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Wayne Law art installation to honor Rosa Parks, Judge Damon J. Keith

A striking, color-saturated art installation of 26 wood, fiber and fabric totems will open Tuesday, June 3, at Wayne State University Law School to honor civil rights pioneers Rosa Parks and Judge Damon J. Keith.

A Garland of Praise Songs for Rosa Parks honors Parks and Keith for their integrity and courage. The installation was created by Lester Johnson, a native Detroiter who recently retired after 35 years as professor of fine arts at the College for Creative Studies in Detroit. The art installation, which will be permanently exhibited in the law school's Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights, is made possible by a grant from the DTE Energy Foundation.

The public is invited to view the art installation during the exhibit opening between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. Tuesday, June 3. Thereafter, the exhibit will be open for viewing from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays. Admission to view the exhibit is free. The law school is at 471 W. Palmer St. Parking is available for \$6.50 (credit and debit cards only) in Structure One across West Palmer Street from the law school.

According to a description of the installation, "The rich fabric is significant. It represents traditional African cloth worn by Africans and those of African descent. It embodies community, uniting the fabric makers, the art itself and the viewers. It honors Parks' vocation as a seamstress. And it highlights the brilliance of creation: Just as a seamstress builds bolts of cloth from threads, African Americans have created community, livelihoods and spirituality despite exclusion and injustice. Judge Keith exemplifies how African Americans have interwoven intelligence, bravery and tenacity to achieve greatness despite the odds. The fabric also illuminates the kinship between art and the civil rights movement, inviting us to contemplate the imagery, objects and narratives of social justice that exist outside courtrooms."

Peter J. Hammer, director of the Keith Center, said he enjoys all that the creation represents. "It's about civil rights and celebrates the friendship of Rosa Parks and Judge Keith," Hammer said. "Because it honors two Detroiters, it's also fitting that it was created by a Detroit artist."

Johnson earned his bachelor of fine arts and master of fine arts degrees from the University of Michigan. He has exhibited his work in the Detroit Institute of Arts, Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, and galleries and museums around the world. His work also is extensively represented in private and public collections. In September 2011, Johnson was invited to sign the historic Scarab Club beams. The honor is extended to artists who have made significant and lasting contributions to the arts, including Marcel Duchamp, Tyree Guyton, Charles McGee, Norman Rockwell and Diego Rivera.

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You are here: [Home](#) > [FLINT-GENESEE COUNTY](#) > [WAYNE LAW ART INSTALLATION TO HONOR ROSA PARKS, JUDGE DAMON J. KEITH](#)

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