

Salt River community celebrates shared heritage with the Palestinian cause

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On Saturday, [25 September 2021], the Salt River Heritage Society held a community arts festival unveiling three new murals celebrating the history and politics of this working-class suburb of Cape Town.

The first mural, on Pope Street, honours four legal heroes with roots in the area and surrounds – including Dullah Omar, Benny Kies, Anwah Nagia and Judge Siraj Desai, and was painted by Natheer Hoosain and Nazeem Jardine. Local hero and Banyana Banyana coach Desiree Ellis's portrait by artist Robyn Pretorius rises up on Fenton Road, while a series of murals painted in honour of assassinated Palestinian cartoonist Naji-al Ali have been painted on the corners of Chapel Street and Addison Road, by Tasneem Chilwan and Nazeer Jeppie.

The Pennsylvanian minstrel troupe led a procession from the Pope Street mural to the Fenton Road mural of Desiree Ellis.

Judge Desai, speaking of the people in the mural, said they were united in three fundamental regards: a commitment to fighting racism; a commitment to the creation of a new society freed from the "imperialism" of the United States of America; and, a commitment to the struggle of the Palestinian people.

Palestinian Ambassador to South Africa Hanan Jarrar handed over a letter of support to Judge Desai from a Palestinian Judge, and head of the Interim High Judicial Council, Chancellor Issa Abu Sharar. In June, the South African Zionist Federation laid a complaint against Judge Desai, currently the Ombudsman for Legal Services, with the Judicial Conduct Committee for his comments in support of Palestine.

Jarrar told GroundUp that the Salt River murals were important symbols of cultural solidarity, and spoke to the long-standing history of shared struggle against apartheid between South Africa and Palestine. In a brief address Jarrar welcomed the use of walls as positive symbols rather than sites of division.

Imam Rashied Omar called the mural a tribute to the under-recognised Unity Movement of South Africa. "By choosing this image, we are correcting a lacuna in our history," said Imam Omar. "Today we celebrate the taking back of our streets and our walls."

Anwar Omar, vice-chair of the Salt River Heritage Society (SRHS), told GroundUp that this event was to be the first of many. The society hopes to commission further murals and to hold similar events celebrating local culture and history every three months. Omar said that often murals had been painted in the area that had no connection to local people or the culture, "a form of cultural gentrification".

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