

The Sparrow Squad

by Caroline (Caro) Scanlan

On a busy corner in Newhallville, four sparrows take to the air with grace and power — one can practically feel the breeze from the flap of their wings. The Sparrow Squadron — the latest public mural installation by New Haven-based artist Kwadwo Adae — was recently completed at the intersection of Dixwell and Division in the Newhallville neighborhood.

I met Kwadwo for the first time on September 18, at the installation of one of New Haven's new Black Lives Matter murals on Bassett Street. Kwadwo, the mural designer, was orchestrating an all-day, community volunteer painting event. Wearing his trademark paint-splattered artist coat and gliding between neighbors with rollers and paintbrushes, he stood out in a joyful crowd. I approached him to introduce myself (we had corresponded by email over the summer to coordinate a tree planting in front of Adae Fine Art Academy, his plant-filled State Street community art school) and thank Kwadwo for being a tree steward.

During our conversation, Kwadwo explained he was nearly done with another mural in the neighborhood — a flock of sparrows on the wall of Moe's Market — and he was excited to have trees integrated into the final mural design. One month later, on a gray and drizzly morning in October, URI's GreenSkills team had the privilege of planting four new trees — two serviceberries, a hackberry, and a pink flowering dogwood — to complement the birds in flight.

While striking in their own right, the sparrows evoke a difficult story. As Kwadwo writes on his website, "The Sparrow Squadron mural was created in response to an egregious incident of gun violence where Yale University Police Officer Terrance Pollock and Hamden Police Officer Devin Eaton fired a total of sixteen bullets into the car of Stephanie Washington and Paul Witherspoon III, an unarmed black couple [in spring of 2019]. The incident occurred 0.2 miles away from [the wall where the sparrows are painted]."

The mural was started in summer 2019, but its significance has only amplified since the murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor earlier this summer and the global protests and shifts in public consciousness that followed. In describing the symbolism of the sparrows, Adae writes, "Birds are representative of peace and freedom, two important aspects of life that police gun violence robs from a community. Sparrows are featured as they are small, often overlooked birds that are beautiful and ubiquitous to the community."

The tree species were chosen by Kwadwo with attention and care. "The yellows of the hackberry and the red orange tones of the serviceberries... against the deep amber background of the mural every autumn" were thrilling to imagine. In de-



Artist and tree steward Kwadwo Adae visits with URI's tree planting team, explaining the story and significance of the "Sparrow Squadron" public mural at Dixwell and Division.

scribing his excitement about the serviceberry trees in particular, Kwadwo writes, "The flowers would support local pollinators and the [berries] would support many different species of birds. The fact that they are edible is an enormous plus.... Introducing a tree with edible berries in an urban setting has the potential to increase youth interest in interacting and engagement with trees."

As the rain drizzled on and the sky darkened before an afternoon downpour, URI's planting team stood in front of the mural, their attention captured by Kwadwo as he shared the story behind the sparrows and the significance of painting public murals in neighborhoods across New Haven. It has always been important for him to give back to the community, he explained, and to invest his care and energy into the city's predominantly Black and Brown neighborhoods.

William Tisdale, our planting-crew leader, explained that he had a family member who had lived right around the corner for years, pointing to the blue building one door down from Moe's Market. Jonathan Geneste, a team member from Emerge, chimed in that he, too, had family nearby and that he had spent a few years living a few blocks away. Kwadwo seemed heartened to learn that members of our team had a deep connection to this place, that the mural and the tree planting felt close to home. "And the owner of the market, [Bachar Jandali], we should be grateful for him, too," Will chimed in. "He didn't have to agree to have the mural painted on his building or to provide the water for the trees" — reminding us of the web of relationships that supports community projects like these.

As we packed up our trucks and got ready to leave

the planting site that day, I positioned a "Request A Free Tree" sign right next to the flowering dogwood, with the hopes that nearby residents may feel inspired to ask for a tree of their own. A few days later, the phone rang, and it was Charlene. "I live on Dixwell, just up from the bus stop at Division. There's a sign about free trees. My son is turning nine years old this weekend, and for his birthday, he says he would like a new tree out front." Not only that, he wanted his friends to know they could have one, too. Malachi became our youngest tree ambassador that weekend, passing out tree-request postcards to the 20 attendees of his ninth birthday party. A few weeks later, a new trident maple was planted in front of Charlene and Malachi's Dixwell Avenue home.

The sparrows and their new arboreal companions, with a call for freedom and cultivating our sometimes unnoticed but always present connection with the natural world, had already begun to spread tree fever through the neighborhood. Hopefully much-needed peace and healing, too. And who knows — maybe Malachi will be one of the young folks trying their first serviceberry fruit next July.

For more information about Kwadwo Adae and his work, you can visit his website (kwadwoadae.com) or follow him on Instagram (@[kwadwoadae](https://www.instagram.com/kwadwoadae))

Note: This year, URI has been investing in Tree Ambassadors across New Haven, thanks to generous support from CT Green Fund. If you or someone you know is interested in organizing your neighborhood to have more free trees planted by our GreenSkills team, we can get you set up with all the materials you need!