

# In Uphams Corner, he makes art hit home

**By Alexa Mills** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MAY 31, 2014



JOHN BLANDING/GLOBE STAFF

**Cedric Douglas, at his Uphams Corner studio, is focused on connecting neighbors with art.**

On one of the first nice days last spring, Cedric Douglas hung a giant bank check near the intersection of Dudley Street and Columbia Road in Dorchester. Words on the check posed a question: “How would you spend 3 million dollars to improve Uphams Corner?” It had 24 memo lines. Each read: “I would \_\_\_\_\_.”

At first the check hung crooked on the wall, but a woman walking by stopped to help him hang it straight. Then she stood back to look. She got an idea for something she wanted.

“Write it in!” Douglas said.

“Write it in?” she asked.

“That’s what the markers are for. Write it in!”

She looked at him, marker in hand, and then turned to write on the first line. If she had \$3 million to improve Uphams Corner, she would fix the sidewalks. It was the first of many ideas for improvements that were collected by Douglas, who solicited suggestions with several cardboard checks.

Douglas, whose public artworks stretch back 20 years, uses murals and face-to-face encounters to give voice to the neighborhoods where he has lived. In part because of his work in Uphams Corner, the Boston Foundation and Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative recently named him the winner of a citywide public art competition.

Douglas won \$100,000 to help engage Uphams Corner residents in a months-long brainstorm on bringing art to their neighborhood. Later, another \$400,000 will go toward implementing their ideas.

“I think it takes a lot of guts to do what Cedric is doing,” said Mark Matel, a project manager at Nuestra Comunidad Development Corporation, a Roxbury nonprofit that works to improve underserved neighborhoods. “He’s doing public artwork he finds value in, and he’s encouraging other people to participate, which isn’t what you normally see. Usually you see the artist doing everything.”

During those spring days in 2013, the community responded to Douglas’s call for ideas on his giant checks. One person wrote, “Do small things to raise community pride.” Another wrote, “Stop the killing.” Many people wanted to make housing more affordable. On a check made out specifically to “Artists of Uphams Corner,” someone wrote, “More murals, more colors.”

After he won the grants, Douglas then bought a retired NStar utility vehicle and named it the Up Truck — “Up” for Uphams Corner, “Up” for “What’s up?” He converted the truck into a mobile public art lab, and he’s parking it in various neighborhood spots every weekend through June 21. People can come on board the truck and make art — a different kind of art nearly every weekend.

Twenty years earlier, in the spring of 1994, 16-year-old Douglas made his first attempt at sharing art in his neighborhood. He bought three cans of spray paint on a Wednesday afternoon in May. They were black, yellow, and green, the colors of the Jamaican flag. Then he went to the public basketball courts near his home in Quincy.

His friends were playing ball when he got there. The court was run-down, with cracks in the pavement. “You couldn’t even bounce a basketball without it going in eight directions,” he said. He opened his backpack and took out his sketchbook, where he’d drawn a cartoon character he’d made up.

Douglas began painting the pavement. “It was my first-ever piece.” The players told him it was cool. Then just as he was finishing the edges, a police car pulled in.

Douglas packed up and ran. He tore through the woods, emerged in his own neighborhood, and ducked into a friend’s house.



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**The Up Truck was parked in the Uphams Corner section of Dorchester last weekend. People can climb in the truck and make different kinds of art for the next few weekends.**

He walked home a while later but made it only six blocks before an officer, who he remembers as “the nicest cop ever,” escorted him back to view his work. The officer asked, “Why did you do it?” Douglas answered, “I was just trying to beautify the basketball courts.”

When his parents picked him up, he was in a jail cell. They grounded him for a very long time. But within a year, Douglas remembers, something happened that made him think. He found the crumbling neighborhood basketball court repaved and repainted.

Douglas stayed in Quincy for eight more years. He attended Bunker Hill Community College. His adviser there, an art teacher, gave him a book called, “Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain,” a drawing

instruction book for any person, no matter his ability or field. Douglas attached to the idea that anyone could produce art.

