

THE IMPACT OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN HERITAGE TRAIL MURALS

For over two years, the development of the Champaign County African American Heritage Trail has made significant strides. Over 20 interpretive signs have been installed, the transformation of Skelton Park is nearly complete, group tours have commenced, and the website contains a comprehensive history that is accessible to all. One of the outstanding components was the installation of murals echoing themes found on the Trail. During the month of September, our community was transformed by the work of four visiting artists who took the challenge to heart.

Thanks to a grant from the Office of Tourism at the Illinois Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity, the ECU Foundation teamed up with 40 North to launch a call for artists in February. 93 artists applied from 32 states and five countries. A jury led by 40 North and members of the Heritage Trail steering committee reviewed applications and selected the artists for the four available locations. Space was generously donated by Fairlawn Real Estate and the Housing Authority of Champaign County at the Urbana Neighborhood Connections Center (UNCC).



(Clockwise from top left)

Jeremy Biggers from Dallas reflected on the theme of **“Breaking Barriers: African American Firsts”** at 212 E. White St. in Champaign. His artwork showcases a little girl reaching for a brighter future as a powerful symbol of aspiration, hope, and the boundless potential within us all.

On the theme of “The Power of Black Women”, artist Georgie Nakima from Charlotte, NC, created **“KOFENA”** at 511 E. White St. Two figures add the perspective of sisterhood and collaboration. On the left, she is “lighting the torch” or “carrying the fire” while the other is in meditation, complementing the duality of progress between contemplation and action.

At the UNCC, artist Rob “ProBlak” Gibbs from Boston created a mural reflecting the theme of “African American Educational Excellence.” Titled **“Each One. Teach One.”** this mural stands as a testament to the enduring power of education, community, and shared narratives.

Artist Oscar Joyo from Chicago created **“EPOCH”** on three walls at 1801 W. John St. in Champaign, reflecting the theme of the “Champaign County African American Heritage Trail Timeline.” This mural celebrates the undeniable ingenuity and contributions of Black people, past and present. Each wall captures the spirit and essence of notable individuals from Champaign-Urbana’s history.



During their time in the community, the artists themselves made a significant impact. All of the muralists benefited greatly from Art Coop in Lincoln Square Mall, where they all purchased needed supplies. Local muralists were hired to assist Georgie Nakima in

painting the geometric portions of her design. Thanks to his high trafficked area on Mattis Ave., teachers from Unit 4 were able to bring him in to the schools in the area to take to students. At UNCC, Rob “ProBlak” Gibbs spoke with the kids at the center.

Members of the community were also able to connect with the muralists at a Meet and Greet event held at Gallery Art Bar. The experience of hosting these acclaimed artists was outstanding, with our community impressing all of them through our amenities and overall welcoming atmosphere.

Be on the lookout for one more mural coming in May from artist Ryan Adams (Portland, ME), who will paint the basketball courts at Douglass Center. Find more details about these murals at ccafricanamericanheritage.org.

“He [ProBlak] has shown us the importance of telling a story while painting a picture. His kindness and genuine concern for our youth continues to show forth through conversations with him and observed interactions with passersby, our students, and our staff. ProBlak has been a blessing to UNCC and the CU community at-large. It’s rare that I have an opportunity to meet someone who is a true representative of Black Culture while understanding the artistic value of Black Culture. From the minute I met ProBlak, we became brothers (we have a saying that “Real Recognizes Real”) and ProBlak is as real as it gets!”

—Dr. Jeneice D. Mitchell, Executive Director of UNCC

From Our CEO



Looking back on the first quarter of FY25, it's about the people. Through an organizational assessment during the Destination 2027 strategic planning process, we've restructured our brilliant team, who inspire me every day.

Thank you to Mike DeLorenzo, for your unwavering commitment to the University of Illinois and wishing him the best with this new chapter. Mike hired me 15 years ago in his role as Chair of the ECU Board, for which I'll forever be grateful. Also thank you to Tim Oravec, Community Development Manager, for his dedication and passion to ECU. He is already missed by all of us!

