Dedicated to Building a Better Pittsburgh
Honors College students work alongside the August Wilson House

By Ian P. Hurley

The Hill District was known as the “Crossroads of the World” and a hub of Black culture and commerce in the early- to mid-1900s. The neighborhood is the backdrop for nine of August Wilson’s 10 “The Pittsburgh Cycle” plays, also known as the “American Century Cycle.” They chronicle the African-American experience through the 20th century.

“He’s America’s greatest playwright. I know people like to say he’s the greatest African-American playwright, but the truth is he has more major awards than ANYONE else. When students’ eyes are opened to August Wilson’s life and works, they gain new perspectives on race and history in Pittsburgh and beyond,” noted Dr. Kathleen Glenister Roberts, director of Duquesne’s Honors College since 2011.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND THE SPIRITAN MISSION

For the last 30 years just across the neighborhood from Wilson’s childhood home at 1727 Bedford Ave., the Honors College has been working to expose Duquesne students to horizon-expanding opportunities, develop their leadership potential, and prepare them for lives and careers of purpose. Importantly, engaging students around the Catholic Spiritan tradition and a holistic exposure to service has been part of the college’s mission.

“It seemed the Honors College—as a large and multifaceted asset at Duquesne with talented students from every major and very dedicated liberal arts faculty—had far more potential for community engagement than we were tapping,” said Roberts.

Listening to the needs and aspirations of the August Wilson House (AWH) staff and board was paramount to forging a true partnership. Each spring since that first year an Honors College seminar course has been held to assist the AWH.

“The August Wilson House is an extraordinary group of individuals. Not only did I learn more about August Wilson, but they were very skilled in community outreach and event planning, and I learned a lot throughout the semester from them about the logistics of putting on a large scale event,” remarked Katrina Bucher, an Honors College and physical therapy student in the spring 2021 seminar course.

A REIMAGINED CELEBRATION

As the COVID-19 pandemic changed so many aspects of our lives, it also called for a new approach to the annual Birthday Celebration Block Party: During a normal year the block party is a true community event and a fitting tribute to the Pittsburgh legend. “Our block party started out really small. It’s morphed to, I think, 5,000 people or so,” Turner noted.

Ten Honors College students worked to further this signature partnership through their course, Honors Seminar in Social Justice: Community and University. An idea was born to highlight the playwright’s enduring inspiration to other artists including a birthday celebration event, video interview series and traveling art exhibit. Ten talented artists were selected to take part in the “Art for August” project and create their own unique approach to depicting August Wilson. It features illustrators, a photographer, painters, a poet, a sculptor, quilter and several mixed media artists. Their works initially were displayed as part of the birthday celebration at the Energy Innovation Center.

Students helped develop a video interview series with the artists, formulating the questions and editing video interviews conducted by seminar instructor, Associate Professor Dr. Erik Garrett.

Garrett remarked that “we also took the responsibility for [planning] the traveling exhibit throughout the city over the next year” including locations at Duquesne in 2022, the Center of Life in Hazelwood (another of Duquesne’s community partners), the University of Pittsburgh and the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh.

“Getting the art to so many viewers as possible was important to me because there is such a special way art is able to speak to people. It allows more people to understand the special nature of the Hill District and August Wilson’s work,” said Bucher.

A FELLOWSHIP TO SUPPORT ARTISTS AND SCHOLARS

Launched in 2018 and supported by a $100,000 grant from the Nancy Jones Beard Foundation, the Duquesne University-August Wilson House Fellowship provides opportunities for artists and scholars of color.

“This gift helps bring August Wilson’s legacy full circle by honoring his extraordinary career while encouraging the work of great artists and scholars of the future. It also allows the University to strengthen its engagement with the Hill District and its commitment to advancing the arts and culture in western Pennsylvania,” President Ken Gormley noted during the fellowship’s launch.

“The heart of the partnership with the August Wilson House has always been education in the humanities. This fellowship program will expand that exponentially,” Roberts remarked at the launch of the fellowship.

THE VALUE OF PARTNERSHIP

Roberts offers a fitting personal reflection on work with AWH and the Duquesne and Honors College missions. “Service is in our DNA! It’s the default position of our students rather than a nice ‘add-on.’ And this kind of orientation in the world can’t only be shaped by administration or faculty—it’s students who pass that commitment on to each other.”

To watch the Art for August artist interviews, please visit: https://www.augustwilsonbirthdaycelebration.com/art-for-august-artist-interviews

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