

COVER STORY



EDWARD JOSEPH DWIGHT, JR.: THE ARTIST'S JOURNEY

*By Archon Al Cooper,
Delta Eta Boulé*

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Archon Edward Joseph Dwight, Jr., is a man of several extraordinary achievements for which he already graces the pages of history. He is an artist and sculptor of some national and international renown, having created 128 public memorials, including seven of Archon Martin Luther King, Jr., and another 18,000 gallery pieces. His works have been commissioned by federal, state and local governments, corporations and numerous nonprofits, and can be seen at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History as well as in baseball stadiums, public parks and courthouses around the country.

But in 1974, when Archon Dwight began his art career in earnest, he had never heard of Harriett Tubman, Frederick Douglass or many of the iconic figures of African American history he would later memorialize. At the time he was transitioning from a career in construction (one of several careers), in which he was owner of his own construction company, and dabbling in artistic pursuits – creating sculptures from the metal scraps he found on his worksites. These pieces were displayed throughout his home in Denver. George Brown, the first black elected lieutenant governor of Colorado, was visiting Dwight when he observed the crude pieces.

After walking around a bit, Brown suggested Dwight come



ARCHON ED DWIGHT AS A YOUTH

to his office for a chat. The chat quickly turned into a tongue-lashing that began with the following three questions:

“Have you ever heard of Harriett Tubman?”

“No.”

“Have you ever heard of Frederick Douglass?”

“No.”

“Buffalo Soldiers?”

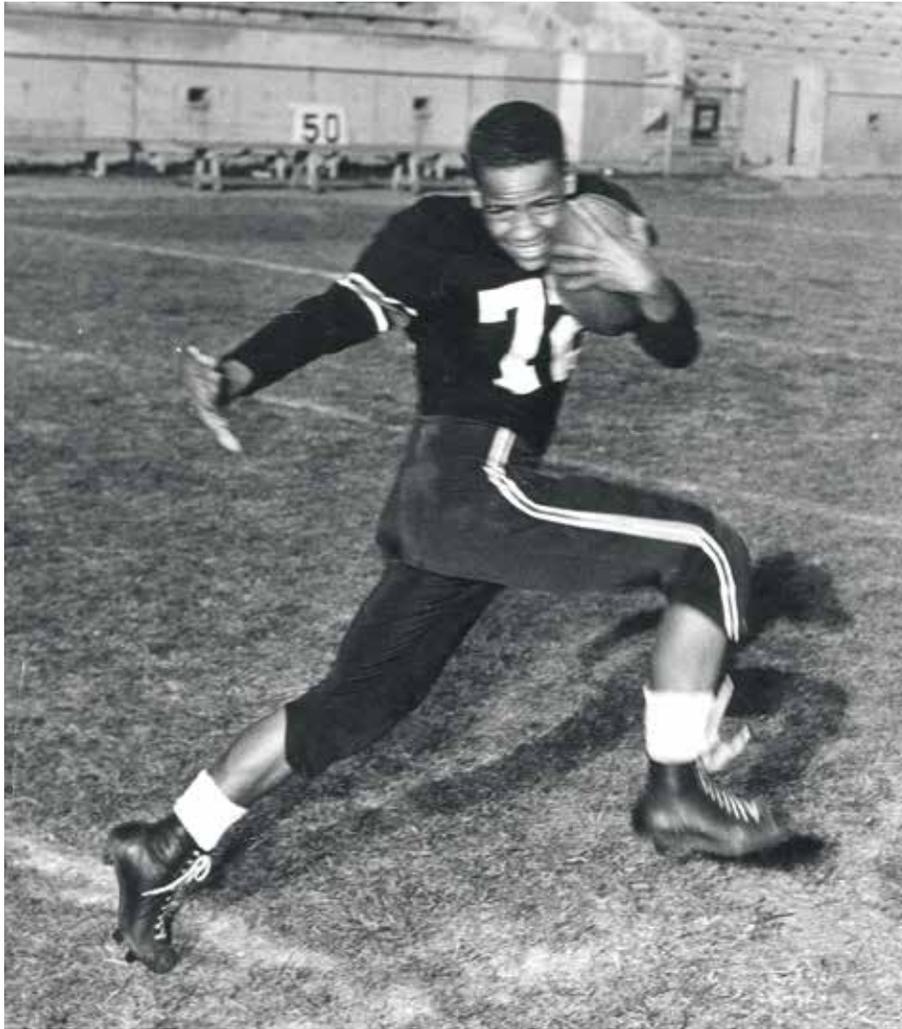
“No.”

