

# Community Partnerships Can Surprise You

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Some stories have infinitely long legs. They stretch across time and space. They may be forgotten for generations only to reemerge, creatively reimagined in unexpected ways. Take the story of the wood buffalo (*Bison bison athabascue*) and the impact their trail had on the founding of our community—a tale told and retold by the Franklinton Historical Society as part of “our story.” Wood buffalo are a distinct subspecies apart from the familiar plains buffalo subspecies (*Bison bison bison*) selected as our national mammal on May 9th of this year. Loss of habitat and overkilling have caused Wood buffalo to become extinct in the United States, but some herds still thrive in northern Canada’s Wood Buffalo National Park.

An ancient wood buffalo trace led northward from the salt springs of Blue Licks, Kentucky, across a ford in the Ohio River to Upper Sandusky following the Scioto River. Lucas Sullivant,



Franklinton Preparatory Academy students and principal at the Franklinton community’s celebration of the wood buffalo.  
Photo courtesy of the Franklinton Historical Society.

a Deputy Surveyor of the Virginia Military District, followed the trace north from his home in Washington, Kentucky into the Ohio country. He founded Franklinton in 1797 at the confluence of the Scioto and Olentangy Rivers. The site opposite Franklinton on the east side of the river, was chosen for the state capital 15 years later.

To honor the role wood buffalo had in our founding, a group of about 50 people—including members of the historical society, community leaders, and high school students—gathered on the morning of October 14 in a vacant lot on West Broad Street in downtown Franklinton. This wasn’t our society’s gig. It was the brainchild of two dynamic and creative individuals—Sherri Palmer of “Keep Columbus Beautiful” and Trent Smith, Director of the Franklinton Board of Trade—our staunchest allies in the community. Committed to improving

the gritty, inner city neighborhood of Franklinton, both esthetically and economically, they took our story and turned it on its head. The celebration centered on a unique wire-cage sculpture of a half-sized wood buffalo designed to showcase trash.

The project began early last year when Sherri and Trent gained permission from the lot’s owner to create a “Franklinton Botanical Sculpture Garden” along its edge. They then asked Byers’ Chevrolet, who was moving out of the neighborhood, if they could have the large clay drainage pipes that were left behind. Those pipes, turned on end in a raised flower bed at the edge of the lot, were repurposed as flower pots. Soon, the pots bloomed with perennials, small scrubs, ornamental grasses, bulbs, and seasonal annuals. Next came an idea for decorating the pipes with artwork portraying historic Franklinton.

Sherri contacted Brenda St. Clair, art teacher at Franklinton Preparatory Academy, who brainstormed ideas with the Franklinton Historical Society. Last autumn, Franklinton Prep art students began painting scenes of buffalo roaming the prairie that became Franklinton, soldiers from the War of 1812 shooting them for food, founder Lucas Sullivant surveying the area, the arrival of the Little Miami and Xenia Railroad (Franklinton’s first train), the 1913 flood, a view of a neighborhood blighted with litter, and another view of the neighborhood after a “Pick-It-Up!” campaign.

But another idea kept tugging at Sherri and Trent. Sherri had discovered artist Jim Swaim, a resident of the coastal community of Little Island, South Carolina, who founded a company called Environmental Sculptures. After witnessing the trash washed up from the ocean along the shoreline of his community, Jim devised a clever way of drawing attention to this problem. He designed and built “environmental sculptures”—animals, from dolphins to pelicans, filled with trash to educate and inspire direct action. View his website and hear him discuss his work at [www.environmentalsculptures.com](http://www.environmentalsculptures.com). Sherri and Trent applied for public art grants to bring one of these environmental sculptures to Franklinton. But what animal should it be—a fish? a bird? a butterfly?

One night, Sherri received a phone call. It was Trent’s voice at the other end of the line. “What about a buffalo?” he asked hesitantly. It was quirky. It was historically correct. It was Franklinton. And it stuck. Jim Swaim had never done a buffalo before. But there it is, with its vigilant, wild spirit hovering ten feet above the Franklinton pavement reminding all of us not to violate the buffalo’s sacred environment by trashing the neighborhood.

For the students of Franklinton Prep, this is more than a piece of environmental art. For them, its message is personal and goes far deeper. It is a memorial to their friend, 14-year old Amanda Kirwin who was shot dead in her Franklinton neighborhood on Dana Avenue in August 2014. Police believe she was not the intended target of the shooter. Kirwin’s friends pledged to remember her by founding the Dana Ambassador Program to keep her street litter-free. The trash that filled the buffalo came from Kirwin’s street. Before the students inserted their collection of trash, the wire-cage structure was smudged in a sage and eagle feather blessing by a Native American asking the Creator to watch over the Franklinton buffalo. ■