Dorian Sylvain (in white hat) poses with her two sons and the six young artists who participated in her summer fellowship. The fellows' work is now on display on the vacant Urban Partnership Bank at 71st Street and Jeffery Boulevard in South Shore.

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HYDE PARK, WOODLAWN, SOUTH SHORE

South Shore Artist Dedicated To Revitalizing Neighborhood By Empowering Young Creatives Gets $25,000 Award

"I am a little institution on wheels," said artist Dorian Sylvain. "I include young artists so they have opportunities for them to make money, opportunities to increase their skillset, opportunities to be totally expressive."

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Maxwell Evans

SOUTH SHORE — A South Shore artist is getting a $25,000 award from local nonprofit 3Arts for the second year in a row, and she'll use it to continue supporting and collaborating with South Side creatives.

Dorian Sylvain, who for the past 40 years has created public art while mentoring local artists, will receive the award at the 3Arts Awards Oct. 19. Registration for the virtual event is free and open to the public.

Sylvain is one of 10 winners of this year's award, which prioritizes women, artists of color and artists with disabilities. She won the 3Arts/Southwest Airlines Community Award, a partially crowdfunded award given to the artist "who most embodies that idea of community," said 3Arts Executive Director Esther Grisham Grimm.

South Shore designer Norman Teague was among last year's award winners.

"Like Dorian, there's no shortage of awesomeness in Chicago in terms of the practitioners that live here," Grimm said. "We want them to stay here, so we give them a reason to stay."

In addition to funding, budding artists in the city need accessible institutions to network and continue learning their craft, Sylvain said.

The Hyde Park Art Center, the South Side Community Art Center and the Beverly Arts Center are among the few institutions available to South Side artists of any discipline, she said.

"Book clubs, playwright contests — the things that were a lot more common when I was growing up are just not there for the youth today," Sylvain said.

“I have this greater mission because I know how important it is. I grew up in the Black arts movement; I understand art to be political.”

There’s an “amazing” mural movement on the South Side, spearheaded by artists like Max Sansing — “he just blows me away when I see his work,” Sylvain said. But murals “just scratch the surface” of the area’s potential for creativity, she said.

Sylvain isn’t belittling muralists; she’s one herself. Her projects at the long-dormant Urban Partnership Bank in South Shore and The Forum in Bronzeville bring color to sites of urban decay, uplifting communities.

“It just breaks my heart to see how [South Shore] looks today” compared to her youth, Sylvain said. “I’m committed to help that vision of reigniting the cultural landscape on the South Side for the benefit of the next generation.”

A Dorian Sylvain mural adorns the old Urban Partnership Bank site in October 2019.
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Sylvain said muraling is a short-term solution. More must be done to ensure the sustainability of South Side's creative scene.

"Young artists live in the neighborhood and have these wonderful static murals," Sylvain said. "But if we're not creating places for children to engage in art, we're just beautifying the neighborhood, we're not fully engaging the neighborhood."

To that end, she's made it a focus of her practice to build the South Side's institutional capacity along with creating artwork.

This summer, six young artists joined her for a fellowship at her socially-distanced backyard studio, which was funded by the Obama Foundation.

They each created a 4-by-8-foot original composition, now displayed on the side of the vacant Urban Partnership Bank at 71st Street and Jeffery Boulevard.

Sylvain's also worked with the CPS Lives program, which repurposed plywood used to protect windows during civil unrest this summer to create a massive mural.

"I am a little institution on wheels," Sylvain said. "I include young artists so they have opportunities for them to make money, opportunities to increase their skillset, opportunities to be totally expressive. … It's really important to me to be able to pass that baton."

Alongside the work from her youth fellowship group, the ever-evolving Urban Partnership Bank display features a crowdsourced collage in progress.

Photos of South Shore notables like former First Lady Michelle Obama, jazz composer Ramsey Lewis and radio personality Richard Steele will be featured alongside "the common person." The community is invited to contribute their own photos to the "Better Together" collage project this Sunday, Oct. 18 from noon-4 p.m.

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The public collage honoring South Shore on the Urban Partnership Bank. "The whole process of communing and creating something collectively is so powerful," Sylvain said.

South Shore has “definitely had some shining stars,” but the collage is “about the collective — not just about the people who have had visible success, but talking about us as a fabric,” Sylvain said.

Over the course of her career, Sylvain’s skill and dedication has not often been rewarded financially. Raising three kids as a freelance artist was a “struggle” many artists can likely identify with, she said.

After applying a few years in a row for 3Arts awards, she said she’s especially grateful to have finally received one amid a pandemic which has stripped so many other opportunities from career artists.

“I’m just over the moon,” Sylvain said. The community award “just reinforces that I’m making an impact out here.”

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