After first teasing him as being “pitiful,” the lieutenant governor proceeded to lecture Dwight about possessing so much creative energy and talent and failing to exploit it to its full potential.

He urged Archon Dwight to

look around, even travel in search of images of black people in federal government buildings, city squares, museums and galleries. There were none that Archon Dwight knew of. “It’s as if black people don’t exist in America,” Brown insisted and admonished Dwight that he had a higher calling.

“You’re going to stop what you are doing, and you’re going to begin recording in sculpture the profound contributions and every significant event of African Americans in the history of this country,” Brown directed. “Your first commission is to do a sculpture of me,” he added... “for the capitol rotunda... as Colorado’s



ARCHON ED DWIGHT AS A HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETE

first black lieutenant governor.”

It was the meeting that changed his life. It was a monumental task. Three hundred and fifty years of African American slavery and suffering, achievement and overcoming. But where even to start? A high-achieving product of a Catholic school education in Kansas City, Kansas, Archon Dwight realized suddenly that there was much of the history and culture of black people that was unknown to him. The lieutenant governor presented him with two stacks of books. “Read these,” he said.

Archon Dwight devoured the books and was inspired to take on the challenge until hit with

the realization of one undeniable fact. “We have a problem, Governor,” Dwight confessed. “I don’t know how to model sculptures. I paint and weld nails and metal pieces together.” But Brown was unsympathetic. “Go to the library, get a book and teach yourself,” he said.

After consulting books on sculpting, Archon Dwight made a bronze work that now sits in the rotunda of the Colorado State Capitol. Kudos to Archon Dwight, but kudos as well to the lieutenant governor for entrusting his image to a novice sculptor.

Brown subsequently commissioned Dwight to create a series of bronzes of African Americans

who came to Colorado in the days after emancipation from slavery. The series, entitled *Black Frontier Spirit of the American West*, opened in Colorado and traveled across the country for five years. Among its many stops were showings at the Smithsonian.

Energized by his success, Archon Dwight enrolled in the University of Denver’s graduate arts program and quickly rose to manage the Sculpture Department. He received his master of fine arts degree in sculpture in 1978.

He has works in the Library of Congress and the Jazz Collection at the Smithsonian’s Museum of American History. Most recently, he unveiled the Texas African American History Memorial, his largest project to date, on the state capitol grounds in Austin, Texas. The sculpture, which cost \$3 million and took four years to complete, stands twenty-seven feet high and thirty-two feet wide. It depicts African Americans’ ascent from bondage to liberation in Texas. Hundreds attended the November 19, 2016, dedication, including Texas governor Greg Abbott, Houston mayor and Archon Sylvester Turner, and members of the Texas Legislative Black Caucus.

Others of Archon Dwight’s celebrated sculptures include three Underground Railroad memorials, the John Hope Franklin Tulsa Riot Memorial and the South Carolina African American History Memorial.

These accomplishments follow earlier firsts, in unrelated fields of endeavor that can only be characterized as astounding.

Ed Dwight was born in 1933 and raised in Kansas City, Kansas, on a small farm on the outskirts of town. He began his schooling in 1935 in the unique Dewey Experimental Learning System that was made available to a group of 2-year-old African American children to determine the impact of early-childhood education on later learning skills. By all accounts, he was a precocious student, with a natural affinity for the arts. He became the official class artist of his pre-school class and held that position unchallenged all the way through high school. His mother enrolled young Ed in every available art class.

But art was not his only interest. He also demonstrated a passion for aviation and often visited the nearby Fairfax Airport, studying the airplanes in the Army Air Corps fleet. The dream of flying was as ever-present in his young life as art, though a far more distant reality. Still, his studies fueled his imagination.

When Dwight turned 4, his mother gave him a library card. It was in the library that he discovered the great masters of art, and after studying their constructions and emulating their styles, he made his first oil painting at the age of 9. This was while he was also studying Army Air Corps aviation manuals.

