



Inside

Music, Mentorship, and Legacy: The Journey of Dr. David M. Thomas

“Music is a means of connection, healing, and celebration,” he said. “That’s why I do what I do.”

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Celebrating 100 Years of Impact: Lady Pearl Shields’ Legacy of Leadership and Love



By Ron Calhoun



SCAN TO LISTEN

Imagine living a life so full of purpose, service, and love that it inspires generations to follow in your footsteps. On January 8, Cleveland’s very own Lady Pearl Shields celebrated her 100th birthday, and her story is one for the ages—a blueprint for resilience, leadership, and making a difference.

From shaping young minds as a groundbreaking educator to spreading hope through her ministry, Shields is a living legend. Her story is so powerful because of its relatability. It showcases the power of perseverance, the value of community, and the importance of giving back.

From the Classroom to the Community

Born in 1925 to Luther and Pearl Thomas, Shields grew up in Cleveland’s Miles Heights neighborhood and attended John Adams High School. She knew early on that education was her calling. After earning her bachelor’s degree from Cleveland State University and a master’s degree in education from Kent State

University, she continued to study at other universities like Bowling Green and John Carroll.

But she didn’t just stop at earning degrees, she changed lives. For 27 years, Shields was the principal at Iowa Maple Elementary School, turning it into a hub of creativity, learning, and innovation.

“She believed in every single student and made you feel like you mattered, asking the children and everyone around her for excellence,” said Rachel Oden, a friend of Shields for 60 years.

After retiring from Cleveland public schools, most people might have kicked back and relaxed. Not Shields. She became the principal at Mount Pleasant Christian School and kept inspiring young minds until her second retirement.

Faith Meets Action

For Shields, education and faith went hand in hand. As an ordained minister, she served as an Associate Pastor at Euclid Avenue Church of God. She didn’t just preach—she led by example, mentoring others and taking on leadership roles in organizations like the National Association of Women of the Church of God.

Rev. Lee Goode, pastor of Church of the Harvest Church of God in Cleveland said, “She can pray without ceasing and get results. People are really impressed with that and respect her ability to speak the truth.”



Lady Pearl Shields holds her Leadership Awards. Credit: LaJean Rae

Pearl’s faith fueled her activism and mentorship, ensuring her impact reached beyond the walls of the church.

A Legacy of Black Excellence

If Shields’ life had a theme, it would be Black excellence. She’s a founding member of the Lambda Phi Omega Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated, a sisterhood dedicated to service and

empowerment. Her book, “Feeling, Thinking, and Growing on Hough Avenue,” captures the essence of her Cleveland upbringing and the strength of a community.

Shield’s nephew Ray Cameron said he lives by what she said, “You’re not better than anyone else, but anyone else is not better than you!”

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Opinion: Cleveland Must Fulfill its Promise to Address Racism as a Public Health Crisis



By Yvonka Marie Hall Executive Director Northeast Ohio Black Health Coalition



SCAN TO LISTEN

C OF C 125-174

Resolution No. 296-2020

Council Members Griffin, B. Jones, Kelley, J. Jones, Bishop, McCormack, Johnson, Cleveland, Polensek, Conwell, Hairston, Mooney, Brancatelli, Santana, Zone, Kazy, Slife

AN EMERGENCY RESOLUTION Declaring racism a public health crisis and establishing a working group to promote racial equity in the City of Cleveland.

Editor’s note: The opinions expressed here are those of the author.

In 2020, the world experienced a profound awakening regarding social justice and racial equity. In response, Cleveland City Council adopted Resolution 296-2020, officially declaring racism a public health crisis. In the years that followed, the city and

community leaders were expected to collaborate on initiatives to promote health and equity for all residents and visitors.

Today, however, I wish to raise significant concerns about local leadership responsiveness to community needs, particularly in light of the declaration and the Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) conducted

in Cleveland.

The CHNA highlighted alarming trends, revealing that the leading causes of death in Ohio are heart disease, cancer, and COVID-19, as reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics.

