

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Sadie Barnette: "The impossible is what we do": A new art project honors neighborhood 'Staying Power'"

By Stephan Salisbury

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"Starr Granger poses for a selfie next to a portrait of herself in the installation, 'On the Day They Come Home' in the Monument Lab exhibition 'Staying Power' at the Village of Arts and Humanities in North Philadelphia. Credit: Tom Gralish

The air is different outside the walls – many who've spent time in prison have said it – although it is the same air. Ivy Lenore Johnson, Tamika Bell-Harlem, and Starr Granger know the difference. Incarcerated as juveniles, they are out at last, decades of prison time behind them.

All that time has led them to this place: They want to end the system that sent them to jail for most of their lives and honor those who helped and supported them, and they want to lift up and maybe inspire a small slice of North Philadelphia along Germantown Avenue south of Lehigh Avenue.

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

It's why they say they got involved with the Village of Arts and Humanities, a community-based cultural organization rooted in the neighborhood for decades, and why they embraced "Staying Power," the latest public initiative of the idiosyncratic [Monument Lab](#) project, a Philadelphia-based organization that aims to transform the idea of public monuments.

"I was 16 when I went in," said Bell-Harlem, standing by a monument called [On the Day They Come Home](#), a 10-foot-tall ode to the day prison doors are thrown open and people are free to leave — and breathe. Monumental photographs of Johnson, Bell-Harlem, and Granger form a crown-like totem, while a poem they collectively wrote girdles its base.



Tamika Bell-Harlem touches a portrait of herself on the installation "On the Day They Come Home," in the exhibition "Staying Power." Starr Granger (right) and Ivy Johnson (left) in rear, are also featured with large photographs in the piece. Credit: Tom Gralish

"As a child I really didn't have nobody to tell me these things: You're beautiful, you can achieve more, and you can do this with your life," Bell-Harlem said. "I want to make sure every young child is able to live a young child's life, and feel that love, and give them that push and that inspiration to be better. That's my goal and that's my passion."

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

"*Staying Power*" is an exhibition of five newly conceived monuments or memorials — *On the Day They Come Home* among them — now sprinkled through the archipelago of parks spreading out from the Village headquarters at 2544 Germantown Ave. The exhibition will remain on view into July.

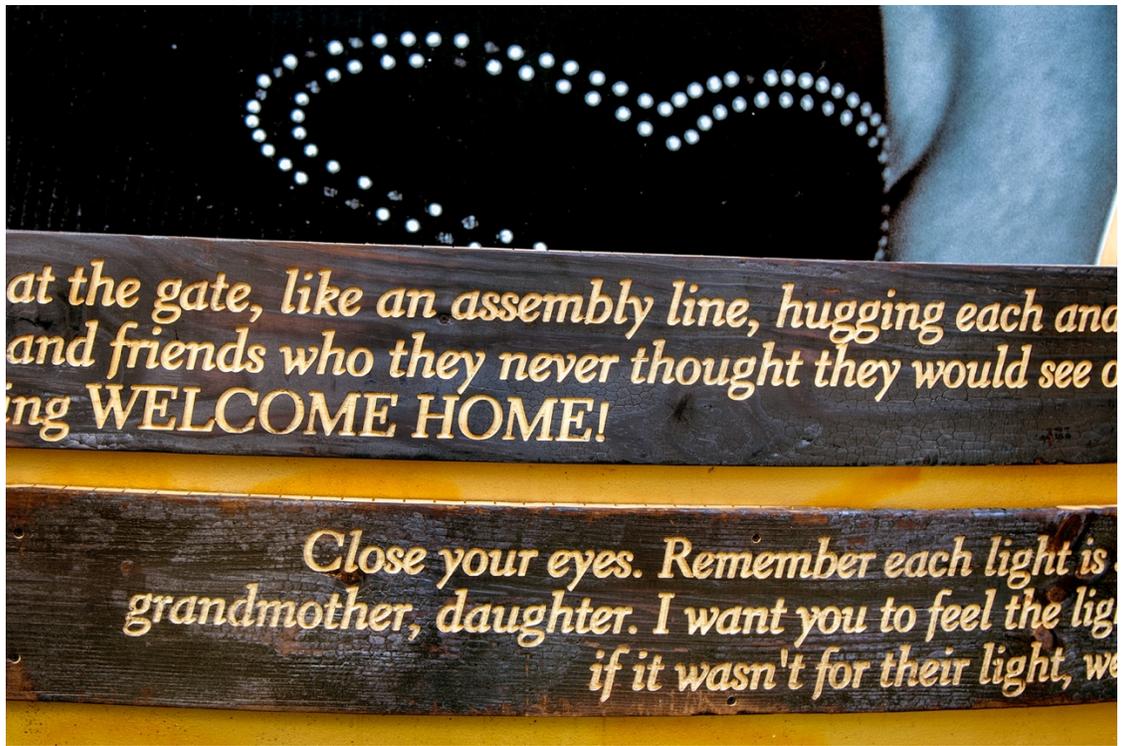
In different ways, each artwork (all are conceived in consultation with community members) honors resiliency, creativity, and patience — those human elements that undergird the notion of "staying power."



