



Department of City Development
City Plan Commission
Redevelopment Authority of the City of Milwaukee
Neighborhood Improvement Development Corporation

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City of Milwaukee to unveil internationally recognized artist's memorial honoring civil rights leader Vel R. Phillips

Karyn Olivier's 'I Didn't Do It Alone' honors one of the nation's most important civil right leaders

MILWAUKEE – The City of Milwaukee will celebrate the unveiling of “*I Didn't Do It Alone*,” a permanent public artwork by internationally recognized artist Karyn Olivier honoring the life and legacy of Milwaukee trailblazer Vel R. Phillips. The unveiling ceremony will take place on **Friday, August 21** at 11 a.m. at Vel R. Phillips Plaza in downtown Milwaukee.

WHAT: Unveiling ceremony of Karyn Olivier's “*I Didn't Do It Alone*” sculpture

WHEN: Friday, August 21, 2026 at 11 a.m.

WHERE: Vel R. Phillips Plaza | 401 West Wisconsin Avenue, Milwaukee, WI 53203

WHO:

- Artist Karyn Olivier
- Milwaukee Mayor Cavalier Johnson
- District 4 Alderman Robert Bauman
- District 6 Alderwoman and Milwaukee Arts Board Chair Milele Coggs
- Michael Phillips, son of Vel R. Phillips and Art Committee Chair

Commissioned by the City of Milwaukee Department of City Development (DCD), the memorial installation serves as a creative representation of Vel R. Phillips' work in breaking down social and cultural barriers for women, and women of color, in the City of Milwaukee, throughout the State of Wisconsin, and around the United States. According to [Monument Lab](#), only 6% of public artworks in the U.S. are of women, and even fewer are of women of color.

“*I Didn't Do It Alone*” honors several pivotal aspects of Phillips' life of service and her fight for liberty, while highlighting the core of her lifelong efforts. Throughout her career, Phillips often stated, “I didn't do it alone,” a reflection of her commitment to collective action.

The memorial features three key components: two stone architectural sections with figurative sculptures, a bronze desk, and a bronze chair. Six outward-facing figures will represent citizens, activists, and leaders who worked with Phillips for change. The linked-arm citizens symbolize the unity of the 200 days of open housing protests and stand as protectors of liberty, justice, and democracy – the ideals Phillips fought for.



The memorial's classic Western architecture nods to democratic tradition, honoring our ideals and the citizens who work for the public good. The integration of the intimate office with the more traditional architecture highlights the importance of the personal in our politics.

Phillips' partners-style desk, designed for face-to-face conversations, also reflects Phillips' eagerness to listen to all. The desk's empty seat acknowledges Phillips' absence, but also serves as an invitation to challenge ourselves: *What impact can we make?* Visitors are encouraged to sit and interact at the desk, and over time, the natural patina formed by the oils of human touch will become a part of this memorial, mirroring the way Phillips felt the people were always a part of her work.

Philadelphia-based artist [Karyn Olivier](#), born in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, is well known for her public art installations. In 2024, she participated in the Whitney Biennial (NY, NY), Prospect.6 Triennial (New Orleans, LA), and the Malta Biennale (Valletta, Malta). In 2027, Olivier will unveil an important memorial commemorating Bethel Burying Ground, a site where more than 5,000 African Americans were laid to rest, under what is now a downtown playground. In 2023, Olivier presented her second solo show at Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, and in 2022 Olivier participated in Documenta 15 and installed a large permanent commission for Newark Airport's Terminal A. Olivier is also a professor at the Tyler School of Art and Architecture at Temple University, Philadelphia.

The selection of Olivier followed an international artist search launched by the City of Milwaukee in 2023. A 16-member Art Committee made up of artists, curators, collectors, community members, and City representatives reviewed 60 submissions before selecting Olivier's proposal.

The '*I Didn't Do It Alone*' memorial was funded through Tax Incremental Financing District (TID) 110 (Vel R. Phillips and Michigan), with an all-inclusive project budget of \$600,000, approved by the Milwaukee Common Council.

The Vel R. Phillips Plaza, located in downtown Milwaukee, serves as a gathering space honoring Phillips' contributions while providing residents and visitors with several public amenities, including a garden, informational kiosks, a future Streetcar extension that will run through the Plaza, and a Milwaukee County Connect 1 East-West Bus Rapid Transit station. Draft & Co, a bar and restaurant at the Plaza, opened to the public this year.

For further information on this project, visit city.milwaukee.gov/DCD/Projects/Vel-Phillips-Plaza.