



## Newfields Took a Step on Juneteenth, but More is Needed

Posted on June 23, 2021 by Educator Barnes

When my identical twin sons were born, I wanted them to be exposed to the resources in our city. I purchased annual memberships to the Indianapolis Zoo, The Children's Museum, and the Indianapolis Museum of Art. As my boys grew older, I began ending memberships. The

Indianapolis Zoo went first since my sons were no longer interested in going as much as they used to. Then, I ditched the Children's Museum Membership. We still go there, but only on free days; I no longer wanted to pay the membership price. I kept the IMA membership because my boys loved the campus and the museum. Also, Newsfields is close to our home and the annual membership was not as expensive as the Children's Museum. In 2017, IMA changed its name to Newsfields to represent the museum and the entire campus.



*Educator Barnes' twin sons at Newsfields (Indianapolis Museum of Art at the time of the photo) -  
November 7, 2015*

During the pandemic, I let my membership lapse because I was not going anywhere. My husband and I were working remotely and our kids were attending school remotely. Since some of our close relatives had pre-existing health conditions, we decided, as much as possible, to limit interactions with others.

After the death of George Floyd, social justice issues along with diversity, equity, inclusion, and access were put at the forefront in the media. Organizations were under a microscope, and actions by organizations that were seen to be offensive, problematic, and non inclusive were exposed. Newsfields was not exempt. Dr. Kelli Morgan, a Black woman who was hired as Newsfields' associate curator of American art in 2018, resigned in 2020. She listed discrimination, racial microaggressions, and toxic culture as reasons for her departure. Dr. Charles Venable, Newsfields CEO at the time, promised to address the concerns but based on the outcry in early 2021, this did not seem to have been the case.

Earlier this year, Venable and Newsfields came under fire for posting a job for a new director with "maintaining the Museum's traditional, core, white art audience" as part of the role. The posting was later updated removing the words "white art," but the damage had been done. Community members pointed out the words of Morgan. A petition with a list of demands for change at Newsfields circulated. At the top of the list was the resignation of Venable. I signed the petition (signature 2,060). On Wednesday, February 21, 2021, after mounting pressure, Newsfields accepted Venable's resignation. A month later, Newsfield shared an action plan of change. The press release stated the "plan includes the establishment of a \$20-million endowment, the proceeds of which will be dedicated to the works of marginalized artists; more diversity on the Board of Trustees; organization-wide DEIA training; as well as a series of new programming, community partnerships and free membership offerings to bring Newsfields to a wider, more diverse, audience."

One point of contention for the museum is the fact that it went from being a free space to a space you had to pay to enter. In response to the criticism, Newsfields was made free to the community for a few hours on the first Thursday of the month in the evening. Unfortunately, this coincided with another popular place to visit, the Children's Museum, free days. Important to note, in the March press release, Newsfields is now free the entire day on the first Thursday of the month instead of only a few hours.

Enter this past Saturday, June 19, Juneteenth. Newsfields decided to have free general admission to mark the day that had recently become a federal holiday. Despite my frustrations about how Newsfields needed to improve, my boys missed visiting. They asked to go there

several times during the pandemic. On Juneteenth, my husband, sons, and I went to Newfields.

I requested tickets in advance for timed entry which was required due to the pandemic. Upon entry, as I fumbled with my cell phone to pull up my digital tickets, a Newfields staff member explained how Newfields hadn't been free on Juneteenth before to which I replied, "I know." Then, she asked if we were members. I said we were but our membership had lapsed, and I was considering renewing it. She told us if I went for the digital membership only, it was ten dollars cheaper. I appreciated the tip. I decided to renew that day because my boys love Newfields.

