

Honfleur Gallery brings art and culture back to Main Street Anacostia

This is the second story in our Metro series.

A small Anacostia gallery provides artistic access east of the river. Honfleur Gallery's gleaming hardwood floors, airy space, warm light, vibrant paintings and sculptures area serve as a stark contrast to the brick and cement of many of the crumbling abandoned buildings on Good Hope Road. The gallery can be seen as a diamond in the rough, in an area that seems forgotten by most of Washington.

When one digs a little deeper, it becomes clear that Honfleur is much more than a "pretty space" for the community. The gallery is the first return of an artistic and cultural site to Main Street Anacostia in over 40 years. It allows cultures from unexpected places to cross into Southeast D.C.

The gallery began in 2007 as a project of the Action to Rehabilitate Community Housing Development Corporation. The not-for-profit organization in Anacostia works to ensure families primarily in Ward 8 have a gateway to quality education, livable wage jobs, cultural activities, affordable housing, neighborhood business and access to social services.

"ARCH wanted to create a place to support the arts and artists in this community," said Amy Cavanaugh, director of Honfleur Gallery and director of ARCH's Arts & Culture division. "Before the gallery opened there was nothing like this east of the river."

Historically, Anacostia was designed to be an affordable area for the working class, most of who were employed at the Navy Yard. When it was incorporated in 1854, anyone of African or Irish descent was prohibited from renting or owning property within the Anacostia borders. This rule did not stay in effect for long, by 1880 about 15 percent of residents were black and today it is estimated that this figure has grown to 99 percent.

Forming a connection with the surrounding community does not always come easy. ARCH coordinators have been met by several challenges. Cavanaugh admits the difficult transition has a lot to do with bringing change to a community that is set in its ways. Art is often looked at as a luxury item that is reserved for those with large disposable incomes. It can also be a cultural difference. Cavanaugh, who is white, has found it difficult to attract people in a historically black neighborhood that is surrounded by dollar stores and mini-marts.

“A lot of people do not understand why you need to expand arts and cultural outlets around here when there needs to be so much improvement around education,” Cavanaugh said. “We don’t want to take anything away from education. The arts are an important aspect of education.”

The gallery itself does offer some art educational programming, even though ARCH is not technically an arts education organization. For example, traditional and digital photography workshops are offered to people of all ages, including children.

“At first a lot of people in the community ignored the gallery, but when they realized its connection to ARCH they began to notice it,” said Denise Shepard, a program assistant for the ARCH Training Center who used to work at the gallery and grew up in Anacostia.

Shepard said that the photography classes offered by Honfleur have motivated people to get involved with the gallery.

“People here are generally really friendly,” said Beth Ferraro, creative director of Vivid Solutions, Honfleur’s sister gallery, which is located two blocks away. “Usually a lot of the locals will just pop in to say hello as they have gotten to know us.”

Honfleur has also attracted people from around the world. This has allowed for great cultural exchange between Anacostia and other communities..

“A lot of artists from other parts of the country will drop in just to check out the gallery,” Shepard said. “You may not believe this but about three weeks ago the space was rented out for an artist’s funeral.”

A previous exhibit, “Anacostia Exposed,” featured photographs by Mervyn Smyth an artist from Northern Ireland.

“It was interesting because the exhibit highlighted a lot of the similarities between Belfast and the Anacostia area through a combination of photography and poetry written by people from D.C.,” Cavanaugh said.