

**Washington HS students create special works of art**

*May 16, 2018*– A project for an art class at Booker T. Washington High School has turned into a special gift for a university president on behalf of HISD. Students in Maya Imani Watson’s art class created a piece that highlights the late poet Maya Angelou. The piece was gifted to Dr. Ruth J. Simmons, the newly minted president of Prairie View A&M University.

“We thought it was just a small class project, and now it’s turned into a really huge deal,” said sophomore Enma Rivera. “Knowing that the piece is going to hang in someone’s office is really cool.”

“The Maya Angelou piece has the phrase ‘Still I Rise’ painted on it,” Watson said. “It will make a great gift to the [university’s] new president. The university is stepping into a new era, as are we.”

The piece is a part of a larger project. Watson’s class worked together to create eight works of art featuring historic figures like Malcom X, Sonia Sanchez, Aretha Franklin, and Angelou. The basic components of the pieces were taken from cabinet doors in the art room, which would have been lost when the building is demolished to make room for the new school. The entire collection took the class a month to complete.

During the project’s early stages, Watson requested that her students investigate the AfriCOBRA art movement. The artists involved in the movement prided themselves on creating pieces that highlighted the social, political, and economic conditions of African-Americans during the time. They worked in groups to create their legendary artworks, and Watson adopted the concept.

Faculty and staff at the school began sharing the finished project on their social media platforms, where it was eventually seen by HISD Interim Superintendent Grenita Lathan. She petitioned that the Maya Angelou piece be gifted to Simmons, the first female president of Prairie View.

The project also will help Watson’s students preserve a part of their historic high school, which is being rebuilt as part of the district’s 2012 Bond Program. The new school is scheduled to open this fall, with the old school slated for demolition soon after, making way for athletic fields and additional parking.

“This entire school is going to be gone,” Watson said. “My students and I wanted to take some elements of the building that would otherwise have been discarded and turn it into art. It was important for us to bring parts of this old building into our new campus.”

Watson’s students agree. “Our school is so old, but we want to represent our history,” said sophomore Ashley Briseno . “It’s really cool that we’re going to take these pieces to the new building.”

For Watson, the true success of the project is not in having the art hang in a university president’s office or even in preserving history. The true success, she said, is in the impact it has had on her students.

“I hear my students say, ‘I can’t draw, I can’t paint,’” she said. “But if I set the framework for them, they can work in a group, and it empowers them.”