

# Colors Of Hope; Artist Says Her Murals Can Help Brush Away Crime

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HARTFORD – Janina Spears has a theory: A brushstroke of paint can help reduce crime in the city.

As vibrant colors ran from the tip of her paintbrush onto the side of a grocery store in Hartford's Upper Albany neighborhood recently, she wondered how many people would dare deal drugs in front of the brightly colored mural that she's creating.

“How hard is it to stand in front of all these bright colors and sell drugs? It's hard to stand here and shoot somebody,” she said, her eyes running over the carefully crafted image of a little girl in a grocery store aisle. “You might see them at the corner. You might see them down the street. But you aren't going to see them here. The colors bring attention.”

Spears, 25, is passionate about what she does. When the owner of the Homestead Grocery Store hired her to paint an outside wall, she saw it as not only an opportunity to make some money, but also as a way to brighten the community.

She wishes more children and young adults in Hartford would find a hobby like painting to keep them out of trouble.

She knows what it's like to fall into bad habits.

At 16, Spears went to jail on a second-degree robbery conviction. When she was released nearly three years later, she made a decision to change.

“You can change your life. You can do positive things,” she said, pausing between brush strokes. “I want kids to know that.”

Painting is just one way she gives back to the community. Spears also installs drywall, siding and window trim. She said it's her way of leaving her mark on the city where she was born and raised.

"I always wanted to be one of those people who worked on buildings. When my son gets to see this years from now, it'll pay off," she said, gesturing to the mural she's nearly finished.

Spears picked up her first paintbrush when she was 6. That was when she became enamored with art and architecture.

The road to painting professionally was a rocky one, though. After serving her prison term, she began to rebuild her life by selling T-shirts she designed and bags she crocheted. Jobs were scarce, especially for someone with a rap sheet.

"For most people, [going to prison] would give them more of a reason to do bad things," she said. "You have to have a lot of determination to make it here in Hartford. I don't give up."

Eventually, local businesses took notice of her talents. She has already painted portions of three buildings and is in talks to do more. Her designs run the gamut from landscapes to city skylines.

On a recent muggy afternoon, Spears stood beside the Homestead Grocery Store in a white tank, Capri pants and paint-flecked tennis shoes. Her long dreadlocks were pulled back off her face and secured with a white hair wrap.

She dipped her paintbrush in water, then in the paint on her makeshift palette before gently tracing the outline of a small cereal box on the wall. Her mural resembles the inside of the grocery store, which she hopes will draw in more customers.

The summer heat doesn't really bother Spears. She'll paint in most weather, as long as it's not raining.

"It's hard for me to sit down," she said. "This keeps me out of trouble. It keeps me busy."

One building at a time, she said, she's making the city appear more beautiful. That's the example she wants to set for others, especially her 12-year-old son, DeAndre.

“There’s so many depressing things in Hartford,” she said. “At least this gives it a little bit of sunshine.”