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Clifton Cultural Arts Center sets the bar high with its first exhibition

By: Sara Pearce



"[Floodwall](#)" - a touring Hurricane Katrina memorial exhibition comprised of a wall of hundreds of drawers scavenged in the storm's aftermath and the stories behind them - will be the [Clifton Cultural Art Center's](#) first exhibition. It's been seen by a million people during stops in New York City, Baton Rouge and Austin, and will make its Midwest debut Aug. 28 at the new arts center.

As it's first art exhibition, it signals director Ruth Dickey's goal of creating a space that's more than a neighborhood gathering spot. "Our intent is to be part of the conversation at the local, regional and national level," says Dickey, who was hired in March as the center's first director. Given Cincinnati's riverside location and its history of flooding, she sees an inherent connection between New Orleans and here. "There has been a strong outpouring of support from Cincinnati to New Orleans," she says. "Cincinnati has raised millions and has been really active in sending people to the Gulf Coast." Dickey is hoping to draw school groups to the exhibition and has created the first curriculum guide to it.

There is no doubt that "Floodwall" is a compelling piece. Old drawers. New drawers. Cracked drawers. Open drawers. Closed drawers. Lingerie drawers. Desk drawers. Kitchen drawers. Junk drawers. Artist [Jana Napoli](#) found them all - and more - on the

streets and sidewalks of New Orleans. She saw a world of lost dreams in the scattered pieces of furniture.

“I returned to the city in October and it was silent,” says Napoli, a New Orleans native. I caught her last night at home for a quick interview. “Everyone was gone. Houses were gutted. Everybody’s lives were laying on the side walks and streets.” She gravitated to the drawers, thinking of using them as a way to convey the silence that enveloped her. “You can’t take a picture of silence,” she says.

At first, she wasn’t sure what she would do with the growing pile. Then, she started to become angry about the government’s slow response to the crisis and to what she saw as a growing backlash against the people of New Orleans. “Some people seemed to think we deserved what happened,” she says. “I looked at the drawers and wondered ‘is this not American enough to care about? are the owners of these not American enough to care about?’ ”

As the drawers accumulated in her downtown studio – which was virtually untouched by the storm – she started thinking about their universality. “We all have drawers,” she says. She decided to put them together in a Katrina memorial. The result, “Floodwall,” is a 110 foot long sculpture made up of 350 drawers. It’s cathartic impact has been likened to that of Jerusalem’s Wailing Wall and Washington D.C.’s Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial. “I am surprised at how many people come to the wall and just cry,” she says.

The sculpture is accompanied by oral histories of about half the drawers’ owners. Napoli wrote the address of each drawer on it immediately. Not knowing until later that she would contact the owners. Napoli will be here for the opening. As it turns out, she and Dickey go way back. Dickey once worked for [YA/YA Inc.](#), a New Orleans-based youth arts collective that Napoli founded in 1988. "She is the first artist and mentor who taught me to believe in bold, audacious dreams," Dickey says.

After “Floodwall’s” stop here, Napoli wants to bring it to places along the Mississippi River valley that have recently experienced flooding. She wants to collect the stories of those people to add to the exhibit. "Our drawers look like everyone else’s," she says. “I want to use this as a vehicle to protect each other and hold each other.”

The exhibit - whose opening falls on the third anniversary of the hurricane - will be open limited hours and there'll be a suggested donation of \$5. But Dickey want to waive that suggestion for school groups, who she'd like to drop in without a thought about cost. Half the proceeds will be donated to ongoing Katrina relief efforts and YA/YA. The exhibit's costing \$35,000 to bring in but Dickey says the full amount's been covered by sponsors.



Meanwhile, the center's first official classes will start the week of Sept. 22. The web site hasn't caught up to them yet but I'm sure it will any minute now. They're CCM and writing classes. And Dickey says an exhibition by local artists is in the works for late September with artists TBA. She also told me that their capital campaign will start in earnest in January. It's initial goal is - gulp - \$3 million. That's what Dickey says they'll need to install elevators and fire protection throughout the rambling, historic building. That's much more than the center's web site says [Phase I](#) will cost. It has the price tag at \$1.8 million. In any case, it got a jump start on the goal via a recent \$250,000 capital appropriation from the State of Ohio.