

# In SoNo, a plan to bring people together with art

By [Justin Papp](#) 12:00 am EDT, Thursday, March 28, 2019



Photo: Erik Trautmann / Hearst Connecticut Media

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Dennis Bradbury looks over work by 5 Fingaz and Duvian Montoya at her 22 Haviland Gallery Wednesday, March 27, 2019, in Norwalk, Conn. Bradbury is hosting a series of ART UP! events at her gallery through March

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NORWALK — For most of his life, Pierre Antoine has lived within a small radius in South Norwalk. But for the proximity, each space has been different.

When he first came with his family from Haiti to America, they moved into the former NEON house, directly next to Dennis Bradbury's 22 Haviland

Gallery. The latter is where the young Antoine made lifelong friends and gained early exposure to art.

Later, Antoine and his family moved a few block south, into Washington Village, Norwalk's oldest housing project, where foot traffic was heavy in the public spaces between rows of brick houses.

“They had cookouts — so many cookouts — and children playing,” Antoine said.

In 2018, as the Washington Village Redevelopment began and buildings were razed, Antoine moved across the road with his family to Soundview Landing, the new, mixed-income apartment unit replacing the old housing project, as part of a federal Choice Neighborhoods Initiative grant.

In many ways, the newly constructed Soundview Landing is an improvement on Antoine's previous lodgings. But the social aspect of the NEON house and Washington Village, that was so much a part of Antoine's upbringing, is largely absent at Soundview Landing. He said the new building's quiet hallways can feel hotel-like.

"At the new place people are staying inside. There are two common areas, but you don't see many people at all," Antoine, 26, said, standing near Bradbury in the gallery where as a boy he worked as an assistant.

The need, Antoine thinks, is for a common space in the neighborhood for residents to congregate. The hope, of people like Antoine, Bradbury and city officials, is that Ryan Park — which is set to be refurbished as part of the Washington Village redevelopment — could be the space. They believe public art installations could be a way to cultivate connections in the community and create a "place-making" effect.

"I think our main creative principal is unity in community. This is the rebirth of a neighborhood and we're looking for a piece of artwork that can bring people together," said Julio Pardo, a creative director and founder of a Norwalk-based firm who was contracted by the city to put out a call to artists, asking for a selection of art installation proposals for the redesigned park.

[Submissions are being accepted until April 21](#), at which point Pardo will make recommendations to the Redevelopment Agency, which will then choose finalists to submit a Request for Proposal (RFP) to complete the commissioned work.

"The public art aspect that has found its place at Ryan Park is a line-item funded component of the Choice Neighborhoods Grant," said Susan Sweitzer, senior project manager for development at the Norwalk Redevelopment Agency, who is helping to administer the grant money. "It did not prescribe a location, but it did prescribe a requirement for public art."

It was determined by Sweitzer and others at the city level that Ryan Park was a suitably public place to display art within the Choice Neighborhoods Grant area. The Redevelopment Agency recruited Pardo to serve as a liaison between the agency and local artists and Pardo, in turn, sought the aid of Bradbury, a singular champion of the arts in South Norwalk.

“Dennis has been in SoNo for about 20 years,” Pardo said. “Most importantly for me is that she’s in the neighborhood, she’s two blocks away from Ryan Park.”

As a way of spurring conversation, Bradbury and Pardo invited local artists to a meeting at 22 Haviland Gallery on March 10.

“It was very diverse, there was a lot of enthusiasm,” Bradbury said, of the meeting.

Bradbury also installed a temporary “Art Up” exhibit in her gallery — on view weekly Thursday through Saturday 2 to 6 p.m., or by appointment — with three separate rooms relating to the park and Norwalk artists.

The first room, straight past the staircase near the entrance, showcases the history of the park and its namesake, John H. Ryan, a longtime mail carrier and city councilman who died in 1962. Old newspaper clippings and prints of South Norwalk scenes, donated by Jeffrey Price of Artists’ Market, accompany aerial shots of the old Washington Village. A pamphlet with 18 pages of Ryan Park site plans sits on a table, next to name tags, a sign-in sheet and a coffee table-book of street art from Cincinnati.

A second room, at the back of the gallery, features a collection of works by local artists who came to Bradbury’s aid last summer, after she fell down a flight of stairs and broke her collarbone. Fifty-three artists donated work and the entirety of profits of sales in order to support the gallery. Those that have not been sold remain on display.

The third room, to the left of the entrance, features a small selection of paintings by 5iveFingaz, Jahmane, and Duvian Montoya, a quilt made by the Piece by Piece Community Quilt Project and a series of photographs of Washington Village by the late photographer Tony Velez, whose work also hangs in the Norwalk Historical Society Museum.

“The artists represent that aspect of engagement, but also bring perspectives of diverse backgrounds,” Bradbury said.

This idea of diversity is also crucially important to Pardo. When he was first contracted, early in 2019, he began by researching the park and its surroundings. What he found was a reputation going as far back as the early 20th century as a welcoming place for immigrants.

“Originally, it was the Irish that came in to work in factories. Obviously, there was a large African American population, but there were Hungarians, Italians and Portuguese working in the shell fishing industry. This neighborhood has always been that open door for immigrants,” Pardo said.

Though the demographics have, in some ways, shifted, Pardo and Bradbury are in the early stages of facilitating a project they hope will celebrate the neighborhood’s past residents, while continuing to welcome those of the future.

“For the park to show the history (of the neighborhood) I think is definitely important,” Antoine said. “You don’t have to speak the same language. I think art will bring people together.

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