



**NIAGARA FALLS
NATIONAL
HERITAGE AREA**

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The work of the Niagara Falls National Heritage Area is to enhance public appreciation for the communities, significant historic and natural resources, and landscapes of the Niagara region. The National Heritage area works through a network of heritage area partners who seek to make interpretive, environmental, economic and social improvements that benefits residents and visitors alike. Where initiative is lacking, the National Heritage Area will fill the gap. In pursuing this mission, the Niagara Falls National Heritage Area encourages historic preservation, recreational access and environmental recovery. We value authenticity, cultural diversity, high-quality design, energy efficiency, regional and cross border leadership, open communication and transparent operations.

Cover Photo:

Don King, son of Niagara Falls artist Polly King, seeing our exhibit "Colors Sing to Me: The Life and Art of Polly King" for the first time.

Inside Cover:

Don King and NFNHA Executive Director Sara Capen on opening night of the exhibit.

The Power of Yes

The Niagara Falls National Heritage Area was built by believing in possibilities with an unwavering commitment to saying yes to partners and projects that lead to a better future for the communities of Niagara.

If you take a look at the mosaics within our latest mural at Abate Elementary, you will witness both complexity and beauty. Behind the mosaics are hundreds of tiny pieces that alone represent very little. They become art only when they are each connected, a challenging process requiring concentration, patience, teamwork, and perseverance. Creating a vibrant community that is connected with a sense of pride for the past while giving space to the future is similarly challenging. It requires vision, collaboration, and tenacity—skills the NFNHA applies every day. By doing so, we say YES to a stronger, more resilient Niagara Falls. We know that a stronger Niagara Falls creates a stronger Niagara County.

One only has to look at our projects to see the power of YES in action. Whether it is the Discover Niagara Shuttle, the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, over three dozen public art projects, the preservation of Prophet Isaiah's House, or the Women of Niagara exhibit in the former Jeness Building, each project is evidence of the power of saying yes. Like the 15 years before, 2024 features projects and partnerships that the NFNHA team said yes to. Our small, mighty, and growing team continues to lead with a vision for a brighter future in Niagara.

At the heart of everything the Niagara Falls National Heritage Area does lies the belief in possibilities and the transformative power of saying YES—to ideas, partnerships, and opportunities that shape a brighter future for Niagara Falls and beyond. Like assembling a mosaic, building a vibrant community requires vision, patience, collaboration, and perseverance. Each piece, while seemingly insignificant on its own, becomes part of something greater when brought together with care and intention.

Through every challenge and opportunity, we've committed to saying YES—to connection, innovation, and the preservation of our shared history while embracing a future full of potential. This mindset has been our guiding principle, fueling projects and partnerships that strengthen our communities and inspire resilience. As we reflect on 2024, we are reminded that the power of YES is not just about projects—it's about creating a legacy of possibility, pride, and purpose for generations to come. Here's to continuing this journey, one YES at a time. Let's take a quick look at where YES got us in 2024.