Ivy Johnson looks at a portrait of herself in the installation, "On the Day They Come Home" by Courtney Bowles and Mark Strandquist, part of the exhibition, "Staying Power," She told our photographer it was her choice to pose with the handcuffs. Credit: Tom Gralish

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508



Poetry and quotes by the woman are carved out of charred wood on the base of the installation. Credit: Tom Gralish



Starr Granger (left) and Tamika Bell-Harlem take photos near the monument that features depictions of them in the exhibition "Staying Power," along with Paulette Carrington at center. Credit: Tom Gralish

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508



Tamika Bell-Harlem (right) takes a selfie with artists Courtney Bowles and Mark Strandquist (left). Credit: Tom Galish



Three generations of Walker women, who all live in the neighborhood, recognize subjects in the photos by artist Deborah Willis of "Black Women and Work," in the exhibition. Jennifer (right), her daughter Aylisha and six-year-old granddaughter Zava look over photographs. Credit: Tom Galish

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508



A photograph by artist Deborah Willis, hangs from a clothes line as part of the exhibition "Staying Power." Credit: Tom Gralish



Community residents and artists gather by the mural "Ile-Ife Guardian" mural created by Village of Arts and Humanities co-founder Lily Yeh in 1986. It was restored in 2015. Credit: Tom Gralish

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

They don't look much like traditional public monuments, making much use of photography and sound, poetry and light, and seemingly frail, temporary materials like wood.

"The word *monument* conveys, of course, the bronze and marble statuary on high, that suggest a dominant, unilateral, and untouchable form of history," said Paul Farber, Monument Lab director and cocurator of the exhibition.

"But also the word *monument*, when used and understood, is also about poetry, projection, music, protest. If you have the time, the money, and the official power, you build a monument that's important to you, and that also reinforces your social position. If you don't have the time, the money, or the official power, you build your own monuments."

The three formerly imprisoned women, along with Paulette Carrington and Yvonne Newkirk, worked with artists and justice-system activists Mark Strandquist and Courtney Bowles to create a work that memorializes, in Strandquist's words, "those who aren't there." The absences in a community, those who have vanished into the prison system or have been displaced by powerful economic and demographic forces, speak volumes in their silence.

In the poem wrapped around the base of their monument, Johnson, Bell-Harlem, Granger and their collaborators assert a promise, born of experience, that the prison gates will open.

They're GONNA come home, and on that day, we'll all be there and it's gonna be beautiful. We're clapping and hugging; people in wheelchairs, people with canes and crutches... we've aged while waiting for our loved ones to come home.

We see them coming towards the gate, but they're not walking, they're running. They're so happy to leave, they're running out. Screaming, we finally made it! They'll feel the sun on their face like it's the first time, and breathe in the air.

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508



Students Richelle Kota (left) and Kelli Clark stop by to see the exhibition "Staying Power," including Black Quantum Futurism's "Reclamation: Space-Times," located in Meditation Park on Alder Street behind the Village of Arts and Humanities. Credit: Tom Gralish

In another Village of Arts and Humanities park nearby, the duo Black Quantum Futurism — Rasheedah Phillips and Camae Ayewa — has erected another kind of totem, an 8-foot tall grandmother clock alluding to neighborhood history with images of esteemed choreographer Arthur Hall's dance company in action.