Additionally, Black people in Cleveland have higher rates of

chronic health conditions, such as asthma, high blood pressure, and diabetes as documented by the National Library of Medicine. They are also more likely to experience poor outcomes from obesity, low birth weight, and HIV.

Also, it’s concerning that the life expectancy for Black residents

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Celebrating 100 Years of Impact: From front page Lady Pearl Shields' Legacy of Leadership

Her connection to the community is unshakable. As a 60-year resident of the Lee-Harvard area, she's not just a neighbor—she's an icon. Whether she's gardening, reading, or attending programs at Fatima Family Center, Shields shows us that age is just a number when it comes to staying connected.

A Message for the Next Generation

So, what can Gen Z and millennials learn from Pearl Shields? Everything. Her life is proof that education, faith, and community are the cornerstones of a meaningful life. Whether you're starting your first job, launching a side hustle, or figuring out your purpose, Shields' story reminds us to stay grounded, give back, and chase our dreams with passion.

"I've always believed in planting seeds of hope and love, even when the world felt heavy," Shields once said.



Niece, LaJean Rae, Lady Pearl Shields and daughter LaShelle Johnson celebrates 100 years of life.

Celebrating a Century of Greatness

As she celebrates 100 years, Pearl's life serves as a reminder: Your actions today shape the legacy you leave tomorrow.

For this milestone birthday, Cuyahoga County Council members honored Shields for her lifetime of service, leadership, and her unwavering commitment to the community.

Opinion: Cleveland Must Fulfill its Promise to Address Racism as a Public Health Crisis From front page

in Cuyahoga County is only 73.6 years—significantly lower than that of white, Hispanic, and Asian residents. Addressing these racial disparities must be a priority for our local leaders but there is a lack of urgency from the council to do so.

I recently spoke outside of the city council's office along with some members of the Cuyahoga County Progressive Caucus, The Center for Black Health & Equity, and Cleveland Lead Advocates for Safe Housing (CLASH) to express our discontent with the current administration. I believe we may not be the only ones left in the wind.

For example, on October 28, 2024, a coalition member for Cut the Salt, Keep the Flavor expressed their support for sodium warning labels to be placed on menus in Cleveland restaurants to inform customers of high-sodium items when purchasing food. This solution would be especially helpful for the Black community. Since the time of the public comment, the council has not introduced it to the Health, Human Services, and the Arts Committee let alone followed up on the matter.

Chairman Kevin Conwell of the Health, Human Services, and the Arts Committee; Council Members Richard Starr, Stephanie D. Howse-Jones, and Jasmin Santana have been in tune with the unique public health necessities of Cleveland by advocating for evidence-based policy solutions. Mayor Justin Bibb of Cleveland and the Department of Public Health have also expressed support for these changes.

This is a strong start, but those in positions of power need to collaborate with the community and implement evidence-based policies that will genuinely enhance health outcomes for Black residents. Clevelanders, we need to be sure public health policies are passed to serve us properly.

We need all our Cleveland neighbors to call their designated

councilperson; schedule meetings to discuss evidence-based policies. Ask the council member to allow ordinances to be scheduled and presented before council. Lastly, attend City Council meetings and testify in favor or for the need of evidence-based policies. We all deserve our ideas to be put through a fair, democratic process.

Yvonka M. Hall, MPA, RA, CTTS, GRMS is the Executive Director of the nationally recognized Northeast Ohio Black Health Coalition (NEOBHC). Hall has a master's degree in Public Administration (MPA) and a wealth of specialized credentials, including Registered Advocate (RA), Certified Tobacco Treatment Specialist (CTTS), and Grief Recovery Method Specialist (GRMS).



