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Student-Designed Mural Tells Story of Joy and Struggle

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Lucy Sanchez thinks big, whether about her art or the world around her.

An [art](#) major at Illinois Wesleyan University, Sanchez has designed and painted a mural entitled “La Lucha de Colores” (“The Struggle of Colors”) for the Multicultural Center on campus. The 15-feet-long and 8-feet-high work depicts the journey of a student of color as he or she progresses through the Illinois Wesleyan experience, while also acknowledging the current atmosphere of racial relations in society.

Sanchez has long admired street art, and as a Chicago native, was well acquainted with the city’s Pilsen neighborhood and its many murals. She was deeply influenced by her study of Mexican muralism, which typically conveys social and political messages.

“I’ve always felt murals were art that belonged to a community,” she said. “It’s more accessible in comparison to a lot of art that is very fine art, making fine art a privilege because it’s expensive. Street art tells you what’s going on in that community, even if it’s angry. Street art is reality.”



Artist Lucy Sanchez '17 believes murals belong to the community. “Street art is reality,” she said.



The idea for the mural sprang from a serendipitous conversation. After returning from a study abroad experience in Ireland where she began to see her work “as saying something,” Sanchez was venting her frustration about her desire to create something ‘big’ with Brandon Common, then the director of the Office of Diversity and Inclusion (ODI). Conversations involving a reimagining of the space in the Multicultural Center were already underway, so Common suggested Sanchez brainstorm some ideas for a mural to adorn the focal wall of the center, which is a gathering place for all students to study and socialize.

“As an administrator, I believe it is our responsibility to support students in their aspirations, so I saw the creation of the mural as a way to showcase Lucy’s talents because she is a phenomenal student and woman of color,” said Common, who is now assistant dean of students for campus life. “I also thought the mural would enliven the Multicultural Center and capture what is happening at this moment in time, and I wanted future students to see what one of ‘their own’ did while a student at IWU.”

Using a Kente stole as a unifying element, Sanchez designed the mural with pathways beginning at The Ames Library and the sesquicentennial gates. These locations are included in campus tours, and quickly become cultural icons for new Illinois Wesleyan students. “The stole works as a pathway leading your experience around Illinois Wesleyan,” Sanchez said, noting the stole includes elements of national flags representing the cultural backgrounds of Illinois Wesleyan students. Activism is portrayed, both on campus and in the world.

She also included depictions of dancers to illustrate the importance of joy and celebration in the face of oppression. “We try to celebrate our cultures in multiple ways, and I wanted to include that,” she explained.

The pathway ends with a graduation cap, the symbolic end of the journey. A panel near the end of the stole celebrates the Class of 2017; Sanchez used chalkboard paint for this panel so that it can be changed each year to celebrate a new graduating class.

Sanchez said she wanted the mural to illustrate Illinois Wesleyan’s sense of community, but also the frustration students of color can feel on a predominantly white campus. “When I started the project, I think one of my goals was to empower people,” said Sanchez, who is double majoring in [business administration](#). On one of the panels of the Kente stole, she utilized a quote from activist Yareliz Elena Mendez-Zamora. Sanchez said she wanted to make a statement that people of color are not alone and they’re not going anywhere. “We’re here because we earned it,” she said, referring to students of color on college campuses, and people of color as leaders in industry, the private sector and public office.

Common said Sanchez has left an indelible mark with the mural’s completion. “I hope the mural speaks to marginalized students and lets them know they matter and that they are valued at IWU,” he said. “I also hope that it tells a story of perseverance and determination, and also challenges those who look at it to reflect on where we are as a community and where we can be if we continue to support each other.”

“I hope this mural will continue to promote the Multicultural Center as a space where all students matter, while also challenging future students to leave their mark somewhere else, in some way, on campus,” Common added.



Jasmine White '20 (left) and Sanchez watch a video in the Multicultural Center, a gathering place for all students to study and socialize.