

“Welcome to Black Utopia Lane” mural. Petersen and Ola-Niyi, both retired teachers, created the original mural on a 200-foot-long retaining wall along Weymouth Rhymer Highway near the Caribbean Auto Mart nearly 40 years ago. “It’s a passion project for us,” Ola-Niyi said as he mixed paints — pinks, greens, blues and browns — that he would use to retouch a section of the mural. “We first did this in 1982, and we try to change things up every so often,” he said. “But it’s been a while since the last update — 2013, I think. Daniel Gayle, a former student of Ola-Niyi’s, has taken part in the project since he was 13 years old. – VI Daily News by Bill Kiser, October 29, 2020

How I came to become one of the “artists” of “the Welcome to the Black Utopia Wall.”

By Marcella “Jaribu Bobo” Jennings-Collier

Back in the 1980s, I loved watching all the students from Addelita Cancryn Junior High School painting, laughing, enjoying being out together in public while reflecting on a positive lifestyle with their favorite art teacher, my cousin Leba Ola Niyi and another cousin, Austin Petersen!

I’ll never forget the day when, at that time, one of my idols...Dr. Ben Carson, author of, “Gifted Hands” and a world renown children’s neurosurgeon, was to be the guest speaker for the University of the Virgin Islands Man-Up Male Empowerment Conference of 2013 commented while on his visit to St. Thomas that the wall was, “educational graffiti”.

Due to a very busy schedule from 1985-2014, as owner of Caribbean Safe Water Laboratory and being an editor and writer for the African Diaspora Youth Development Foundation’s periodical called the “Street Speaker Magazine”, many times I just watched and loved the progress of the “wall”.

Finally, in 2024 I was able to stop, grab a paint brush, chose a color and mount a ladder with a painter’s pan in hand and... I was in heaven.

You see, as a youngster, I loved to draw and, believe it or not, was on the path having a career as an artist, just like Austin; but, it was way sided by a train ride...I was, at 13 chosen by my then seventh grade art teacher to participate in an artist enrichment program at Pratt Institute located in the Brooklyn, New York; but, I lived in Queens and my parents decided, no way was I going on a train to the Brooklyn to become an artist. My second choice, as they inquired what I wanted to be, was a scientist...so said, so done...no regrets, but my love for art never quelled so when I was able to mount that ladder, even if it was to cover least a quarter of the wall in red, black and green as I filled in the Black Liberation Flag inspired by the late Honorable Marcus Garvey, I was now officially an artist for, “The Wall”.

He and Leba would decide then paint the images, I would follow with filling in and outlining; rarely actually drawing an image, which I didn’t mind as I wasn’t the major artist he and Leba were.

Austin impressed me with his ability to look at the wall...determine how huge he wanted a panel, a person ...without measuring; someone akin to that guy, King Liar, the liar Lord Nelson talks about in his ballad...” King Liar”; Austin could just free hand draw an image sometimes 15 ft high!

I am thankful Austin is being honored as he truly deserves this great moment. His love for art, his community and culture are something to admire and become iconic on these islands.

One of the 7 principles of Kwanzaa is KUUMBA. Kwanzaa is the African American holiday created by Malana Karenga in 1966; KUUMBA, which is the Kiswahili word for creativity can be used to reflect what Austin Petersen has achieved within our community. He has truly taken to heart this principle defined as, "To do always as much as we can in the way that we can in order to leave our community more beautiful and beneficial than when we inherited".

Always the fun guys, Austin and Leba would joke about each other's painting or maybe something completely unrelated to art.

Donations flowed...from the hands of small children, white and black moms, elder men and women , rastas, Indians, Arabs...the spectrum of the melting pot of these islands. Black Utopia, yes, but people of all races admired the effort and quality of work. \$1, \$10, \$100 ... a few quarters..everyone paused to contribute.

The paint was quality that Austin purchased...an oil based that lasted well over 5 years...a testament to his dedication to perfection and respectful obedience to his public, to purchase the best to make the wall look good and last a long time.

Our time was limited, as Leba had to get to his live broadcast program on WSTA called University on the Air; and Austin, back to caregiving his mom. I had to get back to the soccer field where I managed Massey Soccer Academy; but we all knew our purpose was to, "finish the wall" before the end of the year; of which we did!

With the last 20 ft of, "the wall", Austin came up with an idea and that was to focus attention to the various music and dances of the Caribbean. I suggested a young lady who was still in high school and an artist who was just accepted to a major Art School, Deja-Marie E. Simon joined the crew. Back in 2024, using her creativity and not at all bothered by the fact she had to sit on the ground or a small pail to facilitate her positioning to paint, Deja, who we all admired for her diligence, became the newest and then at 17, the youngest artist, at this interval, to assist in this cultural and historical masterpiece.

Well done Austin, keep on , keeping on !