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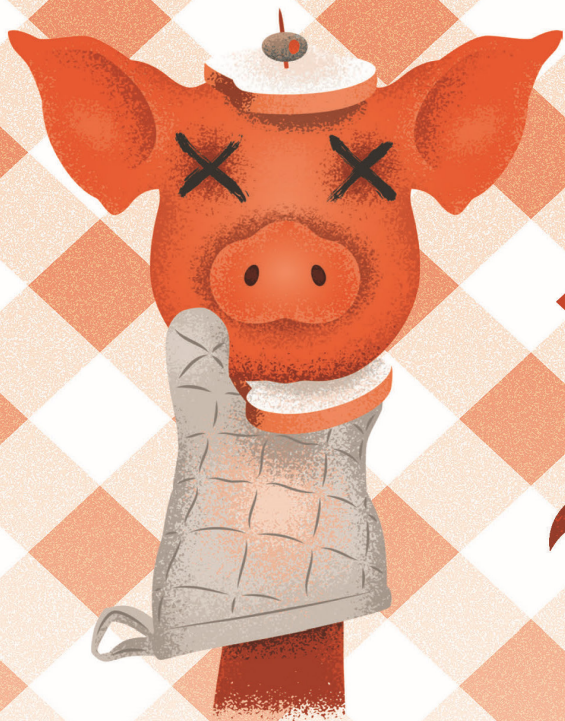
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THIS AIN'T YOUR MAMA'S HAMLET!

Fat Ham

FEBRUARY 1 - 23 | ALLEN THEATRE
 by JAMES IJAMES | directed by NATHAN HENRY

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has been invited to the backyard barbeque! Get your plate ready for a slab of smokin' hot revenge, served with a hefty scoop of vengeance, and a side of karaoke. Without spilling too much of the sweet tea, a visit from beyond the grave reveals family secrets and scandalous generational trauma. How will "Juicy," a queer Southern Black mama's boy, reconcile the truth in service of his own liberation? This Pulitzer Prize-winning play is a delicious, outrageously, heaping hot mess of hilarity!

MEET THE ARTISTS



JAMES IJAMES
 Playwright
 James Ijames is a Pulitzer Prize winning and Tony Award nominated playwright, a director, and educator. James' plays have been seen at Wilma Theatre, The National Black Theatre, The Public Theater (NYC), and Steppenwolf Theatre.



NATHAN HENRY
 Director
 Nathan Henry is a Cleveland-based professional director, producer, and actor. Select credits include Dobama Theatre, Cleveland Public Theatre, and Karamu House.



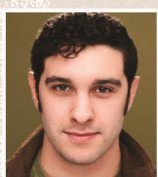
THE CAST, L-TO-R: Mell-Vonti Bowens, Jr., Ananias J. Dixon, Tanesha Gary, Shunté Lofton, Paul Oakley Stovall, Brenden Peifer, Mariama Whyte

**FOR THE LOVE OF THE GAME...
 AND LEBRON JAMES**



KING James

MARCH 1 - 23 | OUTCALT THEATRE
 by RAJIV JOSEPH | directed by MONTEZE FREELAND
 a co-production with CITY THEATRE COMPANY in Pittsburgh, PA



THE CAST:
 Robert Hunter & Michael Patrick Trimm

In the world of basketball, LeBron James is the king. But to die-hard Clevelanders like Shawn and Matt, "King James" is a god, and their fandom forges their unlikely bond. Set in a bar in Cleveland Heights and spanning LeBron's rookie season to the 2016 NBA Championship, the men navigate their turbulent friendship through their shared love of the game. From the first quarter to the final jump shot, *King James* comes in clutch as a riveting love letter to our beloved home, "Believeland." Filled with humor, jabs steps, offensive fouls, and great poignancy, this energetic new play by Pulitzer Prize finalist Rajiv Joseph is an intimate exploration of the place that sports occupy in our lives and in our relationships with others.

'The Amen Corner' Shines at Akron's Weathervane Playhouse



By Vince Robinson



James Baldwin's play "The Amen Corner," directed by Terrence Spivey, is wowing audiences at Akron's Weathervane Playhouse. Baldwin was a noted author/activist known for speaking out against societal ills. In this Baldwin, his first play, he tackled relationships, religion, and racism, true to his form as a writer and social critic.

