

Viola Desmond legacy comes to life in her Gottingen Street neighbourhood

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HALIFAX, N.S. — It's hard to miss the new tribute to trailblazing Halifax businesswoman and civil rights icon Viola Desmond on Gottingen Street, in the neighbourhood where she once operated her hair salon, Vi's Studio of Beauty Culture.

In a sidewalk space next to the Blue Collar Barbershop, across from the Halifax North Memorial Public Library, Halifax artist Marven Nelligan has created a virtual vision of Desmond's salon that passersby will be compelled to investigate. Dressed in purple hues akin to the \$10 bill that bears her likeness, the interactive display comes complete with a mirror and a vintage barber's chair, with a few modern touches to suggest what her business would be like today if it was still in operation.

On Wednesday, dozens of area residents and community leaders gathered for the unveiling of the permanent display, which serves to remind Haligonians and visitors of Desmond's contributions to the city as a Black business owner who not only had clients like soprano Portia White, but also opened her School of Beauty Culture to train other Black women who were denied enrollment at local segregated training facilities.

The dedication follows the recent tribute paid to Desmond by the Toronto International Film Festival, which named a theatre in the TIFF Bell Lightbox complex after her and her sister Wanda Robson, who passed away in February.

While kids on lunch break from school sat in the chair and played at doing hair and makeup in the mirror, Nelligan and his sponsors, the North End Business Association, shared their inspiration for the project and its importance in educating others about the scope of Desmond's legacy.

"We wanted to create something that was going to last for a long time," Nelligan told the crowd who came out for the ceremony at the library reception that followed. "The people who are coming up behind us can learn about and experience the story of Viola in a new and exciting way.

"We took this on knowing there were going to be different hurdles to get around, problems we'd have to solve, but things found a way to come together and it's really exciting that we're all here now to give it up for Viola and celebrate her legacy with this new artwork in our community, which is also her community."

Besides providing the refurbished, and accessible, antique chair for a trip back in time, the memorial has a virtual component using the GLYPiX platform, which can be launched by scanning a QR code on the display itself, allowing viewers to interact with a digital Desmond portrayed by actor Megan Ryan.

Taken all together, the installation is designed to provide a more detailed portrait of Desmond, beyond the headlines for her 1946 arrest and subsequent legal battles after sitting in the whites-only section of New Glasgow's Roseland movie theatre. It includes photos of Desmond's sister Wanda, who devoted much of her life to preserving and promoting the legacy of her sister, who died in 1965 at the age of 50.

The greater scope of Desmond's contributions to Canadian history is appreciated by entrepreneur and Emerging Lens Film Festival co-founder Tara Taylor, who runs the Braiding Lounge hair studio next to the memorial, and who also wrote and produced the 2018 stage musical Viola.

“What inspired me was her savvy,” Taylor told the assembled crowd at the library. “She was a chemist inside, her hunger to strive and achieve all that she could inspire me to do the same. The theatre incident happened to her, but it’s not who she was inside.

“Incidents like that propel our spirits to come alongside our communities to fight for equality, justice and peace. Viola answered that trailblazing call.”

Nelligan also draws inspiration from Desmond’s drive to provide opportunities in her community in running his own Marvelous Design studio, and in his desire to create a tribute that will appeal to a younger generation through the incorporation of the GLYPiX educational platform that he hopes will take root with similar displays around Halifax and beyond.

“Everybody knows the story (of her arrest), but when you really dig deep into her story, she’s such a huge inspiration, and it’s amazing to me,” said the artist. “The awareness just isn’t where it needs to be with regards to her accomplishments and what she did in that time period in this region, and the challenges she faced.

“The incident at the theatre was definitely a huge thing, but for somebody like her, we need to see more of the makeup of a person like that. ... It’s amazing to be able to relate to somebody who’s so iconic, in the tenacity and the diligence that she showed in her ventures. She was a problem solver, she made things happen.”

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