He graduated with honors from an all-white high school and was awarded an art scholarship to the Kansas City Art Institute. But his father, as most fathers do, suggested he pursue something to better earn a living. Dad had been a professional baseball player for the Negro League's



ARCHON ED DWIGHT AS A TEST PILOT IN THE U.S. AIR FORCE

Kansas City Monarchs. So Dwight enrolled in engineering classes at the Kansas City Community College, dutifully pursuing his degree until one day he caught sight of the cover of the local black newspaper, featuring a picture of Lt. Dayton Ragland, a black U.S. Air Force pilot. From that moment Ed Dwight set his sights on the skies:

Every day, he went down to the local Air Force recruiting office to ask for an application for pilot training. And every day he was told the same thing – the Air Force was not letting his kind in. He was told this even though President

Harry S. Truman had ordered the desegregation of the armed services in 1948. Dwight wrote to Washington and was told that an aviation cadet evaluation team would be visiting his junior college campus.

“What I did not know at the time was there was a move afoot to recruit black pilots. Thirty-three of us from the college were sent to Denver [by the aviation cadet evaluation team] in 1951... to Lowry Air Base to take the exam, the pilot aptitude test. Now you have to understand...I had been taking



In space first which the Russians cannot claim, Capt. Edward J. Dwight's training at Edwards Air Force Base in California includes the checking of a flight path on the "astroglide." He is one of 10 jet pilot trainees selected for the Aerospace Research Pilot Course at the base, but his hopes set on a fantasy: flight to the moon and back.

FIRST NEGRO ASTRONAUT CANDIDATE

Crack Air Force jet pilot is training rigorously for future flights exploring outer space

sample tests for pilot training ever since I was a junior in high school. You go to the library, and they have these sample tests that they give you. I had been unwittingly working toward taking the real test, playing this imaginary pilot guy.” *

It is perhaps a measure of how serious the Air Force was about recruiting black pilots that Archon Dwight was the only African American among the thirty-three invited. But he was also the only one to ace the test and be selected for pilot training in the U.S. Air Force – his dream of

flying suddenly within his reach.

He entered the Air Force, completed his training and earned a bachelor’s degree in aeronautical engineering from Arizona State University while serving as a flight instructor at nearby Williams Air Force Base. Then history intervened. On November 4, 1961, Archon Dwight received a letter from President John F. Kennedy, inviting him to attend the USAF Flight Test Pilot School at Edwards Air Force Base in California in preparation to become America’s first “Negro” astronaut.

Not everyone in the program was as excited about it as Archon

Dwight and President Kennedy. “They did not want me down there,” Dwight said of his fellow officers and astronaut trainees:

“I heard...how a certain high-ranking officer called in several of the staff of the test pilot school and made a comment that ‘Washington is trying to cram a nigger down our throats, and we don’t want that nigger to graduate, because if he graduates it’ll hurt this program and will destroy everything you people have been putting together.’ ” *

This same high-ranking officer called Dwight into his office once and asked him point blank:

“Who got you into this school? Was it the NAACP, or are you some kind of black Muslim out here to make trouble? ... Those people in Washington don’t know what we’re doing down here. They could get you killed.” *

Through threats and all, Archon Dwight persisted and finished seventh out of seventeen candidates, and he was ready for hard training in the Manned Orbital Laboratory (MOL) Program, which was the military component of the manned space flight effort. But history/fate intervened again. The assassination of President Kennedy on November 22, 1963, brought the entire enterprise to a halt. The following Monday, Archon Dwight received orders shipping him out to Germany. He was told he would be a liaison for the German space program. But Germany didn’t

have a space program.

Dispirited, he resigned from the military and took a position with IBM as a systems engineer and marketing representative. Realizing that wasn't really for him, he went into business for himself, developing a chain of Bar-B-Q restaurants in the Denver area. This venture was followed by a real estate, land development and construction company. He designed, developed and built hundreds of apartments and condominiums in the Denver area, and his company built the original City of Parker in Colorado, under a Housing and Urban Development New City Program. Then, in 1974, he met Lt. Governor Brown, who launched him into his career as an artist.

A visit to Archon Dwight's 30,000-square-foot studio, gallery and foundry in Denver is eye-opening. In a large aircraft hangar in the industrial district of Northeast Denver, shelves are lined with models of heads, bodies, arms and legs as well as models of the airplanes he flew. "This is where everything happens," he says. "Whether it is a gallery sculpture or a massive monument, it all starts right here."

Among the gallery pieces are an oversized image of trumpeter Miles Davis, a life-size image of President Barack Obama and his family from the 2009 inauguration, and a series of Buffalo Soldiers of the Wild West. Dwight beams with pride in showing off the space and the work that have brought him both renown and fulfillment as an artist. He continues to work tirelessly on



ARCHON ED DWIGHT AT HIS STUDIO



TEXAS AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY MEMORIAL PRIOR TO INSTALLATION



DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING MONUMENT, CITY PARK, DENVER



INTERNATIONAL UNDERGROUND RAILROAD MEMORIAL, DETROIT

numerous projects. And with memorials erected in thirty-five states and Canada, one does not have to travel far to experience the power of his art.