Looking out on Uphams Corner from his art studio this spring, Douglas said: “Kids want to get some recognition in the world. It’s like there are a billion people in the world, and you want to have some type of evidence that you exist. That’s what graffiti is, kind of.”

Douglas, who earns commissions painting murals for local businesses and institutions, has kept an art studio in Uphams Corner since he graduated from MassArt in 2011 at the age of 33. Sometimes he sees fresh graffiti on nearby walls. “The lady who owns this building is the nicest person,” said Douglas. “I don’t want people writing on this building. It’s going to make the neighborhood look bad.”

Last summer he made a PowerPoint presentation of all the blank walls in and around Uphams Corner that could become walls for murals or street art. “I think the city needs to embrace the talent that’s here at a certain age, and let the kids do it,” said Douglas.

Before painting a mural on an alley wall last fall, he drew his design on paper and asked the neighbors for feedback. He changed his design based on their thoughts. Douglas got the idea for his art truck while he was working on that mural.

He wanted to collaborate with yet more neighborhood people on art, in someplace less hidden than an alley. He thought, “A truck is perfect. It’s the language of the streets.” Trucks reach more people. Trucks deliver good things: paper, ice cream, packages. A truck could deliver an opportunity to make art, too. When the Boston Foundation opened its \$500,000 public art competition, Douglas wrote up his vision and made his entry.

While he was waiting for the results, he flew to Miami in December and painted a mural at Art Basel, an annual international art show. It was a good diversion.

On his assigned wall in Miami’s Wynwood neighborhood, Douglas drew a girl holding up a spray paint can. A giant tyrannosaurus rex

emerged from the can. The dinosaur's back read like an evolution of cities: a subway train rushing beneath a cityscape of pyramids and glittering skyscrapers along the dinosaur's spine.

When Douglas got the call that he had won, was so excited he couldn't even hear what his grantors were saying to him. He'd made hundreds of sketches of ideas for the truck since he'd filed his application.

He introduced his team of artists to the truck on a Tuesday morning in late March. They had endless ideas. People could screen-print their own T-shirts and make art with iPads. Douglas pointed to a spot near the rear of the truck. What if they had a caricaturist sitting there, drawing neighborhood people. This would be a special caricaturist — a conversationalist caricaturist — who could talk to people about their dreams for Uphams Corner.

Matel, of the Nuestra Comunidad Development Corporation, co-led the team that opened Roxbury's former MBTA Bartlett bus yard for art and community events last summer. He watched Douglas and artist Percy Fortini-Wright paint a giant portrait of Rosa Parks on an old garage door.

The day before the truck was due to be presented before Mayor Martin J. Walsh, the artists — all of them from Boston — gathered in Bartlett Yard. They took their cans of spray paint to the Up Truck. Fortini-Wright painted the outline of a triple-decker on the freshly primed and sanded truck wall. Ricardo Gomez painted a face. They worked together, right arms outstretched.

On a Sunday in April the truck was finally parked in Uphams Corner. It was sunny. There was music playing. Gomez and Fortini-Wright were painting more faces. Up Truck team member Avanti Wolcott greeted visitors. A passerby stopped and pushed his headphones to his temples. Douglas approached him. "What's up, man?"

One weekend in May, Douglas and his team set up a T-shirt-making shop on the truck. They had stencils and screen-printing equipment. More than 200 people designed and produced T-shirts. Another weekend they set up a photo booth and brought in costumes. People

could make up their own outfits and take photos. On Mother's Day, they drove around Uphams Corner and handed out roses to moms.

The team, which also includes artists Kate Balug and Julia Roth, installed a voting system inside the truck. They hung framed pictures of the kind of public art Uphams Corner residents have envisioned — things like interactive sculptures, murals, and a permanent creative space. People can paste stars on the ideas they like best.

And Douglas still asks every person he meets: "What kind of art do you want to have in Uphams Corner?"

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