Kudos to Minnie Pearson and the local NAACP chapter for hosting the NAACP Illinois State Convention for the first time, which included the unveiling of the Salem Baptist Church trail sign right before their town hall gathering.

Shout out to local community champions, Tamra Parker and Karen Jackson, who joyfully picked up their free Chambana Proud T-shirts after completing 50 stops with the "Art in CU" experience pass. Their smiles say it all about what we do every day for our community.

Thank you to the Orpheum Champaign for hosting our July ECU Board meeting, to Willard Airport for hosting our August board



meeting, and to Estella Samii for leading our combined ECU and ECU Foundation Board annual FAM (familiarization) Tour of the Champaign County African American Heritage Trail in September.

Grateful for our board leadership, our partners, and our work force as we build bigger tables to foster a place where residents and visitors feel a shared sense of belonging. When we come together to create more inclusive and welcoming spaces, we all win!

Jayne DeLuce



Foundation Update

The ECU Foundation celebrated several heritage trail sign unveilings, toured the entire trail with the ECU Board for their joint board meeting, and supported several event bid incentives to continue bringing business to our brilliant community. They also mapped out the FY25 budget and a game plan to enhance Toast to Tourism in May 2025. The mission of the ECUF continues to support our ability to host events, assist film productions, welcome and attract new residents, and develop the Champaign County African American Heritage Trail. For more information on getting involved with the Foundation, please visit experienceecu.org/foundation.

Board FAM Tour

Every September, the ECU Board and Foundation Trustees play a crucial role in our operations by participating in a familiarization tour. This tour is designed to deepen their understanding of the communities and amenities in our region. This year, the tour highlighted the Champaign County African American Heritage Trail, a significant part of our community. Led by Estella, the tour took us across Urbana and Champaign and the university campus to learn about historic moments and people who contributed to our African American heritage. We also visited three of the four new murals and learned about the artist's inspiration, a testament to the rich cultural fabric of our community.





Destinations International

Jayne was grateful to participate in the Destinations International Convention on July 14-18 in Tampa. Education centered around Destination Organizations of the Future, leadership, sustainability, digital marketing, AI, and mental wellness. She served on a panel about “Igniting the Movement: The Destination Effect Campaign” and participated in DI Board meetings, as well as EDI and Advocacy Committee meetings.



ESTO

This August, Terri and Jayne attended U.S. Travel’s ESTO conference in Columbus, OH. This annual event, a high-level marketing conference, provided a wealth of learning opportunities as it brought together DMOs from across the country to learn from experts in AI, data, marketing trends and more. Our re-brand being selected as a finalist for a Destination Award, one of just three in our budget category, was a testament to our innovation. While we didn’t win, the experience was invaluable and we are proud to have been named a finalist.



CU Pride Festival

The Chambana Welcome Crew was excited to be a part of the annual Pride Parade hosted by Uniting Pride of Champaign County. With over 25% of incoming residents matched with our ambassadors identifying as LGBTQ+, it is important to showcase this program and how it can help welcome newcomers. Thanks to Mark, Jan, Terri, and Carly for representing!

DRES Tours

As the Illinois Wheelchair Basketball program brings in recruits, ECU provides community tours for the parents of the athletes to help provide a better understanding of where they may be sending their students. This fall, we took out two vans full of parents to see all the community has to offer. Assistant Coach Matt Poland shared, “The parents were raving about the tour and some of them were even planning on going to a brewery! You are truly amazing and we appreciate every part of what you have done!”

Beyond IID Walking Tour

ECU hosted a walking tour for 50 international visitors attending the Beyond IID conference. We discussed local landmarks and answered questions while we walked participants from the Illini Union west on Green Street to the Boneyard Creek Basin, before ending in downtown Champaign. Once in downtown, participants were provided with a downtown dining guide for a night out enjoying our local restaurants.