Sara Capen
Executive Director, Niagara Falls National Heritage Area



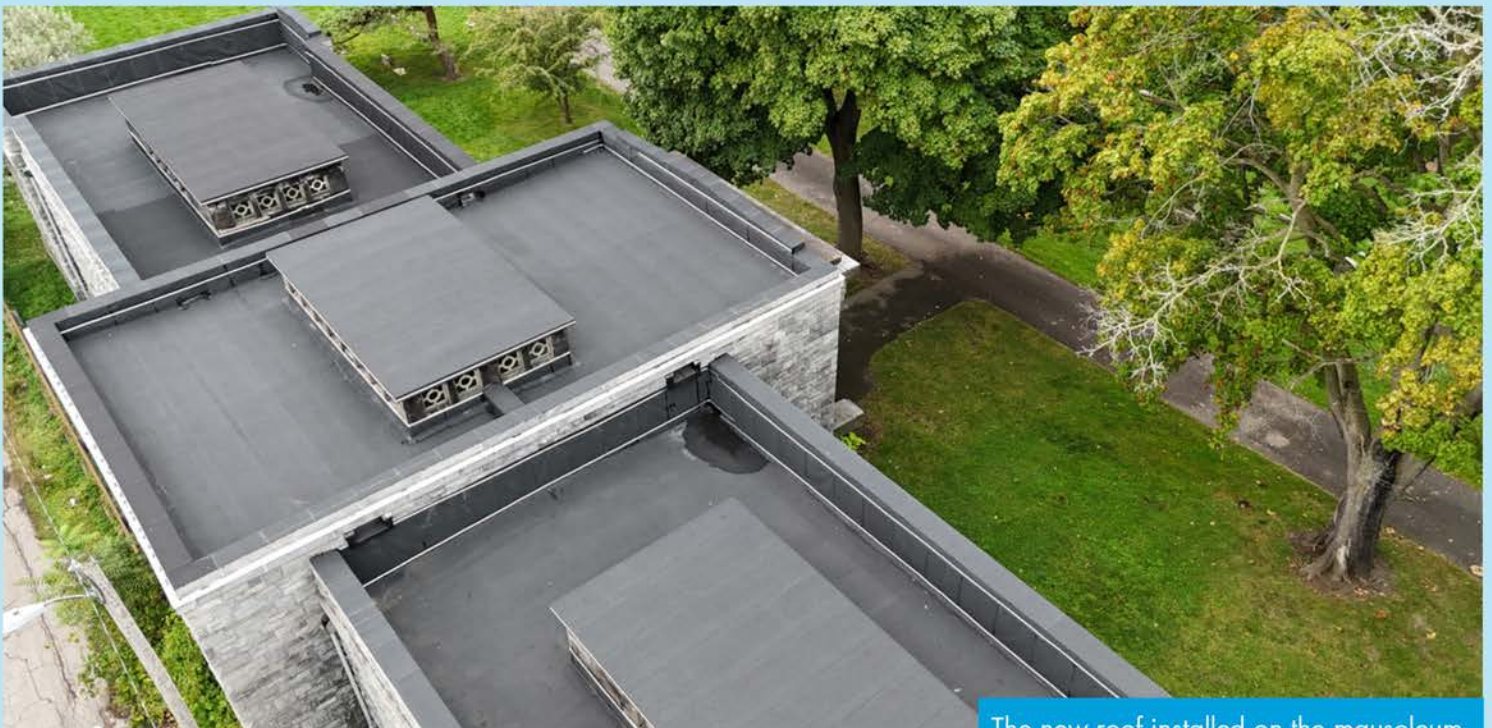
Cambria Hotel Exhibit

We partnered with the newly opened Cambria Hotel Niagara Falls to create an immersive exhibit at the heart of its lobby. This captivating display takes guests on a journey through time, blending the artistry of Polly King's sketches with a curated collection of historical photographs that showcase the rich history of Niagara Falls. Throughout the hotel, visitors can now experience the region's storied past in a unique and inspiring way, making history an integral part of their stay.



Oakwood Cemetery Restoration

In close partnership with Oakwood Cemetery, the Niagara Falls National Heritage Area is proud to lead a \$2.4 million restoration initiative for three historic buildings at Oakwood, a site rich with the stories and heritage of our community. In 2024, significant progress was made with the installation of a new roof on the mausoleum, marking an important step in preserving this treasured landmark. More restoration efforts are on the horizon as we continue to honor and safeguard the history held within Oakwood's grounds. Funding for these efforts has been provided by New York State and the Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation.



The new roof installed on the mausoleum.

Bad*ss Women of Niagara Tour

This year, we introduced the Bad*ss Women of Niagara Tour—a pilot program paving the way for more experiential offerings in 2025. The tour spotlighted remarkable women from Niagara’s history, some famous and others whose stories deserve greater recognition. Participants explored the very sites where these trailblazing women made history, blending engaging storytelling with immersive experiences. The tour combined walking segments with rides on the Discover Niagara Shuttle, making it both informative and accessible. It was met with enthusiastic feedback, and we’re excited to announce that this tour, along with other dynamic programs, will be part of our lineup in 2025.



