

University of Michigan students react warmly to talk by former political prisoner and artist, Gary Tyler

Luke Galvin
23 March 2025

On March 13, renowned quilt artist and political prisoner Gary Tyler spoke before an audience of over 1,000 at the University of Michigan (UM) in Ann Arbor. He was framed for murder at the age of 16 and sentenced to death. Tyler, who served 42 years in prison, stressed the historical importance of his struggle as a class-war prisoner and his use of art to promote social change.

Tyler's presentation, "Art as Resilience," was part of the Penny W. Stamps School of Art and Design's distinguished speaker series, in collaboration with Detroit's Library Street Collective art gallery. The Detroit gallery, which sponsored Tyler as a speaker in July 2023, features an ongoing exhibition of his work. Thursday's event was open to the public and free to attend.

Although the Stamps series is academic and attended by students for class assignments, Tyler's story elicited an immense response from the audience, resonating with many underlying political concerns and questions of workers and youth today.

In October 1974, Tyler, a 16-year-old African American high school student, was arrested and falsely charged with the murder of a 13-year-old white youth who had been shot and killed amid an anti-busing mob incited by the Ku Klux Klan. Police viciously beat Gary in an attempt to gain a false confession to the murder.

After a spurious trial, Tyler was convicted of first-degree murder and placed on death row at Louisiana's notorious Angola State Penitentiary, known for its violence and harsh conditions. After the Supreme Court struck down the death penalty in 1976, invalidating his sentence, Gary spent almost 40 years in prison for a

crime he didn't commit.

Gary Tyler became a symbol of America's brutal class injustices. The Trotskyist movement—the Workers League (WL) and the Young Socialists (YS), forerunners of the Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality—played a leading role in Tyler's struggle for freedom.

The YS and WL organized marches and meetings to publicize Tyler's case, collected 100,000 signatures demanding his release, and won support from unions representing millions of workers.

Speaking with the *Michigan Daily*, Art & Design junior Tyler Lawhead described the impact of Tyler's emphasis on the role of art in the struggle against injustice. She stated her "biggest takeaway was what other artists are doing in the context of their life and what more I can be doing with my art."

Vivien Eiseman, another Art & Design junior who commented on Tyler's presentation to the *Daily*, stated: "I've always been really interested in protest art and sign making, and I really like that behind him there were a bunch of photos from protests and protests about him being in prison ... It's always interesting to me that people can convey your opinion and message in a really concise way, like within a protest sign."

Following Tyler's discussion and questions, attendees spoke with reporters from the WSWs and members of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, the youth section of the Socialist Equality Party, at U-M.

Several attendees described Tyler's immense impact on the audience, with one student remarking, "I've never heard an applause that loud for a Stamps event."

I've never stayed through the end of the Q&A section or seen that many others do so."

Four other students spoke at length with WSWs reporters and gave a video interview. All stated they found Tyler's remarks moving and especially relevant to the immediate political situation.

"It was one of the most inspiring lecture series, by far," one said, "and this is the first time we've all stayed this long for the whole Q&A section. His words were very impactful, the way that he engaged with the audience in the Q&A and his answers were thoughtful. It makes you think his experience really reflects on you and makes you want to ... think about everything that he was talking about and consider it in relation to the state of the world."

When asked about the case of Mahmoud Khalil—a legal resident of the United States who has been kidnapped and imprisoned by the Trump administration for his role in anti-genocide protests at Columbia University—another student responded:

They're taking away and violating his [Khalil's] rights that he should have as a person who lives and breathes, and that's my big takeaway after listening to Gary's talk. Listening to all of the things that he [Gary] did to retain his humanity ... It was intense because there were people trying to take that away from him. There were people who didn't recognize him, like, look at him! ... I think it's important on a very basic level. Obviously, there are a million things we need to fix—just treat people like people.

When asked how they felt about Tyler's statements in support of youth protesting injustice and inequality, and taking up the struggle against oppressive systems, one of them said:

Nobody knows what they have to do until they're doing [it]. Sometimes you just have to take the first step, even if you don't know what that looks like. I think sometimes the first step can be like building a community, like having

friends and people who are like-minded around you that can support each other.

Speaking on both the attack on public education and the Trump administration's assault on protesters at major US universities, another student said, "I have a friend from Columbia [University] who I was speaking with the other day about the situation there." She continued, "It's really important to fight as forcefully as possible and spread information. People don't want us to be educated. People don't want us to be able to interact with information, critically. They want us to be complacent."



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact