

Meaningful Metamorphosis

Gary Tyler, once imprisoned, finds his calling as a celebrated quilter

BY JULIE JACOBS



▲ Gary Tyler

GARY TYLER HAS A TRULY incredible story to tell. For all that he has gone through — wrongfully incarcerated for murder as a youth and in prison on death row for nearly 42 years — he is not bitter, but rather resilient and reflective.

These days, you can often find him seated at a sewing machine, crafting compelling scenes and portraits with fabric, needle and thread. You see, Tyler, now 66, emerged

from his experience behind bars to become an award-winning quilter.

Many of his quilts depict young Black men and women and, in some cases, Tyler himself during his time as an inmate at Angola State Penitentiary in Louisiana, where, following his conviction in 1974 for the death of a 13-year-old white boy, he was unjustly imprisoned. The circumstances leading to his incarceration began in the summer

of 1970, when he left his hometown of St. Charles Parish, Louisiana, to live with his sister in Los Angeles. There, he learned more about the civil rights movement and Martin Luther King Jr.

The experience was “a reservoir of information that I didn’t even know existed, mainly the importance that Black people played in this country,” he shares by phone on a Tuesday afternoon.



▶ “December 14th, 1975” depicts Tyler behind bars. C127 was his death row number and he was in cell number 8.

ARTWORK COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND LIBRARY STREET COLLECTIVE

Tyler returned to Louisiana with a newfound awareness of Black pride and an assertiveness of self. When he used his voice to protest police activity during a conflict between white and Black students, which resulted in the death of the 13-year-old, he was arrested and coerced into confessing to the murder. At 16, he was found guilty by an all-white jury and sentenced to the death penalty, becoming the youngest inmate on death row in the United States.

In the ensuing years, many advocated for him, including notable activists Rosa Parks and Ruben Hurricane Carter, but he was denied a pardon three times. Ultimately, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled Louisiana's death penalty was unconstitutional and remanded cases to be resentenced to the next included offense (or lesser charge). Tyler took a plea deal and in 2016 was released. At age 57, Tyler was a free man.

"To me, it's like is it real? I mean, did I really go through this to get where I'm at today? Because I'm telling you, from the beginning it was like I didn't know whether I was gonna survive this ordeal or not," he says.

Innate Talent

He made it through, for as he told *Forbes*, "There's a saying in prison, 'Don't do time, let time do you.' How you interpret that is how you set the course of your life in prison." Tyler stayed busy while at Angola. He headed its Gavel Club (a Toastmasters International program), was involved in its branch of the United States Junior Chamber (designed to teach young men leadership and personal skills), and

was president of its drama program. When volunteers of Angola's hospice program, who created and sold handmade quilts for fundraising, approached him about assisting them, he was hesitant but accepted and found what would turn out to be his calling.

"Reluctantly, that's how I learned it because that wasn't something I really wanted to do, because I was actively involved in a whole lot of other things and I didn't want to get my hands tied. And also, due to the mere fact that I was in prison, I felt that that would kind of, in a way, tarnish my reputation as a man.

We're talking about doing something, you know, feminine within prison. That's the way I looked at it at the time," he says.

He learned appliqué, a technique that uses pieces of fabric to form pictures on quilts, and his work quickly stood out. While on death row, he also learned how to fashion jewelry boxes out of matchsticks and picture frames out of cigarette packs. His artistry was so apparent the prisoners nicknamed him Kuumba, which means "creativity" in Swahili.

Expressing himself through art not only helped him keep his mind



◀ "Defiant, 1976," from 2023, depicts Tyler's wrongful conviction.

Full STEAM Ahead



occupied, it also revealed a new side of himself: “I think it was the door that started it; yes, I feel strongly about that. You know, when you start something, you start off by having an idea about how you want to do it, and when you start the tampering and, all of a sudden, things start to [manifest themselves] due to the labor that you put in it, you feel a sense of pride.”

Release and Recognition

Upon his release, he moved to Pasadena, California, to live with some of his supporters who had visited him at Angola and offered him a place to stay when he got out.

At 57, with no work history and thus no contributions to Social

Security, he left quilting behind and set about finding a job that would allow him to pay into the system. He looked into youth organizations and chose Safe Place for Youth (SPY) in Venice, doing community outreach and helping runaway and homeless youth.

Years later, during the pandemic, with both the encouragement of people who knew he quilted at Angola and financial assistance from a GoFundMe page they established for him, he set up shop. He received donated fabric and sewing

machines and used photographs of his ordeal taken by or circulated in the press as his inspiration. Many of his quilts feature a butterfly to represent his metamorphosis.

“People, they know about my story, but they don’t know about the life that I lived in prison, you understand?” he says. “So I decided, how can I go about magnifying my personal life to them?”



ALL ARTWORK COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND LIBRARY STREET COLLECTIVE



◀ FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:

“In Memoriam of an Ashanti Warrior, 1996” shows a warrior of the Ashanti Empire in what is now modern-day Ghana.

“Reflection, 1998” and “Indignity, 2017” are among Tyler’s works that are gaining acclaim.

his quilts through the Library Street Collective and other galleries and at events.

But early on, considering himself an artist proved to be an epiphany: “I didn’t realize that until Library Street Collective was telling me, people telling me, ‘Gary, you’re an artist.’ You know, in prison, prisoners are considered hobby crafters and you see the work they do. I

A friend connected Tyler with the Library Street Collective, a gallery in Detroit, which has since showcased his art. He now sells

mean it is wonderful work. ... But when I got out here and when I used the word hobby crafter, it was like, ‘Hold up, hold up, you mean an artist, huh?’ I said, ‘No, hobby crafter.’ And I realized that I’ve been doing this for so long until I’m an artist. I’m not a hobby crafter. I’m not doing this as a hobby.”

In addition to the Library Street Collective, Tyler’s work is displayed in the Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture, the City of Santa Monica’s Art Bank and The Historic New Orleans Collection museum. He is a 2019 and 2020 Art Matters grantee and received the 2024 Frieze Los Angeles Impact Prize, which awarded him \$25,000 and a solo booth at

Frieze Los Angeles in partnership with the Center for Art & Advocacy (The Center). At this international art fair, he expanded on his “We Are the Willing” series, first exhibited in 2023 at the Library Street Collective. In concert with this honor, he won The Center’s Right of Return Fellowship. And recently he exhibited his work at the 2024 Untitled Art Fair in Miami with Library Street Collective.

“It’s now a quest for me to exemplify that despite what I have gone through that my life eventually turned out to be a success no matter what,” he remarks of his journey. “As they say, from rags to riches. In this case, I’m not rich, but I feel that I’m rich in spirit and art.” ■