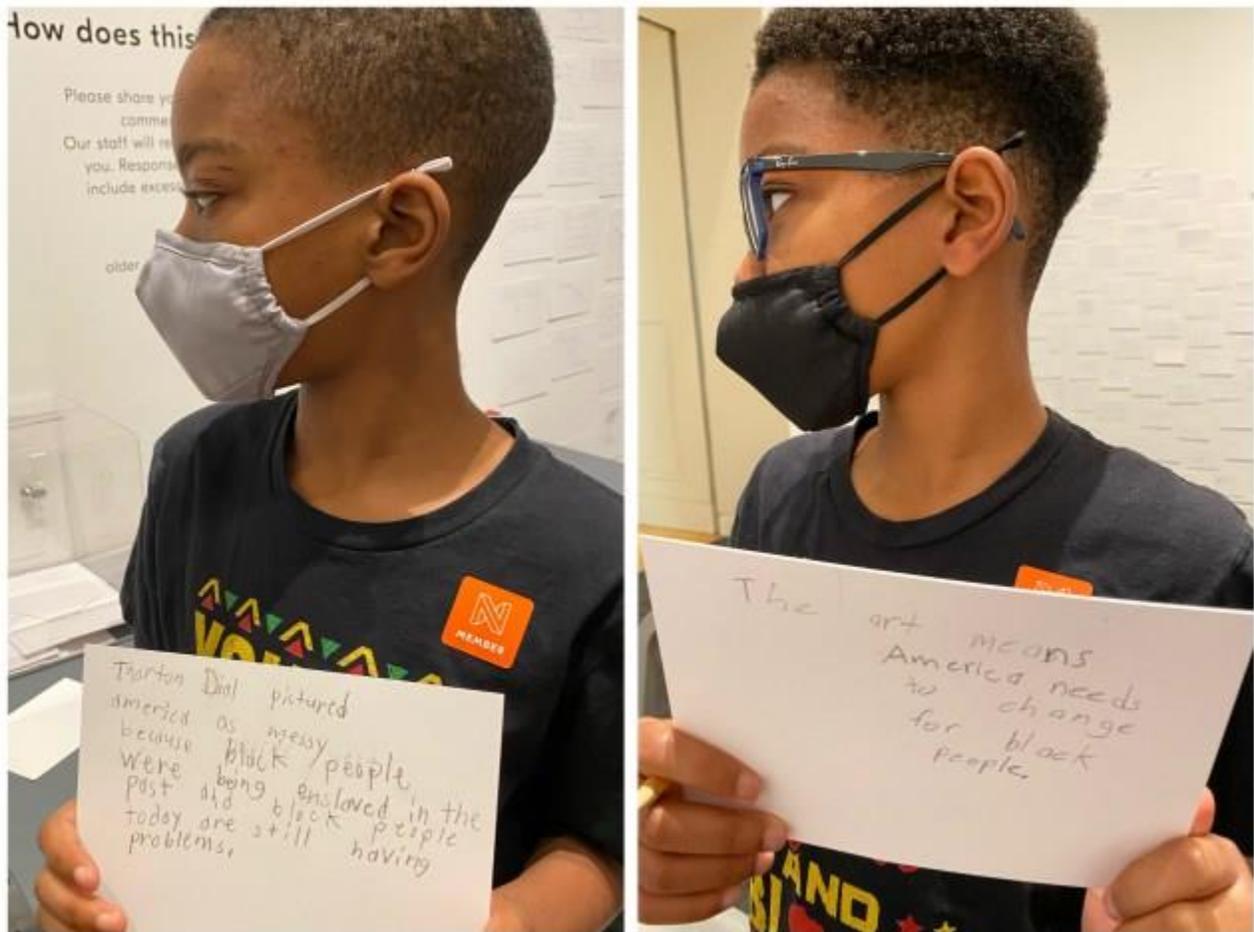
After renewing the membership, we watched a seven-minute video about Juneteenth. Next to the video was a sign with a QR code. I scanned the code and was taken to a [webpage](#) on Newfields' website for a self-guided tour. This page noted that "This tour highlights works by African American artists that focus on issues of Black identity and representation." The tour included five Black artists and six pieces of art. When we got to the end of the tour, one of my sons said, "That was it?" I had the same thought, but children are good at stating the obvious. As a Black female patron, who has been a member for years, I was disappointed that the tour only included five Black artists and only one was female. Representation matters, and we were barely recognized. Black art is part of American art. We are more than the summation of six pieces of art. I'm not sure if there were more pieces that were not included, but I have walked around Newfields numerous times and believe Newfields can do more to include Black artists including Black female artists in their collections.

One of the pieces of art we viewed during the tour, obtained during Morgan's tenure, was actually on display. This vase "[The Expulsion of Colin Kaepernick and John Brown](#)" was acquired by Newsfields in 2019, but Morgan noted that she received push back and the item was not put on display.

Another piece of art "[Don't Matter How Raggly the Flag, It Still Got to Tie Us Together](#)" by Thornton Dial, Sr. got my family up close to, for a lack of a better description, two members of the "core, white art audience." This piece of art was in a stand-alone room. On the wall, the following was stated:

*The American flag means different things to different people. How does this artwork make you feel?*

Additional information let visitors know that Newfields' staff rotated responses from guests on the wall around the question. While my boys were at the table thinking about their answer after viewing the artwork, they were in earshot of two women, who appeared to be white, complaining about Thorton's art. They briefly stood in the entrance to the room and left after stating his art was offensive and they were not going to tolerate the American flag being used in a disgraceful manner. Later, we talked about the women's response. Also, one of my sons pointed out that a person wrote the word "lie" on their card in response to the prompt. My son wanted to know why. In good teacher fashion, I said, "Why do you think a person would write that answer?"



*Educator Barnes' sons provide a response to the prompt about the art "Don't Matter How Raggy the Flag, It Still Got to Tie Us Together"*

Art can be provocative. Art should make us think, and art can make us uncomfortable. I am glad the vase is now on display and the American flag artwork elicited conversation, but the seven-minute film and brief Black artists tour were not enough. I did not feel the spirit of Juneteenth; I felt a box was checked.

My sons love Newfields, so I am not giving up. Venable's exit and the plan of action were needed, but many in the community want more. Having general admission be free on a Saturday along with providing information about Juneteenth is a plus, but Black patrons must keep the pressure on and be persistent. so that we are appropriately represented in the art collections at Newfields and that Juneteenth is more than a seven-minute film and a brief Black art tour.