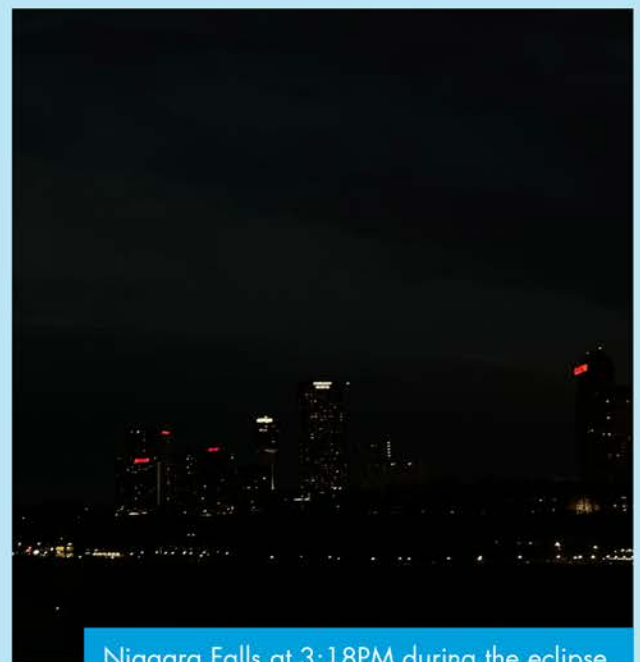
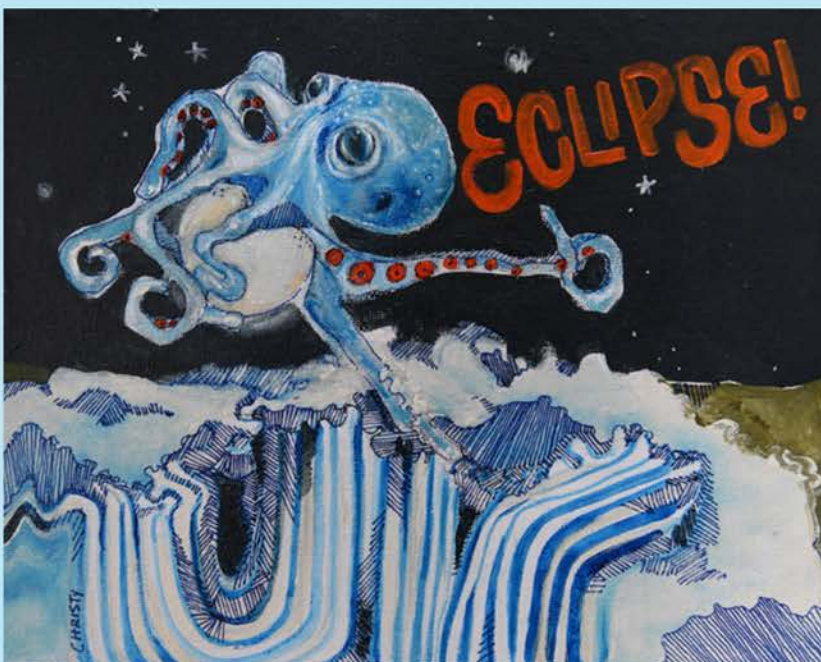
Amie Gustafson leads a Bad*ss Women of Niagara Tour.



The Solar Eclipse

In 2024, Niagara Falls became the stage for a breathtaking phenomenon as a total eclipse graced the skies, allowing visitors and locals to experience two awe-inspiring natural wonders at once. To commemorate this rare event, we unveiled a special edition Discover Niagara Shuttle wrapped in stunning eclipse-themed artwork by Orchard Park artist Christina Francis.

During the week of the eclipse, our shuttles provided free transportation, connecting visitors to a range of exciting events and programs organized by our partners, including several unforgettable NASA-hosted experiences. Funding for these shuttle initiatives was provided through a grant from AES.



Niagara Falls at 3:18PM during the eclipse.

Salute to the Parks Gala

In April, our team traveled to Washington, D.C., to proudly support Executive Director Sara Capen and the Alliance of National Heritage Areas as she received the prestigious National Park Achievement Award from the National Parks Conservation Association. The award was presented during the Salute to the Parks Gala at the iconic National Building Museum. The event provided a remarkable platform to showcase the impactful work of National Heritage Areas and to celebrate the historic passage of the National Heritage Area Act.



Discover Niagara Shuttle

The Discover Niagara Shuttle celebrated another successful season, providing free transportation for locals and visitors from May through October. As a cornerstone of our region’s tourism infrastructure, the shuttle connects people to Niagara’s incredible attractions and natural wonders. This year, we were thrilled to expand our service, offering daily routes to Four Mile Creek Campground—delighting campers and creating seamless access to the area’s treasures.

In addition to our regular routes, the shuttle played a vital role in over 100 special events, including class trips, festivals, tours, parades, and more. By connecting communities and enhancing experiences, the Discover Niagara Shuttle continues to make a meaningful impact throughout the region.



Prophet Isaiah House

The Prophet Isaiah Second Coming House celebrated a monumental milestone this summer, opening its doors to the public after the successful completion of an intricate and labor-intensive restoration project in partnership with the Kohler Foundation and B.R. Howard and Associates. The grand opening ceremony marked the culmination of years of dedication, with our staff playing a pivotal role in managing construction needs and curating engaging indoor exhibits.

