

In The News

HCC celebrates highlighting Latinx art and culture

HOLYOKE – One mural features a sepia-toned likeness of a bomba dancer and drummer and stands three stories tall over the Holyoke Community College courtyard. Another lines an entire wall on the second floor of the HCC Campus Center, spelling out “E-L-C-E-N-T-R-O” in bold, blue letters from floor to ceiling behind silhouettes of icons of Latin American history. A third presents a brightly colored image of a traditional Puerto Rican vejigante mask, welcoming visitors into El Centro, a bilingual student-support program for HCC’s Latinx students.

All three were painted by muralist Betsy Casañas in collaboration with the city of Holyoke and the nonprofit Beyond Walls project. While Casañas completed the murals over the summer, they were officially unveiled Oct. 4, during Hispanic Heritage Month festivities that included a Latinx Fiesta and two ribbon-cutting ceremonies, one outside in the HCC courtyard and one inside by El Centro.

“I want to say that you showing up today matters,” said Julissa Colón, director of El Centro. “It shows the institution and our community that we have a voice and that we are unafraid to use it, and that the work that is being brought to our campus represents us and what we want to say about ourselves.”

Casañas returned to campus to participate in the day’s celebrations and help cut the ribbons. Initially, she said, she did not know much about Holyoke or HCC before she was enlisted to paint the murals and was given complete freedom to create whatever she wanted. After doing some research and talking to Colón and others at HCC, she decided on the themes represented in each mural.



Muralist Betsy Casañas stands with HCC President George Timmons in front of one of her murals featuring a bomba dancer and drummer.

“I felt that there was such a large Puerto Rican presence in Holyoke, I wanted to bring a little bit of Puerto Rico here,” said Casañas, who is Puerto Rican herself and lives in Philadelphia - “to see that reflection of ourselves on the walls.”

The large outdoor mural of the bomba dancer and drummer, she said, is an actual representation of a classroom at the famous Tata Cepeda school in Puerto Rico.

“They were rehearsing,” said Casañas. “Tata Cepeda comes from seven generations of folkloric musicians, dancers, and drummers.”

Among the 16 figures on the large mural outside El Centro are baseball legend Roberto Clemente (of Puerto



Members of the HCC community celebrated the debut of three new murals on campus with two ribbon-cutting ceremonies on Wed., Oct. 4, during Hispanic Heritage Month.

Submitted Photos

Rico), and Nobel-prize winning author Gabriel Garcia Marquez (Colombia), and many more important people, such as Luisa Moreno, a Guatemalan-born labor activist, Dr. Jose Gregorio Hernandez, a Venezuelan physician later declared a saint, and the Mirabal sisters, who were murdered after demonstrating against the dictator Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic.

“If you don’t know who these guys are, look them up. There’s incredible environmental activists. We have folks from the LGBTQ community. We have musicians that were just revolutionary in their time. We have absolutely incredible folks on this wall,” said Casañas.

The third mural is inside El Centro, on the wall in the reception area that can

be seen through glass windows all the way from the far side of the cafeteria. It’s an image of a vejigante, a traditional Puerto Rican mask often worn during festivals to ward off evil spirits.

“Not only are the murals beautiful,” said Colón, “but they show our students that their history has value, that they come from incredible stories of strength, success, bravery, and joy.”

Holding the scissors for both ribbon-cuttings was new President George Timmons.

“These murals reflect what is possible for our students,” Timmons said. “They showcase where we come from and what we can be. They are inspiring, they are vibrant, and they connect us to one another.”