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PLACE

GARDEN



A living quilt

A Santa Rosa-based artist creates an inspirational flower bed in Sacramento's Sojourner Truth Park

BY DEBBIE ARRINGTON



Mayor Darrell Steinberg puts a quilt square in place at Sojourner Truth Park in Pocket/Greenhaven.

PHOTO BY DEBBIE ARRINGTON

This “quilt” was sown, not sewn. Threaded with double meanings, it's part of an inspirational flower “bed,” created as an art installation as well as landscaping.

Now sprouting in Sojourner Truth Park in Sacramento's Pocket/Greenhaven neighborhood, the living “quilt” will take months to reach full bloom with the flowers echoing the colors of the planting squares.

Jane Ingram Allen, a Santa Rosa-based artist with a worldwide following, created the evocative project as part of a city program to bring art projects to every council district in Sacramento, often using park sites as canvases.

“I'm putting a quilt down to cover the Earth,” said Allen, who has made paper-based art projects around the globe. “It will change over time. Nature will control it.”

For this installation, Allen was inspired by the park's namesake, Sojourner Truth, a former slave, abolitionist and suffragist. The artist chose the “North Star” quilt pattern because of its meaning to freed slaves.

“The North Star was part of the secret code for escaping slaves,” Allen explained. “If they saw this quilt hanging outdoors, they knew which way was north—the way to freedom.”

There's more symbolism: The North Star—in the sky, not on a flower bed—can guide anyone during a journey or challenging times, such as the current COVID-19 crisis.

After nearly a year of planning and working with pandemic restrictions, Allen's project debuted Nov. 21 with a small socially-distanced dedication and planting ceremony.

Allen, who has family in Sacramento,

recruited local basketmakers to create the headboard and footboard for her flower “bed.” Members of the Sacramento Weavers and Spinners Guild used mulberry canes and grapevines to shape the whimsical bed frame, which will double as trellises for sweet peas.

For the quilt blocks and strips, Allen made paper, studded with wildflower seeds. The flower color matches the red, blue, yellow and white used in the blocks. The white strips are planted with sweet alyssum, baby's breath and white poppies. Blue spaces will be lupine and blue-bonnets. Yellow squares will sprout California poppies, tidytips and golden cosmos. Red poppies and sage complete the color blocking.

Allen likes the combination of crafts and interests tied into her art project. Besides the history and symbolism of the design, the project features papermaking, basketry, quilting and, of course, gardening.

“Whether the world is ready or not, it's time to sew—and sow,” she quipped.

During the dedication ceremony, Sacramento Mayor Darrell Steinberg and City Councilman Rick Jennings were on hand to help “plant” the bed. Wooden skewers topped with wine corks were used to secure the quilt panels in place.

“It's wonderful to be out here on a beautiful fall day, especially during 2020,” said Steinberg, wearing a face mask. “To get outside and celebrate a community gift, it is a blessing.”

Now, all this art needs is rain.

“It should sprout by the first of the year,” Allen said. “We'll see the first flowers in March, and hopefully it will bloom all summer. Some flowers will even come back again and again.”

“With time, the color pattern will become very abstract,” she added. “That's nature's way.” □

Debbie Arrington, an award-winning garden writer and lifelong gardener, is co-creator of the Sacramento Digs Gardening blog and website.