New Faculty Events

As we welcome new faculty to the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Terri, in collaboration with Carly McCrory-McKay, Champaign County Economic Development Corporation, participate in many new faculty events. Terri presented on the community amenities to trailing partners during the orientation, followed immediately by the New Faculty Resource Fair. At the fair, they answered many community questions and shared information on the Chambana Welcome Crew, New to CU Mixers, podcasts, and much more. On Friday, August 23, they hosted their New Faculty Community Tour, previously held on Saturday morning. The switch was a big success. Nearly 30 participants joined on the bus tour, graciously provided by MTD, where they were taken around the community to discover our downtown and campustown districts. Mayor Marlin spoke to the group at Rose Bowl Tavern, and Mayor Feinen met the group at our happy hour at the end of the tour at Hamilton Walker’s. Several participants sent follow-ups for their appreciation and excitement at getting to know the broader community. These events are critical to engaging new residents and bridging the gap between campus and community.



SO YOU WANT TO BE A FILM ARTIST?

AUGUST 29 | 5:30-6:30 P.M.

Champaign Public Library, 200 W. Green St., Champaign

Calling all local artists interested in participating in the film industry!

Did you know that filmmakers are always looking for artwork to include in their productions? This workshop is the perfect opportunity to take a step into this exciting industry. Interested artists will learn about the process for licensing their work to use in locally filmed productions, compensation structures, and the upcoming film artist database. All types of artwork are needed for film!

As we build the film industry in Champaign County, having local artists will be critical to the success of filmmakers who choose

Film Office Updates

In partnership with 40 North and Flyover Film Studios, we hosted a public meeting for artists interested in licensing their work for use in film productions. Local artists learned about connecting with filmmakers and negotiating a contract. A film artist database will be developed for filmmakers to use when seeking specific types of artwork for scenes in their productions. Additionally, Mark & Terri partnered with filmmaker Brett Hays, Shatterglass Studios, to host a panel at the American Planning Association's September conference in Champaign. Municipal planners from across the state learned more about how they can work with filmmakers to create film-friendly communities with many asking follow-up questions.

Sales & Marketing Efforts



Connect Marketplace

Gina and Robert, alongside Krystal Grace from the University of Illinois, attended Connect Marketplace in Milwaukee, August 26-29. They were joined by other Illinois destinations in an "Enjoy Illinois" branded aisle. Gina had 29 appointments with meeting planners from across the country resulting in 10 pursuable leads and two requests for proposal (RFP's). Robert met with more than 40 event planners looking for sports and entertainment venues to host their upcoming events and tournaments. He walked away with many promising leads and learned more about event best practices from the industry's leaders. Gina and Krystal met with the VP of Science Olympiad, who is very interested in hosting the National Science Olympiad Tournament at the University of Illinois in 2026 or 2027.

TEAMS

Robert attended TEAMS '24 in Anaheim, CA, September 23-26, and took part in 37 appointments. This sports conference is one of the largest gatherings of sports planners each year; over 300

attended the 2024 show. As this conference solely focuses on sports & recreation, it provided viable opportunities and fruitful conversations with leaders in the industry. In addition to the one-on-one meetings, the conference showcased industry best practices and networking opportunities with national Sports Governing Bodies, the USA Olympics, and the Paralympics.

Small Market Meetings

Gina attended the Small Market Meetings Conference in St. George, UT, September 25-27. This conference invited meeting planners interested in smaller markets or destinations to meet with DMOs nationwide. Gina had 23 appointments with meeting planners during the two-day event, including a second meeting with the American Baptist Association, which is looking for a national convention venue in 2028 or 2029. This client recently hosted their national convention in Springfield, IL, in June 2024, and appreciated Illinois' central location for their conference guests who typically travel from the Midwest, Eastern, and Southern states.



SPORTS, EVENTS, & FILM

11
leads

0
tentative

3
definite

CONFERENCES

9
leads

3
tentative

2
definite

GROUP TOUR

0
leads

1
tentative

2
definite

LEAD: A sales prospect with active client discussion. Could also be an active proposal where the RFP has yet to be submitted.

TENTATIVE: RFP or bid proposal has been submitted, waiting for feedback or confirmation from client.

DEFINITE: Event proposal is signed, hotel bid proposal(s) signed or pending.





