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Wayne State University art exhibit honors Rosa Parks, Judge Damon Keith

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Detroit artist Lester Johnson, left and Judge Damon J. Keith talk during the opening of the exhibit A Garland of Praise Songs for Rosa Parks, by Johnson, at the Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights at Wayne State University Law School in Detroit on Tuesday, June 3, 2014. / Romain Blanquart/ Detroit Free Press

Written by Eric D. Lawrence Detroit Free Press Staff Writer

A new art exhibit at Wayne State University honors two legendary Civil Rights pioneers — Rosa Parks and U.S. 6th Circuit Court of Appeals Judge Damon Keith.

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The exhibit opened to the public today at the Wayne State University Law School, where it will be on permanent display in the Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights. The artwork, which is named "A Garland of Praise Songs for Rosa Parks," features 26 colorful wood, fiber and fabric totems, each 54 inches tall.

The artist, Lester Johnson, a 76-year-old Detroit native, said the work is a tribute to the extraordinary integrity and courage of Parks and Keith and that it represents what Peter Hammer, director of the university's Keith Center, described as the "convergence between art and Civil Rights."

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Wayne State Law School Professor Peter Hammer talks during the art opening for A Garland of Praise Songs for Rosa Parks, artwork by Detroit artist Lester Johnson, at the Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights at Wayne State University Law School in Detroit on Tuesday, June 3, 2014. / Romain Blanquart/ Detroit Free Press

Johnson described its creation as a collaborative effort between Johnson, those who supplied the artwork's various components and those whose ideas influenced its creation.

"It's not actually created by one individual but rather it's created by a group of artisans who look at this as a gift to the university and the City of Detroit," said Johnson, who retired in 2010 from the College for Creative Studies after 35 years as a fine arts professor.

The piece was completed in 1999 and traveled to various locations before it was spotted by Hammer and Keith at Detroit's

Scarab Club, Johnson said.

Keith, who spoke at the unveiling today, said afterward that Parks would have been impressed.

"She was a very modest woman. I could hear her say, 'Judge, it is very beautiful,'" Keith said, mentioning that the exhibit blends in with the "artistic demeanor" of the Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights. "It's just magnificent, the artwork is gorgeous."

Keith also said he was pleased that a photo of the judge and A. Alfred Taubman, who also spoke at the event, would be hanging at the center as well. He noted the many contributions — financial and otherwise — that Taubman, a prominent real estate developer and philanthropist, had made on behalf of Parks and the Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights.

Page 1 2 Next

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