

# How Art Saved My Life- in 3 Chapters.

Jean Monestime is a 16-year-old student at Design and Architecture Senior High. This is his story, as told to Elizabeth Hanly.

## Chapter one

I first learned about drawing from comic books. I had two cousins, both of them years older than me. They would hold comic books up to the window and trace the scenes they liked the most. I wanted to do it too. Except that I didn't use the window. Instead I would look at the comic and then back at the blank sheet of paper. I kept looking from the comic book to the paper. I'd be thinking of what I was seeing, thinking so hard. I couldn't hear what my cousins were saying. I remember that there would be this click. It was a pulsating thing--it was blinding, and then I'd draw exactly what I had seen. I was four or five when I started. I

remember people being scared of the way I would concentrate. The people in my family were worried about me. But I remember sitting outside with my mother-- she'd dry her hair outside, she had this long beautiful hair-- I remember sitting with her and drawing.

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I remember when our house was broken into and the television was stolen. It was a while before we got another one. I used to sit and stare at the place where the television had been. I'd sit there imagining all my favorite shows, and I started drawing them.

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One day at school, a friend of mine had gone into my book bag--he was looking for a pencil or something--and he saw one of my drawings. He told me he'd give me 25 cents for it, and I thought this is really cool. A lot of kids started wanting to pay me to draw. I'd think, I could buy a lot of candy with all this change. That's what I remember from the early years, that and an art teacher who was always yelling at me for not staying inside the lines, for using too much of everything -- magic-markers, paint, crayons. "This supply is not just for you, its for everybody," she'd tell me. "And it has to last." But she helped me a lot too. She was the one who told the people at South Miami Elementary about me. South Miami was a magnet school for the arts.



Jean in Action

## Chapter Two

I remember going there with my Mom. I'd never been out that far before. Never so far from home.

We had to take a couple of buses to get there--three or four. I'd known about racism before. I'd heard references to it on TV and the radio, but I'd never felt it until South Miami Elementary. There were so many white kids. I'd never seen so many before. Things were really rough with them at first, even with the other black kids. Afro-American kids, when they wanted to "dis" each other, they would call each other Haitian. I'm Haitian. I couldn't make any sense of this. I wanted to leave school. I was a little kid. It was too hard. You know you might think you have to grow up to deal with these problems, but as kids we think exactly as you do as adults, just on a slightly smaller scale. But, anyway, it was my Mother who made sure I stayed.



(Detail of Jean's portrait of his mother)

And I kept drawing, and after a while everybody knew I could draw. Because I could draw so well, after a while things got better.

My art wasn't exactly about art back then, it was about being able to make myself seen-- not as a Haitian or somebody who was Black-- but as Jean Monestime. I needed to feel that people could see me. I couldn't take my work inside until I felt I'd been seen outside.

Now my mind is starting to race again, it happens a lot, the words aren't keeping up with my mind. I need to stand up. I'm going to walk around the room. (Jean is talking about his Mom as he walks, about her cancer and death. He was thirteen at the time. He's talking about an uncle he loved--his mother's brother, almost a father, who was shot and killed a little over a year later. Jean's talking about a time when he couldn't draw anymore. Nothing meant anything, and this is how he felt for a very long time.)

## Chapter Three

I remember how it started to change. I remember seeing shapes as though it were the first time, and I wanted to know what these things meant. I was drawing again. But at first it was awful. My work was all about broken bodies. I was afraid I'd scare people with this work. But then something had taken me. My work wasn't about having other people see me anymore. I kept drawing and drawing. Something had taken me and I didn't have much of a choice about whether to trust it or not. If it wasn't for that thing that had me -- if it wasn't for my art -- my art and a few good friends, I know I'd be in some juvenile detention center, some boot camp somewhere by now. Now my drawing is all about following where this thing leads. This thing that has me. I don't understand it, and I'm scared but I do know, my drawings not about what I want anymore. It's about something else.