



‘The Hills Have Wings’ mural inspires and honors legacies of the Hill District

Jessica Moss looks to the past and the future on Clarissa Street in project by The Roll Up



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Jessica Gaynelle Moss centers much of her work in neighborhoods. Before attending college, she went to nine different schools in various states and cities.

Home wasn't about the place for Moss, but about the people. Four generations of her family have lived in the Sugar Top section of the Hill District.

She thinks about her father jumping into the nearby reservoir as a kid or the walk she would take every day to school when she lived on Iowa Street, a walk that her sister took 15 years earlier.

Moss, 38, remembers stories of her grandparents going to the [New Granada Theater](#) and her father telling her about the music that he always heard coming from people's windows. She recalls visiting her grandparents as a child and knowing all of the neighbors.

"The Hill District is a place of great legacy and pride," Moss said.

"That is something we always have to remember and affirm. The history of the Hill District is continuous."

Moss and her initiative, The Roll Up, have helped document the neighborhood's history in a new mural on the side of a building on Clarissa Street. The city's newest piece of public art was recently completed by Miami-based artist Tierra Armstrong.

"The Hills Have Wings" is the name of the mural by Armstrong, 28, at 752 Clarissa St. Its vibrant colors and striking image of a man with wings and a woman in profile greet anyone walking down the street or turning the corner in their car.

Armstrong has received many thank yous and positive responses from residents on the block. As part of the \$50,000 project, she met with the oldest resident on the block to gain more insight into the Hill and the ethos of the community.

"This is a huge churchgoing community, so having elements that represented God and spirituality was important," she said.

At different altitudes and viewpoints, the mural changes. The trees that frame the artwork provide an extra element, resembling an afro around the woman in the mural. Armstrong is excited to see how moss that grows on the wall will change the look of the mural as well.

"The process was pretty extensive," she said. "I came here about a month ago and did some community activation, so I had some ideas for baseline sketches."

While painting the mural, Armstrong found out that she also has family heritage in Pittsburgh.

Longtime residents dying and transitioning from neighborhoods like the Hill District emphasize the need to document their legacies, according to

Moss. The mural can create a sense of longevity for people in the neighborhood and preserve their stories, she said.

“I believe that so much of this work is trying to make sure that we can share these stories in ways that can be accessed,” Moss said.

Her father, Joseph Garfield Moss Jr., grew up in a house on nearby Adelaide Street. On that street, Moss has created a short-term residency for Black Pittsburgh artists called The Garfield, where Armstrong stayed during her time working on the mural.

In the mornings before painting, she would wake up, go to the very top of the hill, have tea and talk to God for a moment. Showing up at the wall with positive energy was very important, she said, so that energy would be reflected in the mural and back to the community.

“I find Pittsburgh to be very whimsical,” Armstrong said.

Throughout the mural, there are large calla lilies morphing into winged structures.

“I am a big fan of duality, so if it is not a physical man and woman presented in my work, there is at least that energy,” she said.

In one part of the mural, a woman creates a beam of light that helps the man grow.

“This is how we should operate, helping each other,” Armstrong said.

The man’s wings are significant.

“I thought about how birds learning to fly jump off the highest point of the tree ... and this is the highest point of the city,” she said. “I think it should serve as a reminder [that] no matter what your environment is, whatever God hands you, it was given to you so that you could fly.”

The mural site is one of three properties that Moss’ family owns in the Hill. The building at 752 Clarissa St. contains eight units and is four stories tall. Moss lived there while attending law school, she said.

“There’s this incredible wall on the side of the house. It used to be yellow.... When I was a kid, I had memories of all the hand-painted work,” Moss

said. “And we don’t have that anymore. I’m not seeing the artist’s hand in ways that I remembered as a kid.”

Moss has worked on previous projects with artists including [Max Gonzales](#), the founder of a project called Free Walls.

“Max has been arrested before for making art. He wanted to create a mechanism for allowing people to make art free of repercussions,” Moss said.

“I have access to this space. Why would I not open it up to an artist to create?”

Moss, a graduate of Carnegie Mellon University, created The Roll Up nine years ago. It functions as a residency program, internship and fellowship. Once a year, there is an award ceremony with unrestricted awards,

Moss typically chooses artists through an invitation model. The artist has a vision, and Moss provides the avenues, pathways and resources to make it happen within six months. This project was different.

