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**TIMELESS IN TEXAS**

# Community activist and artist Vicki Meek isn't slowing down anytime soon

She's spent her life advocating for the Black community — and all underrepresented groups. Her latest endeavor is no different.



When Vicki Meek moved to Dallas years ago, she was dismayed by certain aspects of the city's culture. So she stepped up to create the community she wanted. (Scott Cornelius )

By [Holly Haber](#)

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At 72, accomplished artist, social activist and community arts advocate Vicki Meek was at a point where she was declining most requests for her time and support. She was busy leading a three-year public art project as a fellow of the Nasher Sculpture Center, and she was serving on the Dallas Arts and Culture Advisory Commission and the advisory board of Lumin Education, where her grandchildren attend school.

Nonetheless, when Meek was invited to serve on the board of the Dallas Wetlands Foundation this past summer, she instantly accepted. “I saw [it] as a real opportunity to be on the ground floor of something, and to get my community to be a part of it,” Meek says. “It’s going to be fabulous.”

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The nonprofit is helping the public-private partnership Dallas Water Commons to design, build and create programming for a unique urban wetland in the Cedars neighborhood, just south of downtown. Blessed with a skyline view, the 17-acre park is intended to conserve and filter stormwater runoff, mitigate flooding, and serve as a green space for recreation and learning.

Meek says she was asked to join the nonprofit's board because the natural area will feature public art — one of her areas of expertise. But that wasn't why she said yes. "I had a particular interest in it because for generations, when there have been water emergencies and flooding, it's oftentimes the communities of color that are disproportionately affected," Meek explains. "I wanted to be part of something that is brand new and is about the education of our community, and to make sure that the African American community is part of the conversation."

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When complete, the 17-acre park will include enriched existing wetlands, new constructed wetlands, biodiverse habitats, beautiful public green space and an Urban Water Lab. (Studio Outside / Courtesy Dallas Water Commons)

The project is still in the design phase, but Meek has already participated in presentations to neighborhood organizations, politicians and media to get the word out, which she thinks is critical. Construction is due to begin next year.

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“I am very excited [about it] and want to do anything I can to promote all the programs we will end up with, especially the educational part,” she says. “I think it will be an opportunity for this to be a model for the state, not just our city.”

Meek, who grew up in Philadelphia and earned her Master of Fine Arts from the University of Wisconsin, has long advocated for underrepresented people in the arts as well as worked to uplift

the Black community. When she moved to Dallas to marry in 1980, she was dismayed by the lack of city support for artists and its geographical segregation.

“It was culture shock, and I was severely depressed about it,” she recalls. “I slept for about a year. Then I decided that if there is nothing going on, then maybe you can make some stuff go on. Just get in there and roll up your sleeves.”

Meek had a national reputation as an arts administrator, and she was named Dallas' first supervisor of community arts development. Later, she led the South Dallas Cultural Center near Fair Park for 19 years until her retirement in 2016.

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All the while, Meek was creating and exhibiting her own artwork focused on the Black experience, lost history and identity. Her pieces are in the permanent collections of the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, the African American Museum of Dallas, the Fort Wayne Museum of Art in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and other institutions.

Unsurprisingly, Meek is still making art. Having created various pieces for the Nasher Sculpture Center over the past decade, she was named a fellow of the museum in December, with the freedom to develop a project of her choice.

“What I had wanted to do for some time was to shine a spotlight on the Tenth Street Historic District, because it is one of the last freedmen's towns that is intact — well, partially intact,” Meek says. “I wanted to capture their stories, their culture and to document it in some creative way, so that if it doesn't survive [intact] as Tenth Street Historic District, then there will be some record of what it was.”

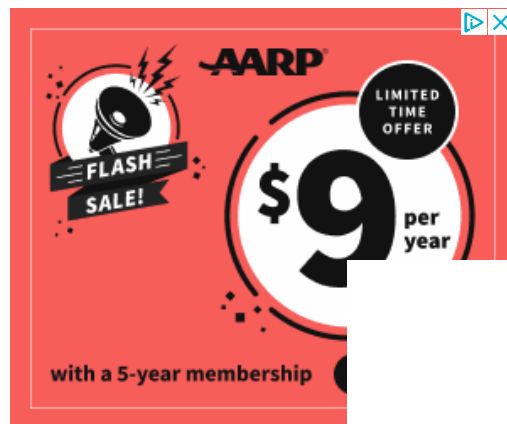
Tenth Street, which was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1994, was established after the Civil War by formerly enslaved people and grew into Dallas' largest African American community. The self-contained hub was partially destroyed when Interstate 35 plowed through its business district in the early 1960s.

Meek recruited three local artists — playwright Jonathan Norton, filmmaker Christian Vasquez and social justice visual artist Angel Faz — plus historian W. Marvin Dulaney and city archivist John Slate to collaborate on the socially engaged public art project, which has been titled “Nasher Public: Urban Historical Reclamation and Recognition.”

“We are not documenting the buildings but the human culture that made it so special,” Meek says. “We’re interviewing elders and getting their stories. One of the things that all of the elders talked about was how safe their community was for them. They knew everybody.”

The team is creating augmented reality experiences that will be linked to QR codes and placed on markers so people can get a sense of the area’s history. “You could see a doctor, a pharmacy, all the businesses — all the things that they don’t have now and they really miss,” Meek shares. “I think what has impressed us the most is the way in which they speak about how supportive their community was of them as human beings, and once they stepped outside of that community, it was a different story.”

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The first year focuses on the African American population and concludes in February, Meek notes. Then, Faz will lead a year of research about the area’s Hispanic history. An as-yet-unnamed American Indian artist will examine its indigenous past in the third year.

Meek has seen Dallas move forward over the years and views both the Nasher fellowship and the wetlands project as more positive steps. “Dallas has made a lot of progress,” she says. “It has made progress, but it’s a constant battle.” Luckily, Meek is up to the challenge.

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