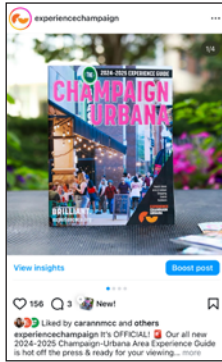
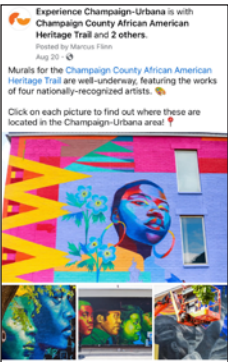
Experience Guide
Kicking off each fiscal year is the publication of the annual Experience Guide. This piece is the signature marketing piece for the region and tells the story of our community. This year, articles focused on activities on a budget, seasonal checklists, spotlights on small towns surrounding Champaign-Urbana, a dining guide based on the meal, vegan and vegetarian dishes, top spots for live music, where to find native prairies, local shopping, and much more. Pick up a guide and share it in your office or with family and friends!



Wit & Folly
Showcasing our community through travel influencers offers an authentic glimpse into the experiences available while reaching new audiences. We partnered with Wit & Folly, who resides in Seattle but was born in Urbana. During the visit, she visited many attractions across the region, including Lake of The Woods, Monticello Railway Museum, Grange Grove, Prairie Fruits Farm & Creamery, downtown Champaign & Urbana, and much more. Through four Instagram posts and 17 stories, we reached 31,000 people.



Social Media & Web Stats



WEBSITE REPORT
62,689 Page Views
3,043 Clicks on Page
20,429 Total Users
11,973 Users via Organic Search

TOP VISITED PAGES
Calendar of Events
Our Stories
Food & Drink
Music & Entertainment
Outdoors

79.7%
of website traffic is from outside the greater Champaign-Urbana area

36%
is from outside of Illinois
Top States: Texas, Indiana, Missouri



Facebook

CCAAHT Murals
5,200 reach
299 reactions
29 shares

12,114
Followers



Instagram

Experience Guide
3,420 views
156 likes
22 shares

8,946
Followers



TikTok

Jane Addams Book Shop
809 views
12 likes

1,875
Followers



Lodging + Visitor Data

Reporting July–September 2024 | Data provided by Zartico
Based on **29,747** credit cards and **55,696** mobile devices observed.

HOTELS | SHORT TERM VACATION RENTALS

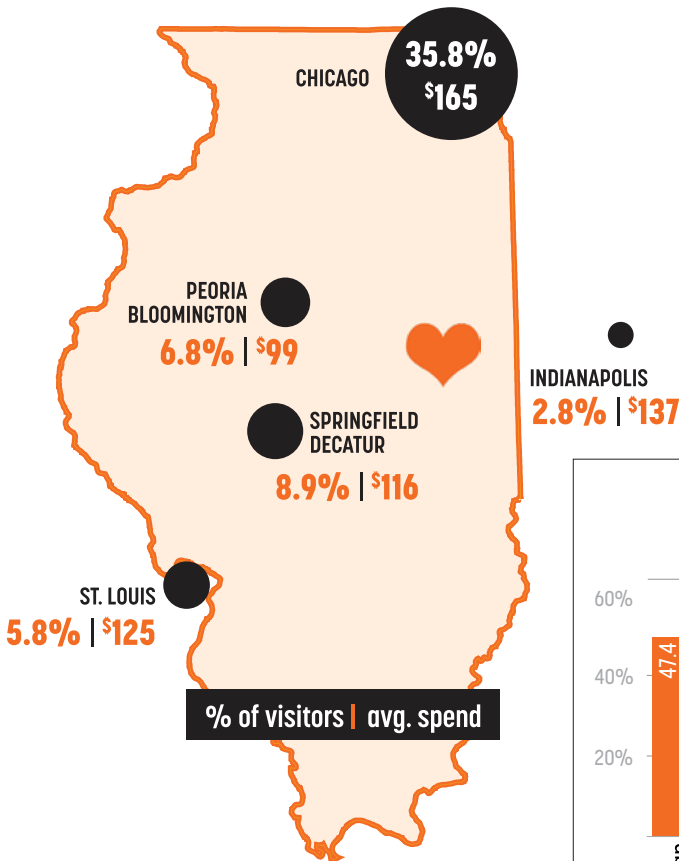
	AVERAGE STAY VALUE	AVERAGE OCCUPANCY	AVERAGE LENGTH OF STAY (in days)	DEMAND (in thousands)
Champaign	\$563.33 \$270.33	32% 68%	4.10 2.17	21.3 111.6
Springfield	\$522.00 \$250.33	49% 61%	4.16 1.90	10.3 95.2
Peoria	\$552.00 \$287.67	43% 56%	5.27 2.13	12.6 126.2
Bloomington Normal	\$572.67 \$229.67	37% 56%	5.27 1.77	8.3 106.4

