McCoy

James “Cool Papa” Bell (1903–1991) was a left-handed center fielder who began his career with the St. Louis Stars of the Negro National League. He was renowned for his speed running and stealing bases as well as his “cool” demeanor during his stint as pitcher earlier in his career. He was added to the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 1974.

Josephine Baker
Midtown Neighborhood
Designed by the artists of Cardinal Ritter College Prep; Jordan Baker, Ariana Bennett, Asia Brantley, Janelle Briggs, Aidan Cotton, Tramond Dukes, Yashaun Harris, Jayden Heitz, Ashton Henderson, Jadhah Holly, Jaylon Holmes, Mary Taylor Lee, Aliana Lewis, Keon Morris, Jalia Mosby, Natasha Phiri, Jusza Pryor, Taylor Richardson, Torri Richardson, Gekirah Rivera, Alonzo Smith, Jr., Jaylan Williams, and Dallas Winner-Johnson
Teaching Artist: Jaryn Blackshear-Bryant

Josephine Baker (1906–1975) was an enterprising and activist who was born in what is now Midtown. Her talents in singing and dancing took her to New York City and eventually to Paris where she found fame for her trademark dancing style and eye-catching costumes. Baker is also known for her work with the civil rights movement and the French resistance during WWII.

Lois Conley
St. Louis Place Neighborhood
Designed by the artists of Carr Lane Middle School; Dany Asaro, Tya Carthen, Anissa Covington, Cameron Crosby, Denijah Curtis, Stanley Flowers, Jeremiah Green, Ta’niah Hicks, Keith Jacobs, Mika Jones, Kentreavour Joseph Heavon Kazimir, Aiyannna Knox Bradshaw, Kenya Love, Destiny Nash, Zariyah Portis, Landon Ruffin, Makaylah Smith, D’Kyra Terry, and Maurel Turner
Resident Teaching Artist: L.M. Flowers

Lois Conley (b. 1946) is the founder/President and CEO of the Griot Museum of Black History, the second-oldest African American history and wax museum in the country. A Vashon High School graduate, Conley has dedicated her life to researching and promoting the awareness of African American history. She also has lectured throughout the United States and received numerous honors for her work.

Lois Conley

Maxine Waters
JeffVanderLou Neighborhood
Designed by the artists of Vashon High School; Jamal Anderson, Andreanisha Arnold, Jesseseca Calhoun, Charisla Chatman, David Cosey, Lonzeiil Griffith, Samuel Holbrook-Williams, Jameer Johnson, Jordan Johnson, Romeo Jones, Lisandra Manley, Iyana McCurry, Geremiah McLucas, Tyler Morris, Dorian Phillips, Omariou Pruitt, Nicholas Randall, Miesha Robinson, Omari Roper, Mykeal Sanders, Jasmine Smith, Shadae Survillion, Ri naya Sutton, Jordan Watson, MacKenzi Watson-Schulte, Jadai West, Sierra White, Ariel Williams, and NaTaryah Williams
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