

Crossing Borders Between City and Suburb in Everyday Activists Exhibit

Image



Tameka Wilson says she chose an internship with a non-profit, [Arbor West Neighbors](#), to continue growing professionally and personally as she works toward a career in art therapy.

By photographing 10 people in Austin, and interviewing many of them, Tameka also connected with her own history.

Austin is one of Chicago, Illinois's 77 [community areas](#), and Oak Park is a suburb that borders Austin to the west. Tameka also photographed nine people in Oak Park.

“I was born in the Austin community, so I was pretty familiar with it,” Tameka says. “I have been in and out of that community my whole life, but I’d never spent much time in it.”

Tameka interviewed people from different generations, ethnicities and vocations; something that connects with her interests and education in photography and intercultural studies. Israel Rivas was Tameka’s photo assistant.

Many of the people she talked with were eager to share their stories, with one interview taking place for three and a half hours and others taking place for more than two hours.

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“One of my participants was so open and honest that he would just talk to me,” Tameka says. “I ended up having to email him the questions to get them answered, because he spent his time talking to me about everyday life.”

People who weren’t being interviewed also wanted to talk with Tameka when she visited Austin.

“When you go to the Austin community, and you’re walking down the street, people speak,” Tameka says. “They’ll actually acknowledge your presence. I really respect the people for having, as my mom used to call it, that southern hospitality.”

Tameka took extra steps to make sure each participant felt comfortable, at one point coming back a second time to take photos, working with her faculty advisors Jill LoBianco-Bartalis and Michael Smith.

“That day she was extremely busy and I felt like I was overwhelming her,” Tameka says. “I reached back out to her after I talked with two of my professors.”

Some neighbourhoods on the West and South sides of Chicago have had higher [homicide rates](#) compared to other parts of the city, combined with greater percentages of poverty. Tameka says she’s heard people say that they consider Austin, on the West Side, to be dangerous.

However, “I knew that wasn’t the only story,” Tameka says, adding that there were more people she could have featured if she had more time before the exhibit.

“I understand that it is an urban community that has a lot of low-income families that depend on social services to maintain their livelihood,” she says. “They’re still people. They still are loved by others.”

Tameka met people who maintained their ties with both communities, including a man “who is a pillar of the community in Oak Park and also a pillar of the community in Austin” through his work to restore Austin’s Columbus Park.

“He talked about how beautiful that park was — that people used to go there to get married and do all of these wonderful things, and the waterfalls and everything,” Tameka says. “Now, it’s all dried up. He belongs to a recreation committee for that park.”

Another participant, Steven Robinson, introduced Tameka to an organization called the Time Exchange, where people use time as a currency to barter goods and services.

“This Everyday Activists project really changed the direction of what I thought about Austin, and I have also been given networking opportunities,” she says.

Tameka says she’s hoping to create a permanent website where anyone could view the photos, and a selection of each participant’s interview, and wants similar

projects to continue in Austin.

“I would love to keep this going,” she says. “It’s such an impactful journey just to nominate people who have that ability to help others.”

Arbor West Neighbors president Susan Stall, who holds a doctoral degree in sociology, organized the art project, named [Everyday Activists](#), to connect the two communities.

Photographs and interview excerpts were on display at the [Oak Park Art League](#) through May 26. An exhibit in Austin, and a virtual exhibit, are also being planned.