

Love The Ave “Love Locks,” a site-specific contemporary artwork coming to New Bedford

“In Wednesday July 26, north end, New Bedford will welcome something entirely new to its landscape.

Acushnet Avenue, the north end’s historic international commercial corridor, will soon be adorned at the Nye Street Pocket Park with a captivating contemporary artwork created by activist artist Keith M. Francis. This site-specific sculpture aims to stimulate conversations around the concept of community while celebrating the love for Acushnet Avenue and New Bedford – and adding immense visual appeal to the neighborhood.

How immense? The metal sculpture weighs 3,000 pounds and is 12 feet high by 10 feet wide. It joins a select cadre of public art in the city like James Surls’ “Seaflower” and John Magnan’s “Habitat” that is site-specific and fully contemporary.

“Love Locks” will be shielded from public view until an unveiling celebration on Wednesday, July 26 from 4:00-7:00 p.m. at the park – across from the St. Anthony of Padua rectory beside the historic church. The reception promises to be a gathering of city officials, local residents, artists, and musicians, all eager to celebrate the unveiling of this significant artwork.

In a show of collective affection for Acushnet Avenue and New Bedford, people at the unveiling will be provided with locks to design and place on the sculpture. Each lock symbolizes their personal love for the community, creating a powerful visual representation of the city’s shared spirit.

The celebration will also feature a very special guest.

Artist Keith Francis has New Bedford in his blood. Not only is he a Visual Design and Communications instructor at Greater New Bedford Regional Technical Vocational High School, but on a recent visit to the Nye Street Pocket Park he literally pointed out a more visceral connection to the place where his magnificent new sculpture will sit.

“See that house,” he says as he points to a characteristic three decker two doors down Nye Street. “My mother was born in that house in 1939!” He explains further that not only did she live there until the mid-1950s, but his parents and grandparents were both married at St. Anthony’s, which will now loom over his work.

Returning from her current residence in Arizona, Keith’s mother will attend the opening reception for her son’s piece on Wednesday, July 26, bestowing even more meaning on the long bond of community and belonging that stays locked in the heart.

The realization of this remarkable sculpture is the result of collaborative efforts between MassDevelopment’s Transformative Development Initiative (TDI) district centered around Acushnet Avenue and the assistance of New Bedford Creative, a program of the New Bedford Economic Development Council.

One of the many ways MassDevelopment TDI districts aim to revitalize and support local communities is through arts and cultural initiatives. This collaborative endeavor highlights the commitment of both organizations to promote artistic expression and community engagement, and build upon the powerful Love The Ave brand launched by the Community Economic Development Center on The Ave (as it is affectionately known.)

Keith’s artistic journey back to The Ave began after his graduation from UMass Dartmouth in 1989 with a BA in Photography/Visual Communications. He added a Master of Fine

Arts from Massachusetts College of Art in 2018, and in between enjoyed success as a graphic artist for, among many other clients, the Democratic National Committee. His full professional history and a portfolio of his work is on his website at keithfrancisart.com.

Over the years, his passion for social activism and commentary has played a foundational role in his artwork, transcending simple classification and spanning various mediums. From graphic design to large-scale sculptures like the one soon to grace the Nye Street pocket park, Keith's artistry has gained recognition and acclaim within the art world. His work holds a prestigious place alongside renowned artists such as Shepherd Fairey and Banksy at the Artemizia Foundation in Arizona, as well as in corporate and private collections.

While his large-scale sculptures are relatively rare due to their cost and logistical considerations, New Bedford residents were fortunate to witness Keith's talent during the 2022 Seaport Art Walk. His sculpture "Glittering Patterns," an open wall of mesmerizing metal patterns reflecting sunlight, captivated viewers and remained on display beyond the walk's official end at the request of the City of New Bedford.

The Love The Ave Love Locks sculpture embodies Keith M. Francis's intention to initiate dialogue rather than impose a singular interpretation upon the viewer. The artwork's design incorporates a level of ambiguity, inviting viewers to engage in thoughtful conversations about social issues and the love for their community. By provoking introspection and fostering meaningful discussions, this sculpture thus becomes a catalyst for growth in New Bedford.

The arrival of Keith M. Francis's Love The Ave Love Locks sculpture on Acushnet Avenue marks a significant milestone. Combining activism, community engagement, and artistic expression, this site-specific contemporary artwork invites residents and visitors alike to reflect, engage, and celebrate

their love for Acushnet Avenue and New Bedford.

Join that conversation on Wednesday, July 26; follow New Bedford Creative and Love The Ave on Facebook for additional event details as they are finalized.”-New Bedford Economic Development Council.