"The Amen Corner" remains relevant in its depiction of the conflict between religion and reality. The play addresses the juxtaposition between rhetoric and real talk. It begs the question of whether or not prayer and praise truly solve problems. Is faith sufficient to address the issues as prevalent today as they were in the last century or is there futility in our ol' time religion?

The answer is left to the observer.

Shaheen Harris portrays Margaret Alexander, pastor of a Harlem, New York church in 1954. The story follows her navigation of a church without her husband

and losing control of her 18-year-old son, David (Beloved Obeng), who longs to leave his role as the pianist there to pursue a life as a secular musician. Her husband Luke (Michael D. Fisher) returns after a 10-year absence to reconnect. His return signals an unraveling of events that test her faith and the confidence of her congregation.

This narrative is brought to life with a thoughtfully crafted set by Richard Morris Jr. It depicts a church upstairs, subtly projecting it as a high place, visible at all times. Downstairs leads to access to a bedroom awaiting a tuberculosis-ridden Luke, and a kitchen below where the pastor and some parishioners congregate. All three sections of the stage serve as windows to those separate realities, all happening within a week and visible at all times.

The opening scene brings the energy of a lively church, replete with Sister Margaret's fiery oratory, the spirited responses from her flock, and the consistent rhythm of Sister Boxer's (Jerald Lynn Beard) magnificently singing tambourine. It was a perfect complement to the gospel music supplied by Maestro Glenn Brackens, setting the tone for the underpinning of the moral thread

that runs through the narrative.

Charlene DeJournett as Sister Moore, carries the banner of righteousness, a chaste member of the congregation who appears to support the pastor initially, but eventually joins other members in reshaping the perception of their beloved leader as she wrestles with her declining popularity. DeJournett and Harris were effective in the embodiment of their characters in this production, standing out among the performers.

Equally riveting, however, was Fisher who portrayed a dying trombonist who comes back to the wife who left him. He spent much of the play in full view on his deathbed, subtly reminding the audience that he was present while the drama unfolded. His last breath brings the proceedings to a climax when his mouthpiece falls to the floor after the wife who had deserted him with their son confessed her undying love for him.

Their son, David, had the eyes of Sister Boxer's husband, Brother Boxer (Derwin Rowser) on him to disclose his penchant for cigarettes, girls, and worldly activities to the flock. The tug of war between his mother's plan for him and his own plan was admirably conveyed by Obeng,



Weathervane Playhouse's production of "The Amen Corner".

Credit: Dale Dong Photography

offering a perfect companion to Rowser's potent role as Brother Boxer in dropping the 411 on the young man's departure from his church music ministry.

The Broadway production resulted in a Tony Award nomination for Beah Richards as Margaret Alexander, Spivey's masterful direction delivers an engaging display of the nuances within church life and the drama connected to the people within. The nearly three-hour performance moves quickly to a conclusion that either tests one's faith or strengthens it. Read the full review at cleobserve.com

Banned Book Review: 'Just Mercy - A Story of Justice and Redemption' in the Prison System



By: Marissa Valentine



"Capital punishment means, them without the capital, get the punishment." - Bryan Stevenson

As I continue to examine the theme of banned books, the motifs that were common in the books banned or challenged covered topics of race, gender, and sexuality. These particular topics constantly seem to be a subject of debate. January is the start of the new year and, for me, a time for transformation. In Bryan Stevenson's book "Just Mercy", the transformation so dearly needed is that of the American prison system and its unjust, and inhumane treatment of the inmates.