The excitement was high as we welcomed visitors to experience this one-of-a-kind art environment for the first time and learn about the extraordinary life of Prophet Isaiah. Later in the year, we welcomed students from Newfane, whose awe and wonder during their tour underscored the profound impact of this remarkable space.

Our efforts were honored with the “Preservation Craft” award from Preservation Buffalo Niagara, recognizing our commitment to restoring this intricate and captivating site to ensure its legacy endures for generations.

Regular tours of the Prophet Isaiah Second Coming House are planned for 2025, offering even more opportunities to share this cultural treasure with the world.



Cutting the ribbon on the Prophet Isaiah Second Coming House.



Learn more about the Prophet Isaiah House project.





Students from Newfane take a tour of the house.



Our staff accepting a Buffalo Niagara Preservation Award for the Prophet Isaiah House project.





Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center

2024 was another remarkable year for the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, solidifying its reputation as a beacon of excellence. The Center continued to attract locals, tourists, and diverse group tours, offering an unparalleled opportunity to delve into the region's unique history and its profound connection to the journey to freedom.

At the heart of this world-class experience are the Center's renowned Freedom Conversation tours, which remain a defining feature. These tours provide visitors with an educational and thought-provoking exploration of our shared history, offering a compelling perspective that bridges the past, present, and future.

The year also featured an outstanding lineup of programming, highlighted by an exceptional Black History Month series. This included captivating lectures, live music, engaging tours, and meaningful collaborations with schools. Through its impactful programming and immersive experiences, the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center continues to set the standard for excellence in preserving and sharing history.

Closing out the year on an inspiring note, the breathtaking "Beacon of Hope", a 13-foot bronze statue by Academy and Emmy Award-winning sculptor Wesley Wofford of Wofford Sculpture Studio, made its arrival in Niagara Falls. This powerful traveling statue, which was displayed at the Heritage Center for several months, honors the legacy of Harriet Tubman and her courageous journeys to freedom. It served as a poignant reminder of her historic path through Niagara Falls via the International Suspension Bridge, symbolizing resilience, courage, and the enduring pursuit of liberty.



Team members with "Beacon of Hope."



Learn more about the NF Underground Railroad Heritage Center.

Public Art

2024 was an outstanding year for public art and an exciting opportunity to collaborate once again with the Niagara Falls City School District. Two stunning murals were completed at Harry F. Abate Elementary School, celebrating the joy of learning and the bright futures of its students. Additionally, the iconic DiCamillo Bakery on Linwood Avenue became home to a towering public art installation featuring a young Skip DiCamillo. Both projects were part of the Downtown Revitalization Initiative (DRI), with more inspiring DRI projects on the horizon.

Beyond these highlights, a variety of community-driven public art installations were completed, adding beauty to the city and fostering connections among its residents. We are firm believers in the transformative power of public art to instill pride, strengthen community bonds, and honor our diverse history and heritage. We look forward to continuing our mission to harness that power to uplift and unite our community.



Polly King

2024 was truly the year of Polly King—what we fondly called the Pollyverse.

We launched a gallery in the former Grayline space titled “Women of Niagara: The Portrait Ladies of Polly King.” This captivating exhibit showcased King’s many portraits, each reflecting the rich history of Niagara Falls and the women who lived here, visited, or crossed paths with her in some way.

A highlight was welcoming longtime Portrait Lady researcher Sandra Rutkowski to the gallery for an engaging talk. She shared her remarkable journey of uncovering the stories behind these women, revealing fascinating connections and insights that brought new depth to Polly King’s work. Hearing Sandra’s process was an inspiring reminder of the power of art and history to connect us across time.

Our team proudly unveiled “Colors Sing to Me: The Life and Art of Polly King”—a major exhibit at the Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University created by our team. Spanning from the roaring ‘20s to the early ‘90s, Polly King’s art captured the profound transformation of Niagara Falls. She chronicled its evolution from an industrial powerhouse to the iconic “Honeymoon Capital,” and finally, to a city facing the complexities of a post-industrial era, often referred to as the “Rust Belt.”

King’s work brought these pivotal moments to life, from the monumental construction of the Niagara Power Project to the vibrant hustle of Main Street, all while celebrating the enduring majesty of Niagara Falls itself. Carefully curated paintings and personal objects, selected by the King family and our team, told the compelling story of her extraordinary life and artistic vision.

