

The Miami Herald

Posted on Tue, Sep. 25, 2012

New sculptures at Miami-Dade College connect human rights

By Michael Vasquez

mvasquez@MiamiHerald.com



PATRICK FARRELL / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

This sculpture sits at Miami Dade College's InterAmerican Campus. Human rights-themed sculptures are being erected at all eight Miami Dade College campuses.

In the aftermath of World War II, with memories of the Holocaust still fresh in the world's collective mind, the United Nations set about the task of creating a document that would guide a new and better world — a world where humanity wasn't so horrifyingly inhumane.

The resulting 30-article Universal Declaration of Human Rights was both a dramatic accomplishment and, in the United States at least, something of a failure. The text, crafted with the aid of former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, articulated the pillars of individual liberty. Where it failed was in capturing a lasting U.S. audience — many Americans have never heard of it.

A large-scale initiative at Miami Dade College aims to change that. With the goal of honoring the document through sculptures at all eight campuses, and a pavilion featuring more exhibits, MDC could become the place where the universal declaration gets its due. If completed, the plan would represent the world's largest public tribute to a document that Roosevelt once called the "common standard of achievement for all peoples of all nations."

Sculptures have been erected at MDC's InterAmerican and North campuses. A gigantic red sculpture, symbolizing a flame of thought, points to the sky at the InterAmerican in honor of the declaration's Article 19: Freedom of Expression.

At the North Campus, Article 2: Freedom from Discrimination is brought to life with "Niños," a sculpture of multiple children, of varying colors, standing on pedestals and facing different directions — each direction reflecting an individual's different point of view.

Until now, said MDC North Campus President José Vicente, human-rights debates have too often ignored the universal declaration. The sculptures, Vicente said, have sparked awareness among students, faculty members and administrators.

"It's been educational for everyone," said Vicente, who called human rights "an issue that will always be current."

The declaration advocates political freedoms, such as freedom of religion, along with economic and social rights that you won't find in the U.S. Constitution.

Article 24, for example, states: "Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay."

Mark Gibney, who teaches International Human Rights Law at the University of North Carolina-Asheville, says Article 24 routinely elicits chuckles from students — though Gibney argues that section was, in fact, relevant when it was written.

"It's an attempt to recognize how many workers at that time had been exploited, working 60- to 70-hour weeks," Gibney said. "This is an attempt to say, 'Enough of that. You have a human right not to be worked like a mule.'"

Though nonbinding and overlooked in this country, Gibney said the universal declaration is widely respected abroad, and heavily influenced the post-apartheid South African constitution, which contains passages dealing with economic rights, such as housing and health.

It is the declaration's focus on economic rights that leads Gibney to call it "the single greatest document ever written." What good are the protections of legal due process, he argues, if you're destitute and sleeping under a bridge?

While MDC is providing the public space for the new sculptures, both the concept and the fundraising have come from two local women — old friends, originally from Venezuela, who stumbled upon the universal declaration by accident.

After relocating to South Florida, Elizabeth Sanchez Vegas and Devorah Sasha in 2008 decided to leave their previous careers behind. Vegas had worked in the television business, and Sasha as a singer, but the pair turned their attention to forming a nonprofit organization that would promote human rights.

At their first official event, the new International Solidarity for Human Rights group held a Guinness World Record-breaking reading marathon at MDC's InterAmerican campus. With a team of six women, the organization read aloud nonstop for 10 days, day and night.

In planning for that event, the group searched for a relevant text to read from. It was then that they discovered the universal declaration, and fell in love with it.

"We decided, 'Oh my God, this document is the key to what we want to do,'" Sasha recalled.

After reading (and re-reading) the declaration aloud during that 10-day marathon, the group set about their current project: a 100-mile Route to Human Rights that connects all of MDC's campuses through human-rights themed artwork.

Each campus will feature a sculpture and plaza symbolizing one of the declaration's 30 articles, while a blue-and-green, cubed-shaped "Human Rights Pavilion," measuring 30 feet by 30 feet, is being planned for the North Campus.

The women are still raising funds for the pavilion's \$1 million construction cost, but once complete, it will house 18 to 20 paintings and small sculptures, each dedicated to one of the declaration's articles. One wall in the building will feature plaques with the full text of each article.

By 2015, the goal is to have the entire Route to Human Rights complete — at which point it will be permanently donated to the college. Vegas and Sasha hope that elementary schools will organize field trips to the pavilion, and that MDC's student population (more than 174,000, hailing from 173 countries) will ensure that the declaration is exposed to a whole new generation.

"It's like a small world," Vegas said of the college. "Imagine how many ambassadors we're going to have in a few years."

© 2012 Miami Herald Media Company. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.miamiherald.com>