

Artist's Magic Lives on in Troy

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The artist and activist [Dara Greenwald](#) died of cancer last week. She was 40.

She lived in the Capital Region for a few years while completing her Ph.D. in electronic arts at RPI. In that time, she brought to life some amazing stuff, including a Victorian workers' rights march in the midst of Troy's Victorian Stroll. The project of hers that I loved the most was the Spectres of Liberty.

I wrote about it for this paper in 2008, but I doubt I conveyed the magic it created.

Two years ago in May, those of us who hold the ghosts of Troy in mind had a physical container for our distractions.

The container was a replica of the Liberty Street Church. Greenwald collaborated with artists [Olivia Robinson](#) and [Josh MacPhee](#), building an inflatable structure from translucent plastic sheeting. A fan puffed the thing into place, using the same technology that billows Santas on lawns and giant rats at scab worksites.

The ephemeral structure was raised for a single evening at the site of the former church, on the corner of Liberty and Franklin Streets. Important moments in abolition happened here, as [Pastor Henry Highland Garnet](#) urged people to "Let your model be resistance! Resistance! Resistance! No oppressed people have ever secured their liberty without resistance!"

These words were part of a profound shift in abolitionist thought. Garnet and others saw moral persuasion — the concept that slavery would dissolve as people realized the moral problems of owning other people — as inadequate, and began to talk to slaves instead of owners, urging slaves to use violence, if necessary, to end the practice.

The ghost of the Liberty Street Church was filled with haunting sounds: moaning trains approaching and fading, the clang of shackles and chains. A picture of Henry Highland Garnet was projected and his words curved out of his mouth and circled each other in giant loops. Images of slaves were also projected onto the thin walls of the temporary building.

You can see a video of this online, at a website created for the project (<http://spectresofliberty.com>). [Paul Stewart](#), co-founder of the [Underground Railroad History Project](#), while narrating the video, calls the church a "spiritual recapturing of the story of the [Liberty Street Presbyterian Church](#)." Being able to step inside the church's replica, he says, is significant.

He's right. Remaking a space and filling it with visual evidence that gives a sense of what's happened is incredibly powerful. The Spectres of Liberty immersed us in a way that other dips into history can't. I have courted Troy's pasts in many fashions. I've studied maps, read city directories and fallen asleep in front of microfilm machines while looking at newspapers.

When I was a teenager, I hunted ghosts with my best friend, [Jim de Seve](#). We found our way into vacant buildings and toured the remnants of other Troys. As adults, we made a comic book about the neighborhood destroyed by the [Hoosick Street Bridge](#). With other friends, I made a picture book about the local history of child labor. None of this compares to what the Spectres of Liberty achieved. For one night, we went back to 1840 and forward to 2010 and stood still, learning about an important pastor and his words and sensing the legacy that history hands us. The inflated church allowed us to consider how recently slavery ended in America and how that end began.

Posters that Josh MacPhee made for the event still dot walls in my friend's houses and I get reminded of the suspension Dara Greenwald helped make. I am sorry she is gone. But this great thing is rising again.

The Underground Railroad Conference is April 13-15, and organizers will be hoisting the church on the last evening, on the grounds of [Russell Sage College](#) in Troy.

Paul Stewart credits Dara Greenwald and her collaborators with setting a new standard for telling the story of the Underground Railroad. I look forward to this second resurrection.
Amy Halloran is a Troy writer.