

A Testimony of Support: Austin M. Petersen

I am writing this testimony to express my unconditional support for Austin M. Petersen and his unique works as a muralist, visual artist, and art teacher. I have known Austin for over 36 years. I have observed Austin's talent, creativity, artistic know how, and how he expressed his ideas and images of our people, culture, history, and heritage. Without a doubt, For over 40 year and working with other artists, students, and young people, Austin has done as much as he can to leave and elevate our community more beautiful and beneficial than when we inherited it. Painting murals, designing Carnival boots and teaching basic art in the schools verify his commitment to the visual art.

Austin Petersen possesses a God-giving gift, unique ability to transform large blank spaces into extraordinary works of art. Thus, residents and visitors would always complement him. His art work reflects an African aesthetics: it conveys the cultural heritage, history, and pride of our people in the Virgin Islands. His murals are not "art for art sake" or bright colors on a wall. This public art is a positive, cultural landmarks that inspire, inform, and empower our people, install true pride amongst residents, share our cultural heritage to the visitors, and define the cultural identity of the Virgin Islanders, particularly those residents of African descent.

Throughout his murals, Austin consistently demonstrates as follows:

- * Technical Mastery: His use of color, line, value, scale, perspective, and detail expresses various subject matters that are relevant in these times.

- *Black Philosophy: His values, world view, and presentation are rooted in the history and culture of our African ancestry who left a rich cultural legacy in the Virgin Islands. In other words, he has continued the traditional ways that master the techniques to tell our story from our perspectives. Along with other artists, Austin always give back to our community as in-kind services and for the love of the arts. His greatest rewards that he valued are when residents and visitors respect and comment him for his accomplishments and contributions to our community.

- *Community Engagement: He encourage and empower his students, young people, and other artists to participate in three mural projects in our schools and community. For three decades, he taught basic art education at ACJHS, IEKHS, and UMES.

*Flawless Professionalism: Austin manages self-funded mural projects efficiently: raising donations from residents and visitors, balancing budgets, establishing safety protocols for students and artists, and restoring the murals with his creative imagination and determination. As a result, along with other artists and students, Austin has designed two wonders of our islands: The Black Utopia Lane and You Reap What You Sow murals.

Without a doubt, Austin Petersen should be recognized, honored, and commended for his artistic contributions to our cultural heritage of the Virgin Islands. I give Austin my unconditional support for an Act that honors him, because he, along with other artists and students, transform the Black Utopias Lane mural into a cultural landmark. I give Austin my highest and most respect that he has always bring the same passion, dedication, excellence, collective work, and collaborative spirit to the mural projects and other endeavors.

Kuumba Leba Ola-Niyi