The Roll Up hosted an open call for the first time, and 89 applications were received from across the world. A panel of eight people, including Pittsburghers Njaimeh Njie, Naomi Chambers, Mimi Platt and Gonzalez, narrowed the field to three finalists.

“Seeing all the work that the artists submitted, and even people speaking on the Hill, just showed me how the reputation of a place precedes itself,” said Chambers, a resident of the Hill District.

Her grandparents met in the neighborhood and her father grew up there. Chambers, 38, is now earning a master’s degree in fine arts from Carnegie Mellon, making objects and installations.

“When people see the mural, I hope they feel this sense of curiosity and signaling how important art can be in a place like the Hill and open their eyes to all that art can be, in the way it made me see art in a different way when I was younger,” she said.

“And seek more of that beauty and art throughout their lives.”

Moss allowed the people living on or near Clarissa Street to choose the artist who would paint the mural. They chose Armstrong.

As an extension of the residency, Armstrong is working on a short documentary with [DaRemen J](#), from Pittsburgh, to premiere in November, when there will be an unveiling party for the wall.

“I’m really looking at the artist’s work,” Moss said. “Are they going to be able to connect with community and be a good neighbor? Are they going to be cool when people just knock on the door?”

Armstrong embodied all those things.

“She came in hot, full of momentum,” Moss said.

She finished the mural in about two weeks, starting in the middle of August.

“Tierra being here is such a gift to our city and neighborhood,” Moss said.

“What the mural develops and what it is developing is a new energy,” said her father, Joseph Moss Jr. “To the community as a whole and individuals.”

The mural creates a benchmark and a destination in the neighborhood, he said.

“The reservoir was the highest point in the city, so you could sit up on the reservoir and look down at the entire city,” he said.

“Now what has been done with the mural has spurred a new mechanism of a destination. You are bringing something that people will want to see and will bring new attention to Sugar Top.”

Moss is working in the same city as her father, grandfather and great-grandfather, Charles Moss, who worked as a photographer and took portraits of Black folks in the Hill District in the 1930s. It’s a legacy.

Her grandfather, Joseph Garfield Moss Sr., was the first Black motorcycle policeman in Pittsburgh and a mechanical engineer and electrician. He’d sit on the front porch at 1804 Adelaide every day, smoking his pipe, and fixing things. Neighbors walking by would bring their items for him to fix throughout the day.

“He’d just be out there using the front porch as his shop,” Moss said.

“Meanwhile, my grandma, Rebecca Range, would be in a basement, using it as her beauty salon. So people would constantly be coming in and out of the house,” Moss said.

While this is specifically Moss’ story, she recognizes the throughlines that exists within Black culture. Stories of entrepreneurship, community and using talents for success are not an anomaly.

“That is inherently Black,” she said.

She explains The Roll Up’s name this way: “People are just meant to roll up and participate in whatever your artistic practice is.”

She is in the middle of renovating the basement of The Garfield into a series of artist studios called The Range.

After her family left Adelaide Street, they moved to Iowa Street. Her family still owns and manages two homes there.

“They are affordable housing and accepting of all, especially folks who have previously been discriminated against,” Moss said.

She is honoring what Joseph Moss Jr. calls “the magic of four generations.”

When Moss, is not helping to create public art, she works as an anthropologist. She recently returned from a monthslong trip with her partner and daughter, visiting Black-owned hotels listed in the [Green Book](#), a list of Black-owned lodging, restaurants and businesses across the U.S. that welcomed and accepted Black people during the Jim Crow era.

The trip spanned 30 days, 11 states and 18 cities. Magnolia House, Black Butterfly and Emma’s Bay House were some of the 13 Black-owned lodging spaces where they stopped as they covered 4,708 miles.

“The thing that I have learned in doing all of this work is that we have more that connects us than we have that creates differences between us....

“If we start to think about things in that way, we will be better off,” Moss said.

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Shaylah Brown is a features reporter covering all things culture, including health, food, real estate and people doing great things. A New Jersey native, she is enjoying learning about Western Pa. through the lens of art, dance and nature.

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