



GATEWAY TO HISTORY

New murals honor the Allen Subdivision

Photos and story by Amanda Karioth Thompson, Arts Consultant

For nearly a century, the Allen Subdivision has been a beacon of unity and resilience.

Bounded by Florida A&M University on the south and west, railroad tracks on the north, and the South Adams Street commercial zone on the east, the neighborhood offered African Americans proximity to jobs and affordable housing. In its heyday, Allen boasted more than 90 Black-owned businesses and hundreds of residents living in a vibrant tight-knit community.



The “We Are All One” murals depict “a story about the Allen community past, present, and future.”

Segregation created a need for self-sufficiency and solidarity. Generation after generation of ‘Allenites’ looked after each other and many who were raised in the neighborhood’s loving embrace still call the area home. Among residents, there’s deep pride for those who grew up in this humble environment and went on to make valuable contributions to society, including Carrie Pittman Meek, the first Black woman elected to the Florida Senate and the first Black member of the U.S. Congress since the Reconstruction Era.

These days, a community like Allen is rare, and its uniqueness caught the attention of Toronto-based artist Yasaman Mehrsa. Born and raised in Tehran, Iran, Mehrsa's love of art began early. “I was so little, four or five years old, and I was crying to go to painting class,” Mehrsa recalls. “I think it was something in my blood that brought me to art.”

With family encouragement, she studied art through grade school, supplementing the offerings with additional art classes after school. She earned a bachelor's degree in visual communication and graphic design while in Iran and decided to pursue an additional visual arts degree a hemisphere away.

HISTORY & CULTURE TRAIL

"I was 23 when I moved to Canada by myself. From an early age, I knew I didn't want to stay in Iran. It's more of an adventure to see different places and experience new things."

Mehrsa began working in Canada as a graphic designer but she missed the tactility and creativity that came with making art of her own. Seeking out exhibition opportunities, she happened upon her first call for public art.



Mehrsa is one of seven artists selected to create artwork for the History and Culture Trail.

"They were looking for artists to paint traffic boxes and it didn't matter if you were experienced in public art. I applied for that, and I got it. It all started from there and I started applying for bigger projects." She now works full-time as an independent artist.

Mehrsa has completed more than 20 successful public art projects in Canada and she was eager to explore new art adventures in America. While searching for opportunities that spoke to her, she found the Blueprint Intergovernmental Agency's History and Culture Trail Project.

This project seeks to recognize and honor the historical contributions and cultural impact of communities, including the Allen Subdivision, adjacent to the FAMU Way Corridor, an east-west roadway from South Monroe Street to Lake Bradford Road.

The History and Culture Trail (HCT) is part of the Blueprint Capital Cascades Trail Segment 3 Project and is expected to be completed in late 2023. The HCT represents a \$1.1 million investment that leverages a \$315 million Blueprint infrastructure investment in the Southside. Once complete, the HCT will join a host of amenities along FAMU Way, including the Skateable Art Park, the Coal Chute Pond Trail, a playground, the new St. Marks Trailhead and more.

After years of extensive research and community involvement, informational panels will be installed along the 1.5-mile route to display images and historical material about the neighborhoods, businesses and individuals who lived and worked in the area. The trail will also include 12 new pieces of public art which are vital in further enhancing and interpreting historical accounts while offering additional opportunities for engagement.

HISTORY & CULTURE TRAIL

Though Mehrsa was entirely unfamiliar with Tallahassee, she was moved to respond to the open call for public art proposals developed by the Council on Culture & Arts in partnership with Blueprint. After reading the provided materials, Mehrsa was inspired by the Allen community “which was very united in social, cultural, and economical matters like celebrations, funerals, education, church activities, food sharing, health care and gatherings,” she said.



The murals celebrate the Allen Subdivision as a beacon of unity and resilience.

Applicants were invited to design two cohesive but distinct murals celebrating the Allen Subdivision. The two murals would be located on support piers, directly under the M.S. Thomas Bridge at Lake Anita Plaza on FAMU Way. Facing each other, the artworks would serve as the eastern gateway to the History and Culture Trail.

Informed by what she'd learned about the neighborhood and its residents, Mehrsa used her own artistic style to propose a visual expression of unity and togetherness. “Sometimes I have a good feeling about something, and it just happens,” she said. This was one of those times. She was one of seven artists selected to create artwork for the History and Culture Trail, which represents one of the largest infusions of outdoor public art in Tallahassee-Leon County history.

Her murals, titled “We Are All One,” depict “a story about the Allen community past, present, and future,” explained Mehrsa. “The large trees on the base of the piers are symbols of strength, growth, and resilience. The houses are symbols of community and togetherness. The large birds are representing peace, love, protection and blessings.”

The inclusion of art into any environment plays a significant role in sustaining cultural identity and creating a sense of place. The return on investment is substantial. Public art serves as a tourism driver, encourages lasting economic growth, and contributes to business development. It fosters community pride, connects citizens to their shared history, and makes cultural heritage a tangible community asset.

HISTORY & CULTURE TRAIL

Using little more than a few gallons of paint, her imagination, and a scissor lift, Mehrsa completed the two 20' tall murals in a little over a week, though she had some extra help. Mehrsa's mother Mitra came along for the adventure, marking the first time her mother had seen Mehrsa in action. "I told my mom about this project and she was like, 'I'm coming too'. Usually, she sees me in photos, or I send her videos. I think she didn't have an idea of what I'm actually doing."

The act of mother and daughter working together reinforced the recurring Allen themes of family, collaboration and celebrating beauty where you can. In that same spirit, community members and local leaders were invited to literally make their mark on the murals. As part of an Artful Celebration Kick-Off event for the History and Culture Trail, Mehrsa outlined areas for others to fill in with paint, creating an expansive cooperative artwork.



Mehrsa completed the two 20' tall murals in a little over a week.



The Artful Celebration Kick-Off event PHOTO PROVIDED

During the event, Mehrsa addressed the crowd, sharing her lasting impressions of the Allen Subdivision and of Tallahassee as a whole.

"It's obvious to me that this community is very bonded and united," she said. "You have a very rich culture and history and I can see that. You should be proud of it."

To learn more about Blueprint's Capital Cascades Trail Segment 3 Project, click here: <https://blueprintia.org/projects/cct-segment-3-amenities/>