VISITOR % OF TOTAL
24.9%
of all mobile devices
observed that were visitors

VISITOR SPEND OF TOTAL
20.1%
of all spend came
from visitors

% OF CARDHOLDERS
with children in household
50%

40.7% of visitors were from
out-of-state.



VISITOR IMPACT



29%

visitor spend of total

\$68

avg. visitor spend



22%

visitor spend of total

\$99

avg. visitor spend



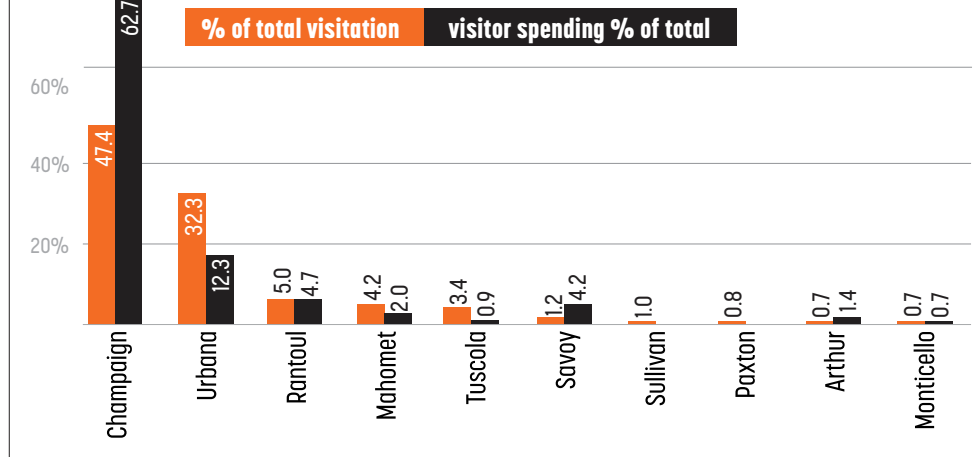
25%

visitor spend of total

\$51

avg. visitor spend

VISITATION & SPENDING BY CITY



OUR MISSION

We promote a welcoming destination experience for visitors to strengthen economic opportunity and enhance the lives of residents.

Partners

DESTINATION FOUNDER

Illinois Office of Tourism // City of Champaign
University of Illinois // Rotary Club of Champaign
Champaign County // City of Urbana

DESTINATION LEADER

Busey // Carle

DESTINATION BUILDER

OSF Healthcare // Village of Rantoul
Village of Savoy // Spherion // Ameren
Community Foundation of East Central Illinois
University of Illinois Community Credit Union
Jane Hays & Dave Downey // John & Bonnie Dauer

DESTINATION BACKER

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First State Bank // Gies College of Business
Roberta Gorden // I Hotel & Illinois Conference Center
Parkland College // Habeeb Habeeb // Champaign-Urbana
Public Health District // William Shiner // Homer Historical
Society // Copper Creek Church // Urbana Park District
Champaign Asphalt // Village of Mahomet // City of Tuscola
Hilton Garden Inn // Family of Eugene & Hester Suggs
Fairfield Suites // Courtyard by Marriott // Janet & Doug
Nelson // Home2 Suites // Village of St. Joseph // Homewood
Suites // Lynne & Dick Barnes // Curt & Jo Anderson
Max & Betsy Mitchell // Barbara Suggs Mason // Robeson
Family Benefit Fund // Steve Horve // News-Gazette

REGIONAL PARTNERS

Amish Country of Illinois
Make It Monticello
City of Paxton

For information on our Destination Partner Program and
how you can support our mission visit:

experiencecu.org/partners



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