



EDUCATION



Philly school board member Joyce Wilkerson dreaded the idea of her portrait. Turns out she loves the abstract work.

The portrait hangs among rows of traditionally presented leaders: generally men, mostly wearing suits, mostly oil paintings. Wilkerson's is different.



The newly installed portrait (right) of Joyce Wilkerson, a current school board member and former board president of the Philadelphia School Board and former chair of the School Reform Commission (... **Read more** Tom Gralish / Staff Photographer



by Kristen A. Graham

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Joyce Wilkerson is neither a “look at me” person, nor a “give me my due” person.

So when school board president Reginald Streater told her he was commissioning a portrait of Wilkerson — a current school board member, former board president and chair of the School Reform Commission — she wasn’t actually that thrilled. What about the other board members? What about the staff who supported them?

“It’s lovely, I’m honored, blah blah, blah,” said Wilkerson. “Apparently, it’s the tradition, but it undervalues the role that everybody has to play if we’re really going to serve our children.”





The newly installed portrait of Joyce Wilkerson, a current school board member and former board president of the Philadelphia School Board and former chair of the School Reform Commission. Philadelph ... **Read more**
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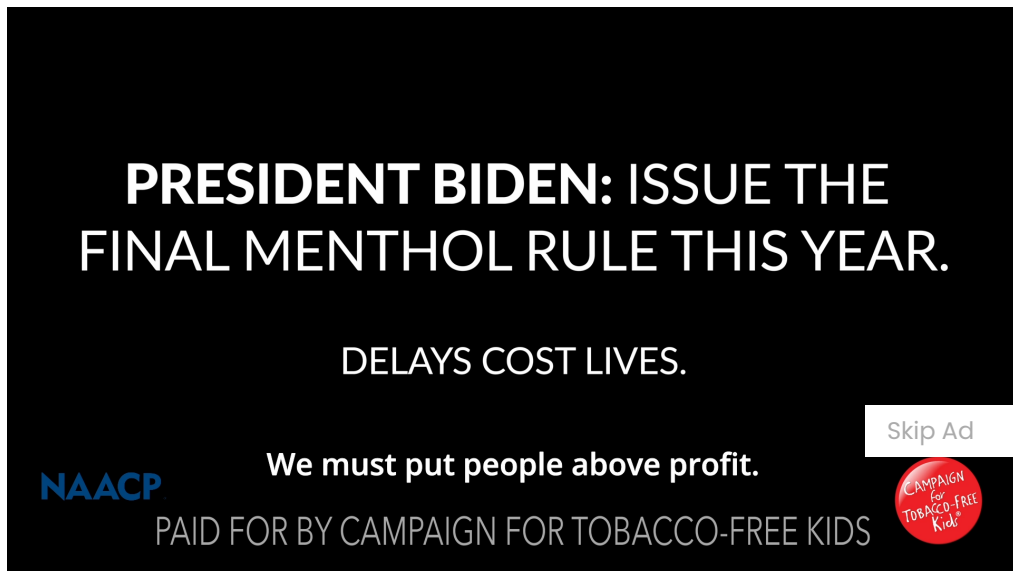
Unveiled Wednesday, Wilkerson's portrait is striking, colorful, and markedly different from the ones that preceded it. In the hallway outside the second-floor auditorium at Philadelphia School District headquarters, it hangs among rows of traditionally presented leaders: generally men, mostly wearing suits, mostly oil paintings.



“Joyful Determination,” the Wilkerson portrait by Philadelphia artist Sydney Carter, is a mixed-media work: acrylic paint, spray paint, paint crayons and gesso. Streater tasked Wilkerson with finding the artist, and she wanted a public school graduate. Carter is an alumna of Central High; she has worked in Philadelphia schools as a teaching artist with the Mural Arts Program, and as a classroom counselor in a behavioral school that serves district children.

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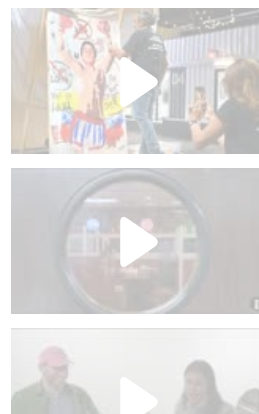
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When Wilkerson settled on Carter, the two met for lunch. Carter wanted to know more about Wilkerson, who talked not so much about her impressive resume — degrees from the University of Pennsylvania and the University of California at Berkeley’s law school, chief of staff to Mayor John Street, executive director of New Orleans Redevelopment Authority — but about her family, her parents and sisters.





Joyce Wilkerson speaks at an event in this 2019 file photo.

TIM TAI / Staff Photographer

That's how Carter approaches her art.

“The background tells the story,” she said. As is with her portrait, you’ll also see layers — colors, texture, patterns. Wilkerson sent Carter photos of her parents and her sisters. There are sketches of children in the layers, and a picture of the school board, some images still evident in the final product.

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Across Wilkerson’s face are images of the President’s House, the Philadelphia landmark that examines the intersection of freedom and slavery at the site of the country’s first executive mansion. During her years working for Street, Wilkerson pushed for the city to allocate funds to the project, because she



believed the public ought to know the uncomfortable truths about America's founding.

"I'm really proud of that in my career," said Wilkerson, 73, who also steered the school system through the transition back to local control.

Wilkerson didn't want to sit for a portrait — she asked Carter, whose sister is board member Sarah-Ashley Andrews, to base her work on a photograph. And the finished product? Wilkerson, hand on chin, looks out, pensively.

"You can tell that she's serious, but not standoffish.," Carter said. "You want to come and talk to her."

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Despite her initial lack of enthusiasm about the project, Wilkerson loves the portrait, for which Carter was paid \$2,200, money donated by the Fund for the School District of Philadelphia.

"She managed to capture who I think I am, and my values," Wilkerson said. "I used it as my ID on my phone; it looks like me to me."

To Streater, the portrait was a necessity. (Not every SRC chair or board president has one.)

"Whether people agree or not with the way Joyce has done things, one thing is undeniable: her laser focus on students," said Streater. "I think that we have to give people their flowers. We don't know what young lady, what Black girl, will see this portrait and follow her example."

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For the record, Wilkerson said she loves “stepping back and mentoring. Reggie asks me my opinion, or he doesn’t, and I’m supportive and mumbling under my breath all the way.”

How long she will continue to do that is unclear.

Technically, the terms of each of the nine school board members ended when Cherelle L. Parker became mayor Jan. 2, but they will all continue to serve until Parker chooses new board members — or asks them to stay.

Parker has not yet indicated whom she’ll choose. Wilkerson, who said she would serve if asked, expects to remain active in education either way — she’s also a member of the executive committee of the Council of Great City Schools, an organization that represents the largest school systems in the country.

“I’m in it,” Wilkerson said, “because we’ve got a lot of work to do to educate our children appropriately.”



Kristen A. Graham  

I cover Philly schools, taking readers inside one of the largest districts in the country. I love a good drum line and a great classroom tale.

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