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Libba Cotten: In Syracuse, her image now lifts a community

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By **Sean Kirst, The Post-Standard**



Jim McGregor/The Post-Standard

Francis Parks (left) a longtime advocate for honoring the great folk singer, Libba Cotten, receives a hug Tuesday from Paulette Ellis, the widow of Cotten's grandson, during ceremonies to unveil a sculpture of Cotten at the Libba Cotten Grove in Syracuse.

A few heavy drops of rain were falling Tuesday as **Dana Klipp** got ready to play his guitar. Civic officials in Syracuse had just unveiled a bronze casting of **Libba Cotten**, a legendary folk singer and Klipp's old friend. While children from a nearby day care center stared at the long sculpted braids of Cotten's hair, Klipp began a familiar melody that caused weather-conscious spectators to forget the clouds and listen.

It was "Freight Train," the song Cotten turned into a classic.

"I thought (the memorial) really captured her," said Klipp, who often performed with Cotten during her final years on stage. "It captures her essence, her joy in playing. I looked at it and I actually remember her with her hair in pigtails, just sitting in her living room and playing."

The sculpture was unveiled Tuesday, in a grove named in Cotten's honor on Castle Street. Until her death at 92 in 1987, she lived not far away, on West Ostrander Avenue. Certainly, Cotten deserves a local monument for her extraordinary musical style. Yet those gathered at the grove said the sculpture accomplishes more than recognizing singular achievement.

It also lifts up the community around it.

"I think of transformation," said Francis Parks, a Syracuse University retiree and a longtime advocate of elevating Cotten's memory. Parks remembered a day, years ago, when she brought a group of SU students to bag garbage and cut weeds at the grove. The trash was everywhere, said Parks, who recalls dragging away pieces of a broken toilet.

Tuesday, Parks stood in a landscaped park that includes a guitar-shaped play area. She spoke of how the bronze casting, created by sculptor **Sharon BuMann** of Pennellville, allows Cotten to keep symbolic watch on many different

parts of Syracuse: A nearby public housing complex. Dormitory buildings on the hill at SU. The towers of downtown, including the clock atop the AXA Towers.

"Now she'll always know what time it is," Parks said.

She and BuMann were among the speakers introduced by Baye Muhammad, city parks commissioner. BuMann, whose goal was giving Cotten a "grandmotherly" persona, said she started thinking about the sculpture 22 years ago.

The suggestion came from Chester Whiteside, a retired city firefighter who also sparked the campaign that led to BuMann's **Jerry Rescue sculpture** at Clinton Square. Whiteside died in 2003, but his passion for honoring Cotten was embraced by Otis Jennings, a former parks commissioner who kept pushing for the monument even after leaving his job with city.

"What's important is the message," Jennings said. "To suffer all she suffered, and to still be successful, that is the one message we want to convey to every child in the neighborhood: 'You can do it. Don't give up.'"

Parks was especially pleased at how the sculpture portrays Cotten's humanity and quiet strength. Imagine all she had working against her, Parks said: Cotten, an African-American, was born in North Carolina at a time when opportunities were limited for any woman, much less a woman of color in a state ruled by a system of legal segregation.

Beyond that she was left-handed, and her own family believed it was unnatural for left-handers to pick up a guitar. As a child, Cotten learned to play by using her brother's homemade string instrument when no one else was home. She finally saved enough to buy a right-handed guitar, which she could play only by turning it upside-down — an approach, recreated by BuMann in the sculpture, that gave songs like **Freight Train** a unique and haunting sound.

Her legacy was so profound that she was finally cast in bronze in Syracuse, her adopted home. Still, the ceremony had a bittersweet aspect for Paulette Ellis, widow of the Rev. Larry Ellis, a local minister and Cotten's grandson.

"He would have loved this," Paulette said of her husband, who died in June. "That woman meant so much to him, and he meant so much to her."

Paulette and her brother, Kip Freeman, lingered after the ceremony with Kevin Ellis, Cotten's 18-year-old great-grandson, who is preparing to serve in the Army. "Just beautiful," the young man said of the sculpture, whose \$30,000 cost was covered by Syracuse University, the Central New York Community Foundation and a grant obtained by state Sen. John DeFrancisco.

BuMann, too, seemed hesitant to leave the grove. She endured the loss of her husband and father during the years spent working on the sculpture. You get the sense BuMann channeled much of her own emotion into Cotten's expression, which projects a mingling of warmth, humor and concern.

It is the face of a grandmother, who's finally come home.

Sean Kirst is a columnist with *The Post-Standard*. You can visit an exhibit dedicated to Libba Cotten at the **Erie Canal Museum** in Syracuse, while the **Onondaga Historical Association** displays her guitar and a Grammy that she earned for her music.

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