He is the recipient of numerous awards and accolades for his art and achievements in the early space program, and the namesake Ed Dwight, Jr., Award is presented annually to exemplary individuals who have helped connect talented math and science students with educational resources.

Archon Dwight was inducted into Denver's Delta Eta Boulé in 2011, and at 83 is one of its most passionate members. He is a member of the Delta Eta Foundation board and works closely with Denver's Sire Archon Al Cooper, Archon Gary Jackson and other members of the board to promote intergenerational dialogue with twenty-eight Delta Eta college scholars. His financial contributions directly support the foundation's annual programming, including scholarships, mentorship and internship activities, as well as a professional development institute.

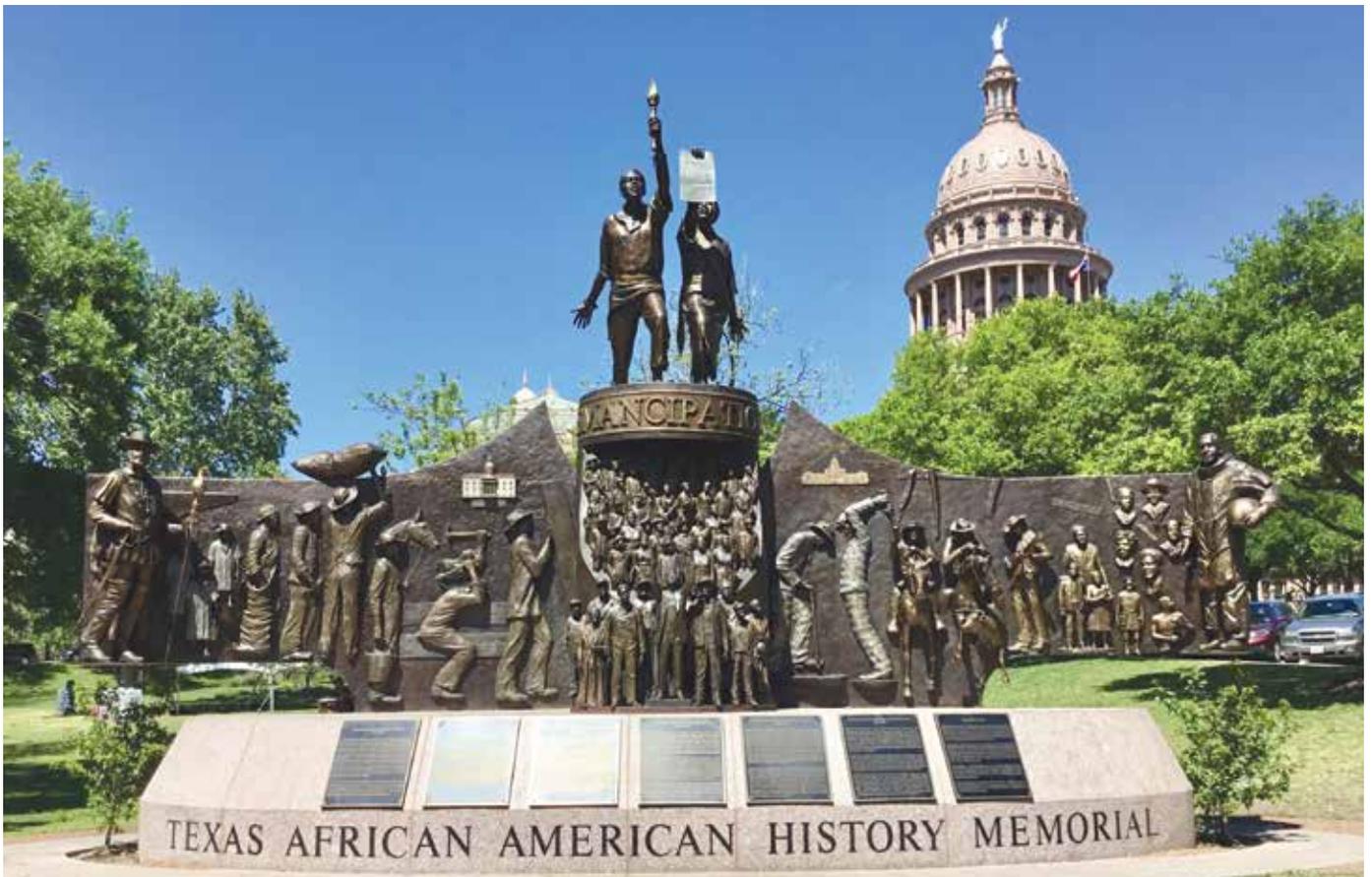
His sculptures are in the collections of many Archons, and in 2016 he released the Sigma Pi Phi Memorial Sculpture, a limited-edition piece commemorating the Fraternity's founders, its rich history and dedication to black youth.

