

## **Springfield youths, artists unveil new downtown mural that stresses unity**

By Peter Goonan

SPRINGFIELD – A large mural was unveiled in downtown Springfield on Thursday, culminating a six-month project that linked local teenagers and artists who say they are convinced that “unity” – the theme of the artwork – is the key ingredient to achieving a better city. justice agency, and The Performance Project, an arts group based in Springfield and Northampton that works with adults and juveniles involved with the criminal justice system.



Photo by Don Treeger / The Republican

The state Department of Youth Services and The Performance Project unveiled a mural in a courtyard outside the Morgan Square Apartments on Thursday, between Taylor and Worthington Streets. Pictured here are some of the youths who worked on the project. From left are Marcus Thomas, Malik Green-Walter, Kamari Acree, Ricky Brown and Camry Starks.

Some of the young participants said there was a lot of work involved, but it was great experience and much fun. "Hard work is easy when you have teamwork," said Malik Green, 17, of Springfield. "That's the key to success. That represents unity – everyone coming together."

"I feel really good," said Kamari Acree, 16, of Springfield. "It was a long process but a really good one. A lot of people look at Springfield as a bad place. We try to bring Springfield to the light. We let people know we can lead up to good expectations."

The mural depicts a "tree of life," a sunrise, and the word "unity" in large letters being painted by people using a paint roller, brush and spray can.

Julie Lichtenberg, director of The Performance Project and one of the mural artists, said 10 Department of Youth Services teens and four artists took part in the project. The project was funded by Commonwealth Corp.

The youth and artists came up with the concept, did the advance sketch work, and built and painted the wood mural in sections both indoors and outdoors, followed by the installation on a courtyard wall, organizers said. The artwork is eight feet high and 16 feet wide.

It is the third mural project in Springfield by the group, and additional artwork is planned, organizers said. The murals are portable, allowing them to be moved to new locations and replaced. said Kamil Peters of The Performance Project, who was the lead artist.

"The more they learned, the more fun it became," said Peters, who is from Amherst but whose family has roots in Springfield. "We do believe art is transformational. It kind of created a community among these kids."

What the youth want to see the most in Springfield is unity, Peters said.

Ricky Brown, 18, of Springfield, said he was "amazed at what we came up with." The theme was that "everyone coming together, working together, not leaving anyone behind, can make a better community," he said.

Christopher Tinson, a professor at Hampshire College who attended the unveiling, praised the project, saying it was "not just artwork, but communicating their vision for a world they would like to create." State Sen. James Welch, D-West Springfield, also attended.