

**I am an American We are One Nation**

## **USING ART TO FOSTER SOCIAL CHANGE**

Artist and teacher chooses projects that emphasize links among community

**MIKE ARGENTO**

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*Each week, this series will introduce you to an exceptional American who is making a difference to unite, rather than divide, our communities. To read more about the American profiled here and more average Americans doing exceptional things, visit [onenation.usatoday.com](http://onenation.usatoday.com).*



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**Ophelia Chambliss believes that “art opens doors.” She is currently working on a project called Social Network. She drew portraits of a diverse group of people, using one continuous line.**

### **Ophelia M. Chambliss**

**Profession:** Artist/educator/community activist **Age:** 58 **Home:** York, Pa. **Mission:** To advocate for social justice and community through art.

Ophelia Chambliss of York, Pennsylvania, knew from the time she was in the fourth grade that she wanted to be an artist.

She was always checking books out of the library on how to draw and spent much of her spare time sketching. Growing up in Chicago’s Cabrini-Green Homes, her family wasn’t well off, so she used to draw on the backs of the supermarket fliers.

“When they started printing on both sides, I thought I was going to cry,” she said.

She studied graphic design and earned a living painting store windows.

She has always viewed her art as a means to communicate and to advocate for social justice. Her goal with her art is to foster communication, to use art to tell stories that tie all of us together.

“Art opens doors,” she said, reflecting a message she communicates through her teaching at Penn State, the York County Juvenile Detention Center and other locations. “It makes it easier for people to talk about difficult subjects.”

In 2009, she was commissioned to install a project in Gettysburg, commemorating the African-American community that had thrived in the historic town and the black

soldiers who fought for freedom. The monument stands in Recreation Park, the final resting place for many of those Buffalo Soldiers.

In February, she curated an exhibit featuring 12 African- American artists. Usually, the crowds for gallery shows during the event are overwhelmingly white. Her goal was to give the artists an opportunity to show their work and tell their stories. At the same time, she also hoped the exhibit would attract a diverse audience.

She is currently working on a project called Social Network. She drew portraits of a diverse group of people, using one continuous line, symbolizing the connection between them. She plans to invite all of those depicted on the canvas to the opening with the idea that they will make connections and talk, a small thing that can bring a community together.

## Q&A WITH OPHELIA CHAMBLISS

### **What does it mean to you to be an American?**

It means being a part of something that is big, something that has an unending potential for growth. It means having the hope that you are a part of a global initiative — that no matter where you start, there is a potential for greatness.

### **What moment touched and motivated you to launch this effort?**

It has given me the opportunity to address and express things I may not have had the opportunity to otherwise do. It creates the opportunity for a dialogue where one didn't exist before, increasing discourse and dialogue among races and changing the media perception of African- Americans in the public space. That's what motivates me. My motivation is to change the narrative of the media perception and how we are archived and remembered for future generations. Whether I'm meeting with the governor or with the kids at the (York County) Juvenile Detention Center, it's the same. It's about changing the narrative.

### **What gives you hope or what concerns you?**

What gives me hope is when I come across a young person who has a vision, and I can help develop young artists to achieve that vision. What gives me hope is that there are people in a position, whether it be public officials or stakeholders, and they're receptive and willing to make the effort to change things. People are listening. That gives me hope.

### **What do you hope to accomplish through your efforts?**

To change the narrative about African-Americans in our community and in our country. I just hope that people will have a new appreciation for each other. We all have our differences, but we all have the same goals. I was thinking about this while I was working on my Social Network project this morning. I hope people will learn something new about someone they never met before and find they have more commonalities than differences.