

NEIGHBORHOODS

Author and illustrator on the south side gives back through art



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Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Sept. 23, 2026, 5:10 a.m. CT

In honor of Hispanic Heritage Month, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel's Neighborhood Dispatch will profile several local Latino community members whose stories, art, entrepreneurship, leadership and daily lives shape and enrich Milwaukee's south side and beyond.

Growing up on Milwaukee's south side, [author and illustrator Ellia Ana Hill](#) loved creating art about her own life.

After discovering "Clifford the Big Red Dog" books, she decided to become an illustrator and create her own books.

As a child, Hill would create cards for her friends and family, and she used art to express her emotions every day.

She later studied at the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design, where she developed her illustration skills, creating her own style by layering pieces of cut colorful paper to bring images to life.

Today, she has written two books and illustrated five bilingual books, including her own, published in English and Spanish.

She often promotes her books at neighborhood events and mentors young local artists who are interested in using their art to share their unique views of the world.

"I want to tell and record our stories, and I want people to see, remember their moments and be inspired to tell their story," Hill said.

Sharing books and art with the community

Through her own books, Hill said she learned to tell her stories in creative ways that resonate with other parents and children. She is often inspired by lessons she learned through her journey as a mother of six.

“[The No Boy](#)” is a book she wrote about her experience navigating a phase where her son's favorite word was "no" and the importance of setting boundaries.

She also wrote and illustrated “Nina's Dresses,” a book about her mother’s dress collection, which she drew as a child.

In addition to her own work, Hill has illustrated books for other authors and partnered with Netflix, Disney, the Milwaukee Art Museum and many other organizations to produce galleries.

As a Puerto Rican artist, Hill said she loves sharing her work with Milwaukee's largest Latino neighborhoods.

Community events like Milwaukee's Puerto Rican Fest and the recent [MKE's Biggest Free Library](#) event at Kosciuszko Community Center give her the opportunity to connect with neighbors and make her books more accessible.

At these events, she sells her books and hosts story hours, where she reads her stories to attending families. She also often hosts craft tables where she teaches people how to make paper flowers using the same methods she uses for her cut paper illustrations.

"The people who are a part of it are passionate about our community," Hill said. "I want to find some way to be able to contribute."

Mentoring young artists

Hill participates in mentorship programs for young artists in Milwaukee, such as [Art for Arthritis](#), a summer mentorship program and fundraiser led by the Arthritis Foundation of Wisconsin.

Hill said she enjoys working with young artists to help them learn how to express themselves and use art as an outlet.

"Some of us grow up loving art but thinking it's only one way, with limited mediums, that art is only done by certain people," Hill said. "That is why I like to mentor young artists ... I want them to see paper and illustration can be an amazing [way] to tell our stories, to tell someone else's story."

Through Art for Arthritis, Hill has worked closely with Nola Carmichael-Oswald, a 14-year-old artist living in Fox Point, Wisconsin.

The two created an art piece titled "The Day Before," about Carmichael-Oswald's struggle with lupus nephritis, a condition caused by an autoimmune disease that causes swelling and impacts the kidneys.

Carmichael-Oswald said she discovered she had lupus nephritis when she was on a family trip to Disneyland. At first, she thought she had a reaction to her sunscreen, but when she returned home, she was diagnosed with the condition.

Carmichael-Oswald learned Hill's cut paper art style and recreated a picture from her trip to Disneyland.

Instead of focusing on her struggles with the condition itself, Carmichael-Oswald said she and Hill focused on the days before she was diagnosed to highlight the experience of feeling joy one moment, to confronting her condition the next.

Hill created an accompanying piece about her own son's health challenges. The illustration features him playing outside the day before he was diagnosed with a chronic condition that causes bone inflammation and pain.

"We wanted to represent how me and her son's lives weren't just about our illness, and how we're like other children, we just have something extra to deal with," Carmichael-Oswald said.

Carmichael-Oswald said that at first, Hill was cautious about teaching her to use an Exacto knife to cut paper, but by the end of the summer mentorship program, Carmichael-Oswald walked away feeling confident in the art form.

"It put a new kind of art in my arsenal that I can keep working on," Carmichael-Oswald said.

Alyssa Salcedo covers Silver City, Layton Park and Burnham Park for the Journal Sentinel's [Neighborhood Dispatch](#). Contact her at asalcedo@usatodayco.com.

Neighborhood Dispatch reporting is supported by Zilber Family Foundation, Bader Philanthropies, Journal Foundation, Northwestern Mutual Foundation, Greater Milwaukee Foundation, and reader contributions to the [Journal Sentinel Community-Funded Journalism Project](#). Journal Sentinel editors maintain full editorial control over all content. To support this work, visit jsonline.com/support. Checks can be addressed to Local Media Foundation (memo: "JS Community Journalism") and mailed to P.O. Box 85015, Chicago, IL 60689.

The JS Community-Funded Journalism Project is made possible through our partnership with Local Media Foundation, tax ID #36-4427750, a Section 501(c)(3) charitable trust affiliated with Local Media Association, and EnMotive, LLC, a subsidiary of USA TODAY Co., Inc. USA TODAY Co., Inc. is the parent company of this publication.