MY BROTHER’S KEEPER STUDENTS CREATE THE FREEDOM COLLAGE TO HONOR FREEDOM SEEKERS ON THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD
By Jason Hall 8/20/18

Seventh and eighth grade Buffalo Public Schools students from the My Brother’s Keeper program recently created an original and symbolic artwork entitled The Freedom Collage to honor WNY’s unique Underground Railroad heritage and the freedom seekers who once traversed through the land on which we live today.

The mixed media collage was constructed by all eighty-six scholars enrolled in the MBK program. The subject matter is based on inspiration they gained during a summer 2017 fieldwork expedition to Buffalo’s Michigan Street African-American Heritage Corridor and a recent visit to the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center. Upon completion, The Freedom Collage was featured in the opening reception of the Immerse: Interactive Artwork Exhibit at the Niagara Arts and Cultural Center. It was also displayed this past weekend at the My Brother’s Keeper closing ceremonies. We have submitted proposals to a variety of local museums and are awaiting responses to determine where the collage will next be on display.

The MBK scholars included several layers of symbolism on The Freedom Collage. Burlap represents a common material used for the storage and shipment of goods on the triangular trade routes. As our scholars learned at the Underground Railroad Heritage Center, those who were enslaved also used burlap to make clothing as well as a variety of other items. The red, yellow, green, and black clothing scraps represent the colors of the freedom seekers’ homeland. The jean and colorless scraps represent the few types of clothing materials given to those who were enslaved on plantations. In joining these scraps of clothing, we represent the origin, depletion of, and return to vibrant color patterns worn by the freedom seekers and their ancestors. The scraps of clothing were also inspired by our study of the colorful work of Gullah artist Diane Britton Dunham.
The drift wood seen hanging on, and beneath, the collage was collected on the rocky shores of Lake Erie near Broderick Park in the exact location where many freedom seekers crossed the swift paced Niagara River into Canada, many perishing in their attempt. This drift wood is soaked with the same water that soaked the many freedom seekers as they made their way across the border. The creek stones also seen at the bottom of our collage were borrowed, with permission, from a creek in Allegany County, NY on which, according to a local Senecan historian, freedom seekers traveled during the last segment of their journey with the help of local Seneca.

We incorporated a broken chain link to honor and symbolize those who began their journey to freedom on the Underground Railroad the exact moment they broke free from their chains. With this chain link, we honored the *Tula Monument* of Curacao, the *Path to Freedom Sculpture* in Facer Park in Sandusky, Ohio, and the *Emancipation Statue* in Barbados, all of which we studied for inspiration and all of which incorporated chains or broken chains in their symbolic tributes. We pressed on a hand print to allow our students to imagine themselves as a freedom seeker, pushing up on the ground below, using any remaining strength to continue the courageous journey to freedom. And, finally, to complete their collage, each scholar wrote the word *freedom* in their preferred or home language.

*The Freedom Collage* reinforces the value of gaining deeper knowledge about WNY’s Underground Railroad heritage while adding another layer of creative, visible learning artifacts to the portfolios of the young men in My Brother’s Keeper. An educational best practice in terms of culturally and linguistically responsive teaching (CLRT) is to eradicate disempowering and disengaging curriculum orientations, such as outdated teacher centered instruction and many common forms of formative, summative, and standardized test instruments. *The Freedom Collage* provided an ideal assessment of our scholars learning and offered all our scholars the opportunity to demonstrate newly gained background knowledge in living color and texture. Moreover, their work provides a personalized gift to our community to reflect the MBK goal of community service and outreach as outlined in our creed.
We have been tweeting out reports and pictures of the project and our daily accomplishments and have received praise and ongoing support from Superintendent Dr. Kriner Cash, the Buffalo Schools Parent Teacher Organization, Mayor Byron Brown, NYSED Commissioner MaryEllen Elia and former United States Secretary of Education Dr. John King. Our project was also featured on Channel 2 News Buffalo. Please view the news clip regarding our work at https://twitter.com/i/status/1028049687591505921.

The MBK scholars would like to formally welcome any BPS community member to add to The Freedom Collage. Together we can make this an amazing experience for our scholars in terms of schooling and the celebration of the visible products of their learning. Moreover, we would like to sincerely thank the Underground Railroad Heritage Center, the Niagara Arts and Cultural Center, BPS Superintendent Dr. Kriner Cash and Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction Dr. Fatima Morrell for making our vision a reality. For more information about our project, or about MBK, please contact curriculum designer and instructor Jason Hall at jhall@buffaloschools.org or tweet to @JayHallBuffalo or @brother_buffalo.