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## Whitman-Walker's Liz complex artfully adorned



(Washington Blade photo by Michael Key)

As you walk through the tastefully decorated corridors of the now vibrant and colorful Liz, it's easy to forget she began as the somber and secretive Elizabeth Taylor Medical Center in the early days of the AIDS crisis.

Founded in 1973 as The Gay Men's VD Clinic operating in the basement of Georgetown Lutheran Church, Whitman-Walker specializes in LGBT health care.

When an initially unknown deadly disease was rapidly killing young gay men across the U.S., including locals, the small clinic's role forcibly expanded to meet the unexpected demand.

"We're absolutely on the front lines of this work," says Don Blanchon, Whitman-Walker Health System CEO. "And that harkens back to the early days of the HIV epidemic. Gay men were impacted by this disease and we didn't know anything. We didn't know the science. We didn't know how to treat it."

At the height of the crisis in the early '90s, Whitman-Walker moved into the property on the corner of 14th and R. The Elizabeth Taylor Medical Center was dedicated in 1993 and was named for the screen legend, a major donor, who attended the ceremony.



The late ELIZABETH TAYLOR with the late JIM GRAHAM (who was then Whitman-Walker's executive director) at the dedication ceremony for the Elizabeth Taylor Building in 1993.  
(Washington Blade file photo by Kristi Gasaway)

“When you look back, the volunteers of the late ‘80s and early ‘90s were on the front lines,” says Blanchon, a straight ally. He says the original building looked like a bunker with frosted windows, private counseling rooms and a security guard out front. “It connotes where the epidemic was and how powerful stigma, discrimination and bias were.” Whitman-Walker remained at the location for about 20 years and slowly watched the stigma ease as new treatments were found and more people were living with HIV instead of dying of AIDS in mass numbers.

However, Blanchon points out discrimination and bias against the community continues. In 2014, Whitman-Walker selected Fivesquares Development as a partner to redesign the old medical center to face new challenges head on and as an out-front representation of a vibrant community of survivors.

Fivesquares brought on renowned architect Annabelle Selldorf to design her first D.C. project, which involved an extensive study of Whitman-Walker and overall Washington history. The result transformed what was once a church basement clinic into a public work of art.

“She hated the name ‘Liz,’ you know,” says Abby Fenton, Whitman-Walker chief external affairs officer of Taylor’s nickname, while showing the Blade a wall of founders’ pictures culminating in one of Taylor. “However, when we explained to her grandchildren that in our community the name was special, they agreed to it and have been very supportive.”

“So the world has moved forward,” Blanchon says, noting the openness of the new design. “The way we approached the new building is the way we approached our mission and programming: This needs to be an affirming and welcoming space for all, especially the LGBTQ community and people living with HIV.”

The new building is filled with soothing images that were either designed from news stories or original works designed for queer people.

“These pieces were designed specifically for Whitman-Walker’s lobby by a queer artist in Baltimore,” Fenton says, motioning toward a row of minimalist paintings in muted earth tones. The pieces are by Rene Trevino and called “Circumference Series: 14th Street, 2019,” acrylic and rhinestones on Mylar.

Fenton says the works were a collaboration between Whitman-Walker staff, patients and the artist resulting in quiet, circular images that capture patient experiences of feeling welcomed and embraced by the clinic.

Moving from the lobby and into the redesigned work area, more than a few of the pixelated, black-and-white images stenciled into the walls were derived from the Washington Blade's coverage over the years. They gave the new building a sense of living history while infusing it with art.

"We wanted to make sure we captured where Whitman-Walker came from and our past," Fenton (who's straight) says, pointing to a donor wall made from Coke bottles and other framed mementos throughout the staff area. "Much of it came from the original building as a reminder of who we are and what we mean to the community."

Around one corner, a pixelated image of Taylor herself stands watch as a silent reminder of the scores of young men who died during the height of the crisis.

"Art and expression have been a part of Whitman-Walker since its early days," Blanchon says. "As an outlet against discrimination, bias and stigma (as well as) pain, loss and suffering, (They) are the best ways to release that." Today the Liz not only houses Whitman-Walker's legal services, public benefits and clinical research program but also retail, cultural and residential spaces.

"We are thrilled to reveal five major art installations at LIZ," wrote Fivesquares Development co-founders Ron Kaplan and Andy Altman in their "Art at LIZ" brochure. "The residential lobby, upper floors and the Belmont Garage at LIZ were designed as canvasses to provide exhibition space for site-specific art."



TONI ROSS, *June 28*, [2019], stoneware, gold leaf (Washington Blade photo by Michael Key)

Kaplan led the Blade on a residential tour beginning with the tactile works that greet visitors in the lobby.

Two signature pieces created just for the LIZ include Alice Hope's shimmering transformation of box spring that reaches from the ceiling down into the sitting area and almost begs to be touched with childlike wonder and Toni Ross's "June 28," which is a literal narrow stretch of stone wall that gathers strength as it grows and is punctuated with hidden bits of gold.

“Within the cracks you see the richest part of a project or a person,” Kaplan says of the piece. “These artists were inspired to do things they hadn’t done before for us.”

Both works are unfinished, but clearly exhibit the patience and control of masters of their craft.

As the tour continues, there’s a sense of descending the rabbit hole and into an urban wonderland of rainbows that were twisted at every turn.

“This is my favorite kind of art,” Kaplan says upon entering Almond Zigmund’s “Rainbow Kink,” a site-specific installation in the Belmont Garage of LIZ. “All of this is very much site-responsive. It was created very specifically for its space and to honor that space.”

As you move through the garage, the unusually colored rainbows, anchored by black and energized by shades of orange, yellow and blue, follow like curious imps creeping along walls, crouching in corners and crawling down from the ceiling.

Each one is different and angled with such precision the experience is one of moving through a gallery, yet with an eye toward the future.

As you walk from the garage and up through the well-lit residential areas with their floor-to-ceiling windows, there is the feeling of light, resilience and hope that Blanchon hopes to convey with the project.

“We are gathering around art and culture and discourse because of the connectivity and how important it is to one’s health and wellbeing,” he says. “So every element of the building is about life, vibrancy, hope and aspiration.” This is most strongly felt on the rooftop with its breathtaking panoramic view that makes you feel 14th and R is the heart of the city. There is a sense of feeling alive and being seen by the world.

“Visibility has always been critical,” Kaplan says. “Progress is not a straight shot ... and I think that anything that anyone can do whether it is as grand as creating LIZ so prominently or just introducing yourself to a stranger, I think all of those things matter.”

The tour ends outside near two platforms for rotating art exhibitions. One platform located near a newly installed set of benches, holds a sculpture by British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare CBE. His work simulates the movement and feel of cultural fabrics as a metaphor for multilayered identities.

“It’s about the fluidity of one’s identity,” Blanchon says. “And dealing with the fact that we identify or see and express ourselves differently in different settings.”

A growing sense of identity and self-awareness among the trans community is the next challenge that Blanchon says Whitman-Walker is ready to take on.

“They have so many needs,” he says. “Similarities exist between the trans community and the HIV epidemic of the early days with discrimination, stigma and bias at the forefront of this war. ... There isn’t a whole lot of social science research about what it means to be transgender in America. So, we’re learning as we go.”

But one major break with the past is Whitman-Walker’s decision not to hide in secrecy during this new fight.

“We are thrilled to be back in this location,” Blanchon says. “When people have suppressed who they are, there tends to be physical, spiritual and mental health issues when we are not true to ourselves. And art has been a way to help us through that.”