Hall established the Ile lfe Black Humanitarian Center in 1969. He transferred ownership to artist Lily Yeh in 1986, who then went about converting empty lots and collapsed buildings into parks, mosaic walls, and sculptures — all created with the involvement of the surrounding community. From these roots came the Village of Arts and Humanities, which has its own story of staying power.

Black Quantum Futurism's monument, [Reclamation: Space-Times](#), invites visitors to record their own stories about community, home, and belonging. The clock tower rises in the center of the park

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

and is bathed in the project's murmuring undertone — a soundscape composed of present and past neighborhood voices.

Record your own story and join the murmuring sea.

"On a practical level, it's saying that people that live in these communities are the best people to speak about the future of that community and are the best tour guides to really unpack what has changed, what has happened here," said Ayewa. "Who's best to speak about the neighborhood, the future of the neighborhood? The residents."

More than a candy store



Portrait of Ms. Nandi, one of 21 photos by Deborah Willis from her monument, "Black Women and Work," in the exhibition Staying Power. Courtesy of the artist

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

Nandi Muhammad — universally known in the neighborhood as Ms. Nandi — lives a few blocks away on Cumberland Street. For decades, Ms. Nandi and her husband, Khalid Muhammad, ran a penny candy store out of their home. But this was no simple candy store. Rather it served as a harbor and a refuge where the Muhammads taught kids how to read and do math and stay safe.

Ms. Nandi is the embodiment of staying power. Now she has connected with the Village and is serving as a community curator for "Staying Power." Artist Deborah Willis, who grew up in North Philadelphia west of Broad Street in an area also known as the Village, has created a monument of 21 photos, [Black Women and Work](#), featuring Ms. Nandi and other neighborhood stalwarts and entrepreneurs.

"When thinking about the Village that I grew up in, you know the marble steps, the neighborhood stores, the clothes, the way that people dealt with fame, power, with our church — those experiences were central to my growing up," Willis said. "I wanted to think and rethink about how women have stayed visible in this community, through the act of family, through the act of the church, the act of mentoring."

The Penny Candy Store "wasn't just candy," Ms. Nandi said. "It was actually a community-based children's center." The point was to provide children a place where they could be children.

"The kids had to stay safe," she said. "We tell people we never lost a bike or scooter or a child in over 20 years. So, you know, they wanted me to bring my knowledge in that small space up here and continue to do it, to branch out further into the neighborhood. And so that's what I did, and that's what I'm still doing because I feel children need adults, other family members to cater to their needs. Why do I have to be your mom to pay attention to you? Why can't I just be somebody who sees you need assistance, and offers it."

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SILVERMAN**

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Sadie Barnette's "Family Style, 2," an installation on Germantown Avenue that celebrates home. It is part of the exhibition, "Staying Power." Courtesy of the artist

Childhood and growing up are also central to Oakland-based artist Sadie Barnette's consideration of staying power. She has created a window installation — *Family Style, 2* — that evokes her aunt and uncle's living room, pink and sparkly, a storefront display offering Afro-pick-decorated wallpaper to entice passers by.

The living room as a place in the home, she said, embodies "strength and power."

"It's a space where you might see dance parties, you might see sermons, you might see political debates, as well as hospice and loss and sharing meals and watching important events on the news. Just so much happens in this seemingly unremarkable everyday space."

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jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

As for staying power, Barnette said her aunt and uncle were the first Black family on the block when they moved in to Compton, Calif., in 1954. They chose to stay.

From that homage to persistence to Ebony G. Patterson's *She is...*, four monumental murals of women in mourning, mounted on neighborhood building walls, is not as lengthy an artistic journey as it might seem at first.



One of four murals by artist Ebony G. Patterson, "She Is..." presides over Ile lfe Park, next door to the Village of Arts and Humanities. It reads, "She is the soil." Credit: Tom Graish

As Patterson says in her artist's statement: "Here we come to pay homage, but to also acknowledge the continued labor in response to violence, but through this labor these women also enact promise."

This sentiment echoes through the parks of the Village and wraps around the monuments. The poem encircling *On the Day They Come Home*, concludes:

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I grew up in prison, was raised there. People always said you're never getting out, the law will never change. We heard that for 24, 35, 40 years... And here we are. Here we are. The impossible is what we do.

ON EXHIBIT

Staying Power

The free exhibit runs into July in the parks of The Village of Arts and Humanities, headquartered at 2544 Germantown Ave. Details are at monumentlab.com.

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