"I hope my experiences... shed some insight and provide a modicum of guidance to our young aspirants, as well as some encouragement and confirmation to our more accomplished," said Archon Dwight.

There's little doubt of that.



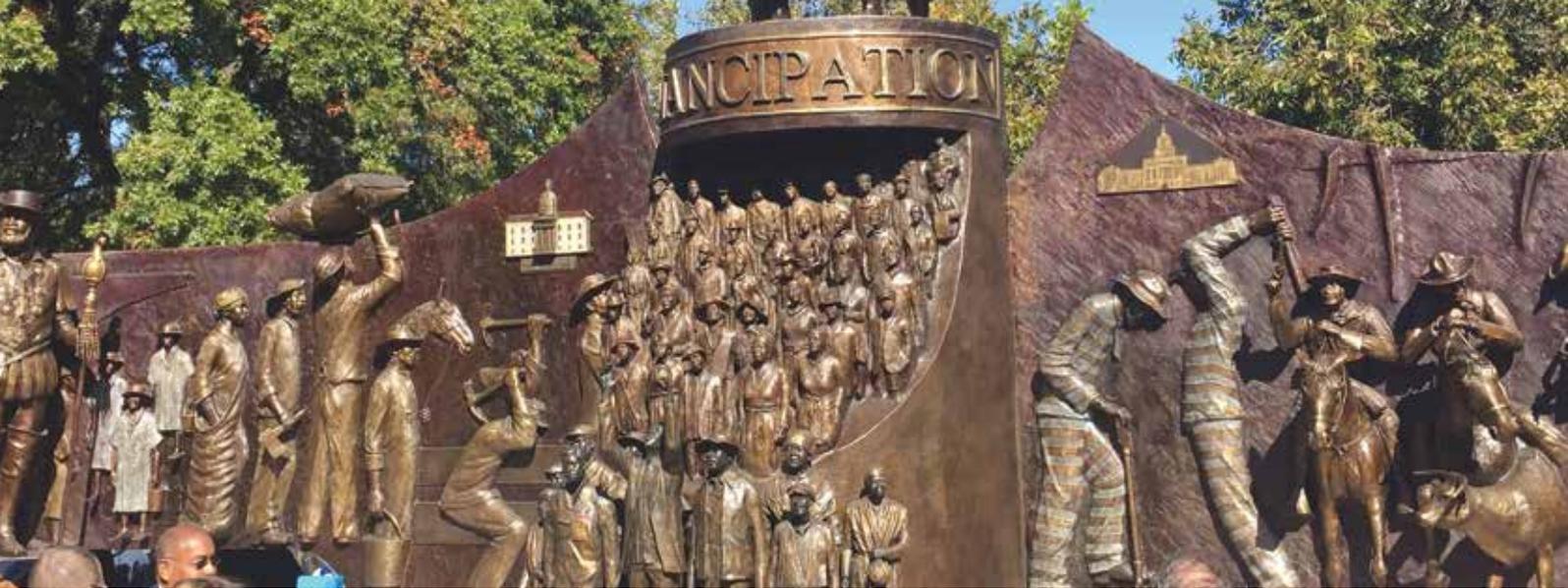
SOUTH CAROLINA AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY MONUMENT, STATE CAPITOL GROUNDS, COLUMBIA



TEXAS AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY MEMORIAL, STATE CAPITOL GROUNDS, AUSTIN

*Excerpted from interviews with Ed Dwight for the 1989 documentary *Black Stars in Orbit* by the late documentary filmmaker Bill Miles and Archon Khephra Burns.