In May, we celebrated the exhibit’s opening with a community reception, complete with guided tours and shared stories. A special highlight was the involvement of Polly’s 92-year-old son, Don King, who served as a docent, offering visitors unique insights and personal anecdotes about his mother’s life and legacy. Beyond the exhibit, a range of programming throughout the year further explored King’s remarkable contributions, ensuring her story continues to inspire generations to come.



Deirdre Reynolds gives a Polly tour.



POLLY KING



Learn more about our work with Polly King.



In 2017, I was first introduced to the art of Polly King via her son Don. Since that moment, my life became infinitely better. There is not a person that walks into the Polly King gallery that doesn't find it "kinda nice" or walk away in awe at the beauty, mastery, and timelessness of Polly's work. Like so many before me and surely those that will come after me, I asked, "How could one person create over ten thousand pieces of art in a lifetime?"

Like me, my team fell instantly in love with Polly's art, the story of her life, her reflections and journals, Don's dedication to his mother, and the incredible legacy that Polly presented to anyone who is willing to enter what we fondly refer to as the Pollyverse. With ease, we became Pollyinators. Our team is not the first nor will we be the last, but part of a hive that extends a century and includes Polly's beautiful family, Sandy and Bill Rutkowski, every Portrait lady, and almost the entire 20th century of Niagara Falls.

The Pollyverse filled our hearts, minds, and spirits. Her work and life reflect the power of art in shaping the human experience. It expresses the importance of not only feeding your body but also the need for all of us to feed our souls.

As a woman, Polly persevered with her dream as an artist despite the systemic and societal barriers she faced in the mid-20th century. Through her arts and her words, you experience her defiance to being confined to a single role or medium of art. As an artist, she not only mastered the masters but created art everywhere she went and quite possibly every day of her life. In doing so, she chronicled and gifted us, and by extension Niagara Falls, with an anthropological look at the quickly changing landscape of Niagara Falls in the 20th century.

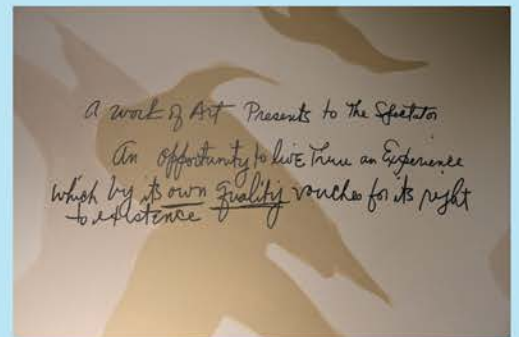
Through her art, the people and places came to life. The struggle between ensuring the natural beauty of Niagara Falls and the industrial reality that economically built Niagara Falls was present in her work, showing us through art the remarkable innovation in constructing the Niagara Power Project alongside the serenity of Niagara Falls State Park.

Through her art, we experience Polly's travels and her ardent belief that simple pleasures bring the greatest joy. Whether it was flowers, tea, or the ever-changing seasons of Western New York, Polly treasured them, and it is expressed in her art. She was a true "bon vivant" in practice and in spirit.

Finally, Polly's work epitomized the true power of human potential to create and understand what is possible. If one person could create this much, what can I do? Polly's life and art challenge each of us to dig deeper into the possible, to view less, to consume less, and to do and create more. To create art in our form and in our lives for no other reason than to enjoy.

With our deepest gratitude, thank you, Don King, for opening our eyes and hearts to the extraordinary world of Polly King and giving our team the honor of bringing her work to life at the Castellani Art Museum, the former Jenss Building, and on our Discover Niagara Shuttle fleet.

Sara





Photos by Alana Adetola Arts Photography





The first planning meeting between the Castellani Art Museum, Don King, and the Niagara Falls National Heritage Area.

Joseph Slawinski

In 2024, the Niagara Falls National Heritage Area staff also turned their attention to another remarkable artist—Polish native Joseph Slawinski—who created numerous works of art throughout Western New York, including several within our own Heritage Area. Over the past year, our team undertook a thorough inventory of his pieces, with the hope of launching larger-scale projects in the future. These efforts aim to spotlight Slawinski’s impressive range of talents and celebrate his enduring artistic legacy.



Niagara Falls Library

Digitization

With funding provided by the Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation, we partnered with the Niagara Falls Public Library to digitize its invaluable local history collection, a project dedicated to preserving the rich stories of our region. By safeguarding these treasures, we're ensuring that future generations can explore and celebrate our shared heritage. Soon, this collection will be accessible to all, making it easier than ever to connect with the history that defines us.



