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Community Celebrates Library Reopening and New Murals at the Isaías González-Soto Branch Library

Murals pay homage to González-Soto, a key figure in Buffalo's Puerto Rican history, while offering glimpse of the neighborhood's future

BUFFALO, N.Y. – Today, the Buffalo & Erie County Public Library welcomed the community to celebrate the grand reopening and unveiling of new wall murals at the Isaías González-Soto Branch Library, 280 Porter Ave., on Buffalo's Lower West Side.

The library, formerly called the Niagara Branch, had been closed for several months last year and in 2023 for major renovation work. Funding for the upgrades was generously provided by New York State Aid for Library Construction, the City of Buffalo, and Buffalo & Erie County Public Library. Over \$2.41 million in building improvements included:

- A new roof
- ADA compliant restroom and lift to the lower-level stage
- New windows, lighting, furniture, and flooring
- Expanded electrical and data outlets
- Restoration of the parking lot and repair of exterior sidewalks
- Updated sanitary/storm piping, lighting
- Refurbished shelving and other facility improvements

The new interior wall murals were created by local artist Angelee Vargas and commissioned by Arts Services Inc. and Assemblymember Jon D. Rivera's office for a total cost of \$10,000. Skillfully drawn and painted in the last two months, they showcase the life and legacy of Isaías González-Soto, the library's namesake – a trailblazer in Buffalo's Puerto Rican community and a symbol of its resilience and unity. Her designs also honor the neighborhood and Hispanic community the library serves.

Ms. Vargas was chosen through a competitive selection process that drew applications from 16 talented artists. The selection panel, composed of community stakeholders - including members of the González-Soto family - carefully reviewed each proposal. Vargas' own story and lived experience closely align with the legacy of the library's namesake, bringing an authentic and deeply personal perspective to this public artwork. The mural depicts the legacy of Isaías González-Soto – a key figure in the founding of Buffalo's Puerto Rican community during the post-World War II era.

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Using a bright template of colors and imagery that reflects Buffalo's rich Latino cultural heritage, the mural both showcases a timeline of the development of the Niagara/Porter community, and features portraits of a diverse residential background that mirrors the neighborhood's past, present and future.

Born in 1921, González-Soto served in World War II before moving to Buffalo in 1950. A pillar of the Puerto Rican community, he worked tirelessly to support newly arrived families, offering assistance with housing, food, employment, and legal aid. He operated a local grocery store, worked for the City of Buffalo, and hosted a Spanish-language radio show. In October 2018, the Niagara Branch Library was renamed in his honor to commemorate his enduring legacy.

A new photography installation, in partnership with the Burchfield-Penney Art Center entitled, "Milton Rogovin: Lower West Side Series" is now on display at the Library through early summer. Lauded social documentary photographer Milton Rogovin's (1909-2011) expansive body of work spans countries and continents throughout his career of more than 50 years. Photographing subjects ranging from factory workers to miners to everyday working-class families, his work brings a compassionate, dignified lens to society's most overlooked communities. The Lower West Side Series was his most celebrated and recognized work. It documents the changes in a small radius within the library's neighborhood, over a span of 30 years.

Born in 1909 in New York, Rogovin graduated from Columbia University in 1931 with a BS in optometry. He moved to Buffalo in 1938. In 1972, he began photographing West Side residents. He created space for his subjects to be photographed on their terms, giving them a voice in the creative process. The exhibition's imagery perfectly coincides with the celebration of a new era at the Library, and encapsulates its significance as an anchor institution of Buffalo's West Side.

Library Director John Spears said, "The Isaías González-Soto Library has served the community for decades – with these much-needed updates, the library is now better equipped to serve as a gathering place, resource hub, educational center, and cultural beacon for generations to come. Angelee Vargas' inspired work completes the improvements to the library, with a beautiful reflection on – and testament to – the community. We are so grateful to our partners from the State, City, and County, and the arts organizations who helped to make these improvements become a reality."

Assemblymember Jon D. Rivera said, "This mural is more than just an art installation; it's a tribute to the heart and soul of this community. The Isaías González-Soto Branch Library has always been more than a library – it's a cultural hub, and a beacon of opportunity for Buffalo's Latino community. This mural pays tribute to those who laid the groundwork for our future successes, and I'm proud to have worked with ASI to bring another public art project to fruition."

Jen Swan-Kilpatrick, Executive Director of Arts Services Inc., said, "Art has the power to lift us up, spark understanding, and create a shared sense of place. This mural at the community library does just that—offering a visual narrative of Buffalo's West Side that honors its residents and their stories. ASI is thrilled to have played a role in bringing this vision to life, and we remain committed to championing the arts as a source of connection and well-being."