



NEWS FROM:

Cultural Arts & Marketing Division, Office of the City Administrator

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Media Contact: Steven Huss
(510) 238-4949
shuss@oaklandnet.com
www.oaklandculturalarts.org

New Public Art in West Oakland Features Inspirational Words of Nelson Mandela *“Unity” Sculptures Honor Community’s African-American Heritage*

OAKLAND, Calif. (January 9, 2009) – While passing the intersection of Seventh Street and Mandela Parkway in West Oakland, pedestrians, drivers and BART train riders can view “Unity,” the newest public art project in Oakland. A painted-steel sculpture by artist Robert Ellison, “Unity” consists of two separate, freestanding sculpture elements made of painted carbon-steel which were installed on January 8, 2009. The project was specially commissioned for the entrance plazas of the Mandela Gateway mixed-use development by the City of Oakland Public Art Program working in collaboration with the Oakland Housing Authority, Oakland Public Works Agency and Mandela Gateway developer BRIDGE Housing Corporation. The sculpture was funded through an allocation of 1.5 percent from the City’s capital project budget for Mandela Gateway area improvements.

“Unity” was created in honor of Nelson Mandela, Nobel Peace Prize recipient and former President of South Africa. Passages from Mr. Mandela’s speeches are inscribed on the sculpture. Mr. Ellison developed his art proposal through community engagement. The Mandela quotes were chosen by interested neighbors and prospective residents of Mandela Gateway housing in a workshop with the artist. Community comments and ideas from previous meetings were also incorporated into the design.

The artwork, perched on top of two wedge-shaped bases, appears as two halves of a stylized seed pod beginning to sprout. The seed pods appear to grow upward and toward one another across the intersection, as though seeking unity. The new growth of the seed pods symbolizes the current renaissance of West Oakland spurred by the Mandela Gateway development and other public and private investment in the area.

In respect and acknowledgement of both Mr. Mandela and the African-American heritage so vital to the history of West Oakland, the design and coloring on the seed pods are based on murals appearing on African homes.

Artist Robert Ellison, based in Penngrove (Sonoma County), California, has completed dozens of major sculptures in public spaces throughout the United States. Oakland is home to two of his earlier works: a colorful metal fence at the corner of 11th and Madison streets depicting cavorting circus animals, commissioned by the Alameda County Public Art Program, and “Regatta,” a nautical-themed weathervane atop the Jack London Aquatic Center in Estuary Park, commissioned by the City of Oakland Public Art Program. Mr. Ellison’s work often combines monumental scale with stylized imagery and a sense of whimsy.

The City of Oakland Public Art Program was created in 1989 with the passage by City Council of the Oakland Public Art Ordinance. The Public Art Program serves residents and visitors by commissioning permanent and temporary works of art to help create a vision and identity for the City and its diverse neighborhoods, while providing career opportunities for local and regional artists. It is a program of the Cultural Arts & Marketing Division, Office of the City Administrator, City of Oakland. For more information visit, www.oaklandculturalarts.org.

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