2025!

Our team is preparing for a busy 2025, featuring the launch of a revamped Discover Niagara Shuttle, the completion of the Niagara Falls Public Library Digitization Project, additional public art installations, and an increased focus on enhancing visitor experiences. We plan to offer tours and strengthen our partnerships within the region. Most importantly, we remain committed to embracing new opportunities as they arise and truly embracing the power of yes.

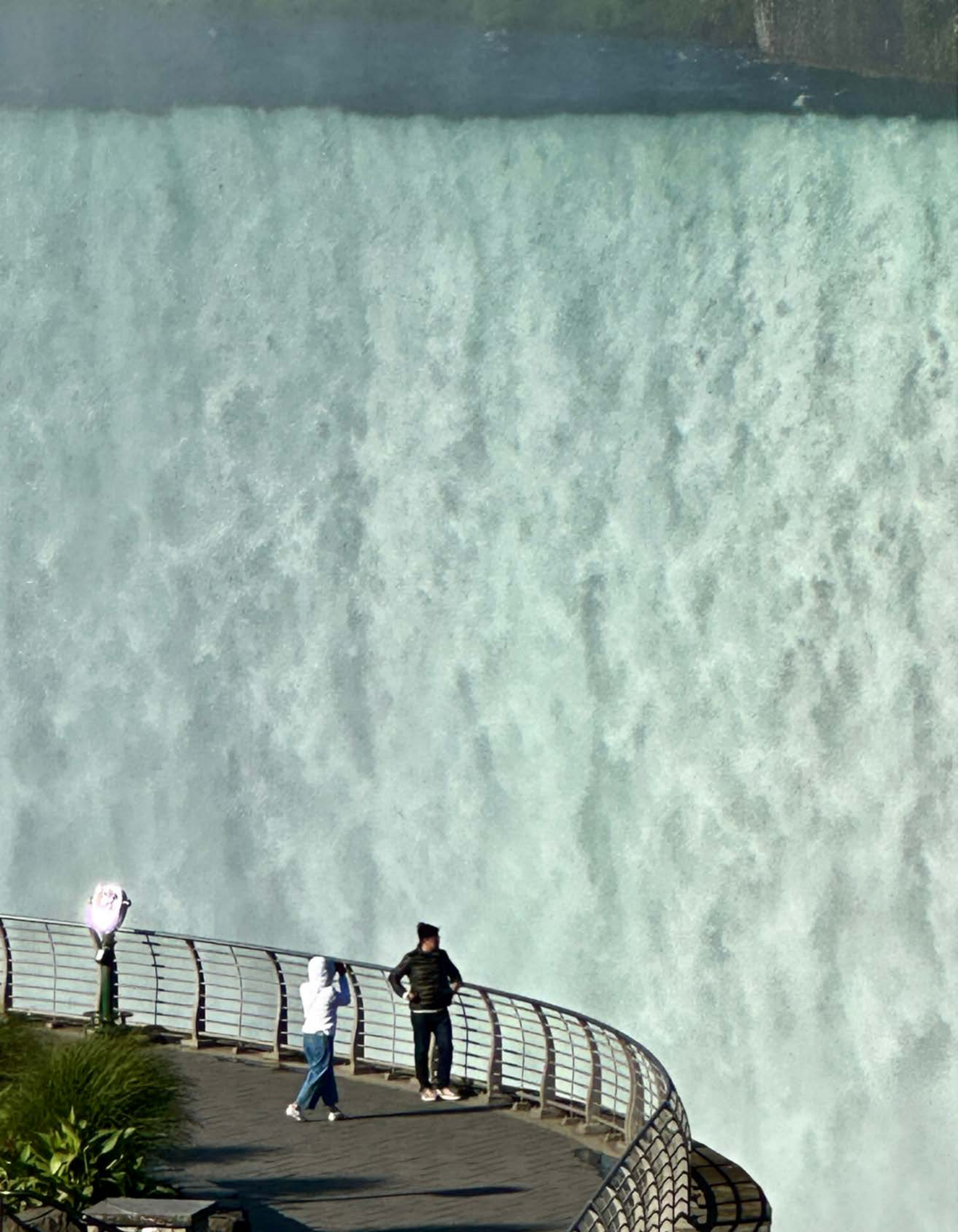


Photo by Alana Adetola Arts Photography

*I tried to tell in
paint the joy I had in
people + places and living
of every thing :-)*



Buddhist monks participating in a walk for peace visit the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center.





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NIAGARA FALLS NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA

