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New Carpenter Art Garden leader has hope for healing

By [Jane Roberts](#), Daily Memphian

Updated: January 18, 2023 9:38 AM CT | Published: January 18, 2023 4:00 AM CT



Jazmin Miller is the new executive director of Carpenter Art Garden. (Patrick Lantrip/The Daily Memphian)

Figuratively, the earth moved beneath Jazmin Miller's feet in 2010 when she was in earthquake-ravaged Haiti, part of a team of counselors and social workers trying to help newly orphaned children process their unfathomable grief.

"Every day, we got nowhere because the kids weren't talking. They had shut down when it came to what they could remember," Miller said.

All she could think of was the bag of art supplies she'd brought and how nonsensical it seemed to haul them all home.

[Executive director retiring from Carpenter Art Garden](#)

“I grabbed all the crayons and the markers, and said, ‘Forget it, we’ll just color,’” she says, her voice catching with emotion.

Within minutes, the children’s memories were spilling out on paper in rapid strokes of color and loss.

The images burn in Miller’s memory for two reasons: The profound clarity of their horror and the power of artistic expression for communicating.

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Jazmin Miller
Carpenter Art Garden

As the new executive director of the Carpenter Art Garden, a one-block installation of after-school art-making and gardens in Binghampton, Miller is on course to help heal trauma on several levels, including the complicated feelings she says many Black people have with agriculture as an institution.

Movers & Shakers

“I am interested in mending our community’s relationship with agriculture, with gardening, with working in the dirt,” she says, choosing her words carefully in what she says can be a minefield of misinterpretation.



[View Gallery](#)

Carpenter Art Garden started in 2012 with a single lot on a street that then was one of the most tortured in the city. There were drug houses nearly next door to Lester School and a culture of poverty that bred so much crime, Memphis Police opened a precinct a block over on Tillman Street.

The founder, art teacher Erin Harris, knew art was being cut from the public school curriculum, severing a whole generation from nuance and creativity.

“She popped over across the street from Cornerstone (Prep School) and Lester and just said, ‘Hey, who wants to do art?’” Miller said.

The vacant lot next the school filled with 120-150 children for art projects that in the beginning were as simple as tossing paint against a fence.

[More than 150 artists prepare to ‘Paint Memphis’](#)

Every Tuesday to this day, the whole of Carpenter Art Garden pauses to create art together in an after-school program that runs Monday through Thursday, 3:15 to 5 p.m.



Carpenter Art Garden student Cashius Turnage (middle) points while he and other after school students listen to volunteers from the Iris Collective play the violin Wednesday, Sept. 18, 2019. (Mark Weber/Daily Memphian file)

But there's also Marker's Monday and Music Monday, Aunt Lou's Clubhouse reading group, violin with Iris Collective and a group bike ride on Thursdays with Lee Evans, who runs Carpenter's bike repair shop. There is a student-made mosaic garden with a piece dedicated to lives lost in Binghampton and bright, whimsical murals enlivening squat, cinder block businesses on Tillman Street.



In 10 years, Carpenter Art Garden has morphed into an installation that spans seven city lots on Carpenter Street, including one on Tillman, effectively lining the path children walk to school with art, mentors and possibility.

The nonprofit owns the lots and the houses (and hoop houses) in which children create art, learn horticulture, do their homework with access to tutors and work in gardens that produce bushels and bushels of produce throughout the year.

Since the pandemic, the programming has been run by teen and adult staff who live predominantly in the neighborhood. Four of the seven full-time staff live on Carpenter, including Evans.

[\\$10 deal: Large menu offers inspiration in Binghampton](#)

“Most of these children are mentored by the folks who work at the garden,” Miller said, faltering as she tries to describe the surprising beauty of cultivated, row-crop gardens in what was a crumbling, urban block.



Nine-year-old Deontae Page pulls up plants from the raised beds in Carpenter Art Garden. (Daily Memphian file)

It's not unusual, she says, to see someone walk down the street and stop to take it in.

"I know what that person's feeling because I've felt it too," Miller says.

The community gets first pick of the produce, and the rest is sold to restaurants, including Tsunami, Inspire Café and Napa Café.

Mondays and Thursdays, the produce is for sale in a small stand Carpenter runs at Mimosa Avenue and Carpenter.

Hattiloo to open theater school for youth, seniors and people with disabilities

"It's unbelievable the amount of fresh, organic vegetables you can get for \$1," said Sarah Blackburn, operational manager.

"Just last year, we started a text message to our regular customers who don't live in the neighborhoods. And we also put it on social media. It's not just the neighborhood that's purchasing, but it's there for the neighborhood."



Carpenter Art Garden's Tarlisa Clark waits customers during a pop-up market event on Monday, Aug. 17, 2020. (Mark Weber/Daily Memphian file)

But still, only a handful of families from the neighborhood, including Chickasaw Place apartments, are regular customers. Miller's out to connect the dots better, starting with her simple motto: "It's better for you to eat things grown out of the ground."

The disconnect has its roots in poverty and lack of access, Miller says, noting that Carpenter Art Garden, with its whimsical public art, is still in a food desert.

"We do expect to continue to pour into the kids in the neighborhood and the families in the neighborhood through the programs we have, which are the arts, the vegetables and the tutoring, but Jazmin has some other ideas of ways to engage even bigger narratives," board president Rush Waller said.

The Works' mobile grocery hits the streets in North Memphis

"That is something we are fully in support of doing."



Marmiracle Mosley (right) works with Carpenter Art Garden artist-in-residence Suzy Hendix (left) to create a mosaic “Welcome to Binghampton” sign on Tuesday, June 29, 2021, at the Binghampton Gateway Center. (Mark Weber/Daily Memphian file)

But Carpenter Art Garden is primarily an arts organization, and Miller is foremost an artist with years of experience in theater, both in production and leadership.

Miller, the daughter of retired Whitehaven physicians Logan and Rosemary Miller, grew up in Memphis and graduated from Rhodes College. She earned a master’s degree in theater direction from the University of Memphis.

Her most compelling artistic expression so far is the one-woman show she wrote and performed more than 200 times around the globe, including in Africa and East Asia, from 2010-2016.

“Journey of Truth” is Miller’s story of Sojourner Truth’s life, a combination of the former slave’s courage and brilliance, and the inner turmoil she overcame to live the power of her spirit.

The production and the places it took her are the embodiment of Miller’s own courage, her own willingness to take risks and stare down her own doubt.

[24-hour mental health crisis program planned for Binghampton](#)

“I met a man, Phil Darius Wallace, who was doing a one-man show at the time on Frederick Douglass,” Miller said. “He said, ‘Well, if you really want to perform, and if you want to make a living for yourself, you’re going to have to create some of your own work and you’re going to have to tour it.’”

“So, that’s what I did,” Miller said, in a run that took her to nearly every corner of the globe. In the process, it showed her ways she could use art to improve people’s lives, including the Maasai Mara people in Kenya.

“Maasai women are property,” Miller says. “We would have Maasai men say, ‘We are not comfortable with you teaching our women,’ but essentially, it is OK to do art with them.”

So Miller and her team came up with ways to teach the women math through dance, finding, “interesting ways to weave education into art,” she said.

“These are all touch points of things that are already being done at Carpenter Art Garden that resonated with me.”

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Miller comes to Carpenter after years of leading the theater division at Crosstown Arts. Before that, she worked several years for Hattiloo Theatre.



Tray Butler paints a Grizz Heart. All of the funds created by selling the art is put towards maintaining the Art Garden and Purple House.
(Daily Memphian file)

The Carpenter board has had four executive directors in 10 years, including Megan Banaszek, who led the garden through two years of the pandemic. Miller is a combination of several touchstones.

“Jazzy has had significant experience mentoring children and young high school students in the arts, primarily theater arts,” Waller said.

“We wanted someone who had experience as a leader in the arts community or nonprofit world and has the ability to help to continue to raise money.”

It also wanted someone who knew Binghampton. Miller has that knowledge through years of service with Eikon Ministries.

Binghampton’s Promise

Her work has long been about healing through art. The garden gives her latitude to expand.

“My hope is always, always healing — inner healing, community healing and bonding — healing together and healing our narrative.”

TOPICS

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Longtime journalist Jane Roberts is a Minnesotan by birth and a Memphian by choice. She's lived and reported in the city more than two decades. She covers business news and features for The Daily Memphian.