



Jan-Michele Lemon Kearney
Councilmember

202102244

June 11, 2021

MOTION

WE MOVE that City Council allocate \$1,000,000 to assist with the funding gap for the creation of the Robert O'Neal Multicultural Arts Center ("ROMAC") at the Regal Cinema and adjacent sites in the West End neighborhood. The ROMAC will be a center for performing and visual arts education and programming for the West End community and for the entire City of Cincinnati.



Councilmember Jan-Michele Lemon Kearney

Councilmember Wendell Young

STATEMENT

The closure of the popular Arts Consortium in the West End neighborhood left a void for the education and performance of music, dance, theatre, poetry performances, and exhibits in the West End, as well as a community space for community events. The ROMAC at the old Regal Cinema not only fills the void left by the Arts Consortium but celebrates through its namesake the tireless community work and contributions of legendary contemporary artist Mr. Robert O'Neal. Mr. O'Neal for whom ROMAC is named, believed all of us are creative and everyone has the ability to create and appreciate art. He lived his life advocating for others using his art to stir change and bring communities together. ROMAC will be the headquarters of community history for BIPOC (black, indigenous, and people of color) and will give voice to the art of BIPOC.

Robert O'Neal

Cincinnati Artist and Activist (1940 -2018)

Born in northern Kentucky, Robert O'Neal spent most of his life in Cincinnati, Ohio. At an early age his creative skills were cultivated under the tutelage of his older sister Loretta. In his junior year at Withrow High School O'Neal received a scholarship to attend the Cincinnati Art Academy during his summer break. He later graduated from the Gebhardt Commercial Arts School. Married to his wife Julia for 48 years, they raised four children. Influenced by his love for the creative process, his daughter Toilynn O'Neal Turner followed in his foot-steps pursuing a career in the arts holding administrative positions at the Cincinnati Art Museum, the Arts Consortium and Saint Ursula Academy. Robert O'Neal is an amazing talent whose visual reference is rooted in the urban issues of Cincinnati's most challenging neighborhoods. The cultural movements of the 1960s led O'Neal to establish himself as a community activist and artist.

O'Neal organized the United Self Expressionists, a group of local artists known as US. They created a body of works reflecting the experiences surrounding their community. During the 1960s, the Model Cities Program, an element of the Johnson Administration's War on Poverty, originated in response to urban concerns. O'Neal became head of the Culture and Recreation Task Force of the Model Cities Program in Cincinnati. This project led to the creation of the Arts Consortium of Cincinnati in the West End, an organization that cultivated hundreds of African American artists and educated the youth of the inner-city. O'Neal held the honorary title of Over-the-Rhine Mayor serving as an advocate for the homeless. For most of his life he suffered from Rheumatoid Arthritis which led to his participation in a March on Washington for disability rights. Years later he served on the Disabilities Advisory Committee for the Ohio Arts Council.

His teaching career included stints at the Arts and Humanities Resource Center where he worked with senior citizens, the Very Special Arts Ohio Program and the Cincinnati Recreation Commission. In line with his passion for grassroots initiatives, O'Neal also assisted in the founding of WAIF Community Radio. In 1994 he was honored by Applause Magazine Image Makers and was one of 25 African American artists featured at the prestigious Clossons Gallery in downtown Cincinnati.

Robert O'Neal was known as the "Master Face Painter." He perfected the art of face painting beyond heart, stars and rainbows to putting actual masterpieces on the faces of children and adults. His creative repertoire earned him a taste of local celebrity at tri-state festivals.