

**HUDSON VALLEY // CULTURE**

# Monticello artists creating The Black Library in their hometown

The community art space, which will celebrate Black history and culture in a rural county, was awarded a \$400K development grant

By **Dalvin Aboagye**

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Douglas Shindler, left, and Michael Davis are creating The Black Library, a new community arts space and lending library in the Sullivan County village of Monticello.

Provided by The Black Library

In an effort to build a new cultural hub in Sullivan County, local residents and artists Douglas Shindler and Michael Davis are taking the first steps toward launching [The Black Library](#), a lending library and community arts space in Monticello supported by the \$407,800 Artist Employment Program grant from [Creatives Rebuild New York](#).

With guidance from the Hurleyville Performing Arts Center, Shindler and Davis want to create a space for creatives, young and old, that wasn't easily accessible when they were growing up in the area.

"I know so many people who just wonder how to even get their work out there and are struggling to even have people view their work," Shindler said.

Both Shindler and Davis grew up making and sharing art with their friends, eventually deciding to pursue it as a career. Shindler, who as a kid liked drawing video game covers, shifted over to painting and photography as he continued his education at SUNY Sullivan and Purchase College. Davis took his love of photography and parlayed it into a job doing interior photo work for hotels after attending SUNY Sullivan, where he and Shindler met.

"As far as my connection with local artists, there were a lot of people I grew up with who were experiencing the same exact kind of life I did that weren't necessarily involved in anything artistic or creative at the time, but have now found themselves in full-blown professions," Davis said.

Informal connections would develop into meetups where Shindler and Davis would share reading recommendations in late 2020. Those early talks of a book club were the foundation for the idea Shindler brought to Tal Beery, the director of finance and development at the Hurleyville Performing Arts Center.

“I can’t think of anything more important for artists to do right now than to cultivate a strong supportive community of artists, first of all, and of course, within the context of the larger project for racial justice in America,” Beery said.

## Pride in identity

One of The Black Library’s goals is to promote mostly nonfiction works from Black authors to imbue a sense of pride in a village where about a [quarter of the population is Black](#). Seminal works of Black nonfiction like “The Autobiography of Malcolm X” and “The Fire Next Time” by James Baldwin will be at readers’ fingertips alongside recent works like “Between the World and Me” by Ta-Nehisi Coates and “The Autobiography of Gucci Mane.”

But most of all, Shindler and Davis want The Black Library to serve as a community center, with literature and the arts being the jumping-off point for other social and educational functions.

“We want to have artists exhibitions, workshops — both artistic workshops and educational workshops for children through adults,” Shindler said. “We want to have community-oriented events like block parties, barbecues, things like that.”

“Generally, we’re just really focusing on a place that’s safe for everybody in the community and a place that’s collaboration-forward and creativity-forward,” Davis added.

To get the word out and increase their inventory of books, Shindler and Davis have spent the past several weeks connecting with like-minded creatives and organizations such as [Queens-based artist and publisher Kris Graves](#) and [Oakland-based Black-owned bookstore Sistah Scifi](#).

“I think the founders of the Black Library represent everything I love about Black creators,” said Isis Asare, founder of Sistah SciFi. “They saw a need within their community and now they’re putting together the pieces in a unique way that builds something new and offers a dynamic solution.”

In early July, Shindler and Davis reached out to Asare about leveraging her platform on social media to draw attention to the library and garner book donations through their [shared book registry](#). Seven titles have been ordered through that registry so far. They expect more along the way thanks to posts and features on Asare’s Wine Down Wednesdays Instagram live chats, which Shindler and Davis appeared on in mid-July.

Besides serving as another great venue for the public to be exposed to the work of Black authors and artists, Asare believes that the library has the potential to inspire all who enter the space.

“I hope the reading of the books and being in community allows the patrons of The Black Library to, one, feel grounded in community, and then from that, have the luxury to really claim their magic and imagine as big as they want,” she said.

## Rebuilding the arts in New York

In February, the Creatives Rebuild New York program was launched to provide financial support to the state’s arts industry, which saw significant declines in job stability over the course of the pandemic. It is a three-year, \$125 million investment principally funded by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation with support from the Ford Foundation and the Stavros Niarchos Foundation.

CRNY funds two grants: an Artist Employment Program for artists working with

community-based organizations, and a Guaranteed Income for Artists program that distributes \$1,000 per month for 18 months to 2,400 artists.

Through the Hurleyville Performing Arts Center, Shindler and Davis were among the initial 300 recipients of the Artist Employment Program grant, which also aims to encourage an interest in the arts in the rural, urban and suburban communities its first cohort resides in.

“Obviously the pandemic has brought economic havoc in our state. But beyond that, it’s really torn at the fabric of our communities,” said Bella Desai, director of strategic initiatives at CRNY. “We haven’t been able to process trauma and to heal. All these projects in one way or another are really helping to address those issues.”

The Black Library is one of several projects spearheaded by people of color that Desai believes best represent the program’s goals toward serving artists, their organizations and the communities they call home.

Right now, Shindler and Davis’ immediate goals are getting a physical space and growing their inventory through their [Amazon registry](#), the [Sistah Scifi registry](#) and the ongoing public donations that can be sent to the Ethel B. Crawford Public Library in Monticello until the end of September. The pair are hoping they can acquire a space on Broadway in Monticello that would serve as their physical location.

In an area that has been on the decline economically in the last couple of decades, they’re confident this could be the start of a bigger community revitalization effort.

"If there were somebody to influence 10 people like me — or 20, 100 people like me — then that would I think be a huge push for a population and a place that's been struggling economically, struggling with loss from addiction, and an abnormal crime rate," Davis said.

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