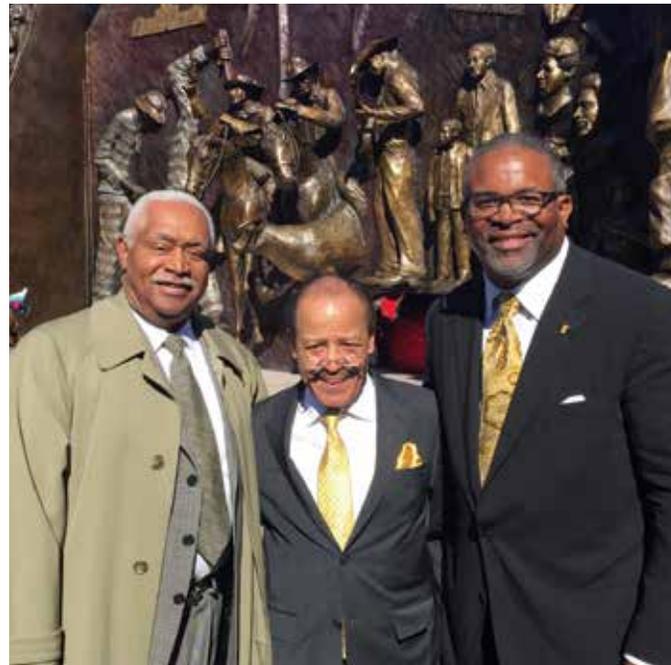
To learn more about Archon Ed Dwight and his work and to view the limited-edition Sigma Pi Phi Memorial Sculpture, please visit his website at <http://www.eddwright.com/>.



TEXAS AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY MEMORIAL, AUSTIN

AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY MEMORIAL UNVEILED AT TEXAS STATE CAPITOL

By Grand Sire Archon–Elect Gregory J. Vincent, Gamma Gamma Boulé



SIRE ARCHON AL COOPER, DELTA ETA; SCULPTOR AND ARCHON ED DWIGHT, DELTA ETA; AND GRAND SIRE ARCHON–ELECT GREGORY J. VINCENT, GAMMA GAMMA

On November 19, 2016, state officials and invited guests, including a number of prominent Archons, gathered on the south lawn of the Texas State Capitol in Austin for the public unveiling of

the Texas African American History Memorial. The memorial, which includes details from more than four centuries of African American Texas history, was created by sculptor and Delta Eta Archon Ed Dwight. The sculpture, made of granite and bronze and thirty feet wide and ten feet high, depicts scenes of the Texas slave experience, emancipation, the postslavery experience, contributions to the development of the Texas cotton, cattle and oil industries, and the role of African Americans in the Texas Revolution.

Additional Archons on hand at the unveiling included Nu Archons Sylvester Turner and Rodney Ellis, both of Houston. Archon Turner, who is now mayor of Houston, helped secure funding for the memorial as a former member of the Texas House of Representatives, and Archon Ellis, a state senator from Houston, was one of the project’s main supporters and sponsors.

The unveiling came some two decades after the Texas Legislature first approved a bill to establish an African American monument on the capitol grounds. Original plans hit design and funding snags, and it was not until 2012 that the project was reapproved under a broader artistic vision and with Archon Dwight as the sculptor.

The memorial is one of Archon Dwight’s more than one hundred public art installations that focus on the African American experience. His work can be seen across the country, including the depiction of the evolution of jazz at the St. Louis Arch Museum, the African American History Monument in Columbia, South Carolina, and a statue of Mayor Harold Washington in Chicago.



PHOTO CREDIT: SHUTTERSTOCK

"I've already found my first job, but it's not going to take me where I want to go. Who's going to give me a chance?"

Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity
has proudly sponsored
hundreds of young black men
seeking education and
advancement since 1904.

African American males face crises of confidence, career development and safety. But there are doors that may be opened to a fulfilling life, career preparation and advancement.

Through individual donations, Boulé members make the dream of a bachelor's degree a reality. Our recipients complete their degrees and go on to become some of America's top leaders, scholars and businessmen.

However, as the cost of a college education continues to increase, so must our rate of financial commitment.

Won't you help us keep up the pace by making a sizable donation to the Boulé Scholars Program?

A typical recipient receives \$10,000 over a four year period. Since 2013, we have committed to provide more than \$250,000 in aid to 37 scholars. **We want to increase the number of young men we propel to success.**

Our strategic plan, our dedication to social action and our participation in the *My Brother's Keeper* initiative create a climate of excellence for high school males from underserved communities. Your generous donation to the Program paves the way to professional and personal accomplishment for these young men.

Contribute to the Boulé Scholars Program to make an investment in the future of our community today.