

## [Sarah Kolker](#)

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### **HARLEM YOUTHS' WISDOM CAPTURED ON BENCH**

by Kamilah Duggins

When [Sarah Kolker](#) was generating ideas for her Create Change project, a few criteria topped the list. She wanted to use the opportunity to include youth; use her mentor, [Isaiah Zagar's](#) method of [mosaic tiling](#), and whatever she made, she wanted to build it in her [Harlem](#) neighborhood, a place where change of varying proportion is gaining momentum as quickly as the properties there are being spruced up and the local business are going down.

Since the early 1990s, Harlemites have been bracing themselves for the fight against [gentrification](#) and its nasty side effects, including displacement, increased property taxes, spiked rents and loss of small business. So as you walk down the streets of what some are beginning to call the [New Harlem](#) (or New Harlem Renaissance), a bare piece of land pierced with signs indicating the name and number of the owner is not an uncommon site; if you walk a few blocks in almost any direction, you're bound to come across at least one.



Overwhelmed with constant sightings last summer, Sarah decided to investigate. She wanted to know exactly what these developers had planned for the neighborhood. “I would call these numbers that were on the signs attached to the land, and no one would answer, or someone would answer and not be able to tell me what was being done with it,” she says. No one in the neighborhood, not residents or business owners could furnish even a guess. “All that vacant land,” she says, in frustration, “and no one knew what was happening.”

Sarah, a 21-year-old senior at [Sarah Lawrence College](#), saw this lack of interest as a possible sign of battle fatigue, and felt it symbolized a diminished sense of ownership among the long-time residents. Leading a team of children in a public art project that was for and about them seemed a possible antidote to the apathy—figuratively and literally. Says Sarah: “I wanted to give ownership back to them by allowing them to build in their own community.”

So in May 2007, she and about 17 young people from the [Association to Benefit Children](#) and the

[Pelham Fritz Recreation Center](#) began the months-long process creating two mosaic tile benches made from donated and found objects. The dangerous elements like cutting glass were left up to Sarah, but the youth, who ranged from age 8-13, wrote their own quotes, baked the tiles and broke them into pieces. The tiles were later emblazoned with images of local heroes, like [Malcolm X](#), and affirmations that reflect a profound clarity:

“Stop hating, start loving from your heart.” “Breathe. Relax. Meditate. Now Elevate.” “Let your third eye open.”

“Create. Innovate. Spread Knowledge.”

“Breathing positivity.”

“Keep your head up.”

When was the last time you felt this uplifted while doing a load of whites?

Within a few months, the bench came together, but it was not a simple *kids + teacher + materials=bench* formula. Despite significant campaigning with several local arts and education organizations, residents weren't as participatory as Sarah had hoped, the kids who helped during the summer weren't able to come back to finish the benches once school started, and months into the project, Sarah and her assistants still hadn't found a Laundromat that would house the bench.



The latter problem is something Prince E. Hunt, co-owner of the Laundry Room, where one of the benches is currently housed, found perplexing. “I thought it was surprising that few people would agree to support it,” says Prince, who had read a [Daily News](#) article about the Laundromat Project a few weeks prior to meeting Sarah. When she approached Prince, he and co-owner, George Michaels, felt it was something they had to do. “It’s good for the community,” says Prince, who’s had the Laundromat there just over one year, “washing clothes can be kind of dull, now, people have

something to look at and discuss while they wash clothes—it’s quite a conversation piece. Ironically, just before we met Sarah, [my partner and I] were talking about how we needed a bench out front because people kept stealing our chairs.”

And because it sits outside the Laundromat, the bench inspires questions and inspection from a spectrum of passers-by, including neighborhood kids and tourists, who stroll past after eating at the nearby Amy Ruth’s or visiting the historic [Canaan Baptist Church](#).

“As I was finishing the bench in front of the Laundromat, [the neighborhood kids] were very interested to know what I was doing,” Sarah recalls. “It’s good for them to know that youth their own age made this because otherwise, [making art] will continue to be foreign to them—like creating something like this

is outside their realm of possibility.”

Like many urban centers across the country undergoing the reconstructive surgery that is revitalization, Harlem is a neighborhood cloaked in a legacy that affirms African Americans’ achievements, enterprise, culture and self-determination. Now that it’s some of the city’s most fertile ground for financial gain, one wonders, when they’ve seen these plans through, what will be the legacy of the New Harlem? What will become of the

Harlem residents who don’t factor into ‘their’ plans? Where will they live? And what or who will the wave of this second renaissance cast aside?

No one knows for sure. But one thing Sarah is firm on, something to which anyone who’s ever moved to a new place can attest, is that beautifying your space with images that reflect who you are makes it feel a little more like yours. “As people become more and more disenfranchised, art becomes more important because it helps them take ownership of what’s theirs,” says Sarah. Unlike the endless condominiums and other signs of Uptown revitalization, “with the mosaic, people can see it wasn’t just something dropped in on them—people *from* the community created it *in* the community. I think that’s hopeful.”

*If you want to see, touch or sit on the benches, and you live in NYC, you’re only a train ride away. One is located in front of The Laundry Room at 116<sup>th</sup> and Lenox. The other is housed at Pelham Fritz Recreation Center, which is located at 122nd Street and Mount Morris Park West in Marcus Garvey Park. Call 212-860-1380 for hours of operation.*

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