The beginning of "Just Mercy" reels you in as a reader as it describes the landscape of the American prison system that will willingly jail children as young as 14 years old, not taking into account the atrocities of their childhood or the lack of parental support that

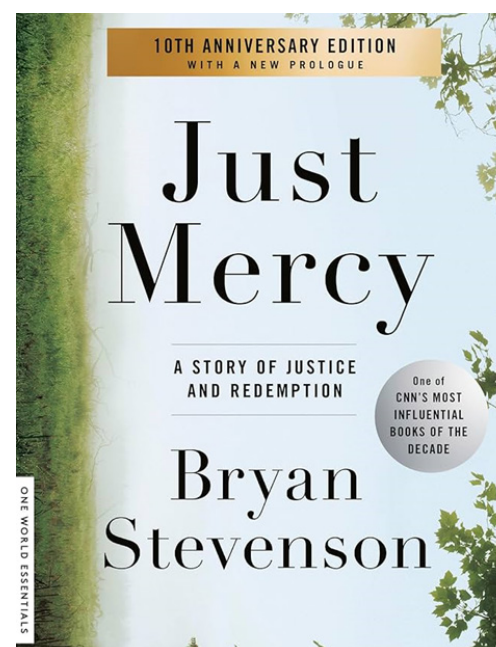
landed them in the hands of law enforcement.

Author Bryan Stevenson, through his illuminating first-person descriptions of his experience as a young and inexperienced lawyer, helps you feel as though you are in the room with every inmate.

"The more I reflected on the experience, the more I recognized that I had been struggling my whole life with the question of how and why people are judged unfairly," said Stevenson.

Stevenson's journey for justice began with his law school internship at the Southern Prisoners' Defense Committee in Atlanta in the late 1980s. There, he was instructed on behalf of his superior to go down to the Georgia Diagnostic and Classification Center, a prison in rural Georgia, to inform an inmate named Henry who was condemned to death row, that he would not be executed this year.

Black Americans make up approximately 13.7% of the population, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, yet we comprise approximately 38% of the inmates in America's prisons. Many prosecutors unjustly and ignorantly argue an affinity for violence among Black youth



as noted in Stevenson's book. However, the real culprit for the large population of Blacks and poor white Americans in the prison system is a lack of proper and adequate legal representation, lack of financial assistance, and the poverty and circumstances that create environments that trap adolescents in bad situations.

As we discuss the implications of unfair treatment of youth, particularly Black youth, in the 88 counties in Ohio, Cuyahoga County sends more children through the adult court system than any other county in Ohio, according to the Greater Cleveland Youth Justice Collective. Although Black people only

account for 17% of the populace in Ohio, Black youth represent 72% of detainees in the Department of Youth Services (DYS) youth systems prisons in Ohio.

In his book, Stevenson's advocacy for prison youth and other marginalized groups reaches the Supreme Court as he presents research studies that highlight the way adolescent brains function. Stevenson and his team at the EJI aim to sway the court's decisions regarding how they sentence teenagers in a way that is compassionate but also understanding of the lack of life experience, resources, and guidance as part of the consideration when deciding a just sentence for crimes.

Reflecting on the implicit biases placed on children of color, I am grateful to author/lawyer Bryan Stevenson and groups like the Greater Cleveland Youth Justice Collective, both of which work tirelessly to shine the light on the oppressive, cruel, and prejudicial treatment of youth offenders.

This book is a must-read for anyone who enjoys reading autobiographical stories of redemption, social justice, and fearless compassion.

City Council Legislation Undergoes First Reading: January 2025



The Cleveland Observer is dedicated to keeping residents informed about legislative activities under review. By reporting on ordinances and resolutions during their initial stages, the Observer enables community members to engage with their Council members, providing feedback or expressing support before final decisions are made.

How Your Tax Dollars are Being Spent

Cleveland City Council introduced a series of ordinances and resolutions during its meetings the last four weeks. These measures address a range of issues, including infrastructure improvements, public safety, community development, and economic growth. After their first readings, the legislation was referred to the appropriate city departments and committees for further scrutiny before advancing toward final passage.

The legislative process involves multiple steps to ensure transparency and accountability. Following the first reading, each ordinance or resolution undergoes detailed review by city departments and committees. This is followed by a second reading and additional discussion during the Council of the Whole meeting, where members debate and refine the proposals before a final vote.

First Reading January 10, 2025

Ordinance No. 19-2025

Summary: Authorizes the Director of Finance, on behalf of the Cleveland Municipal Court, to apply for and accept a grant from the Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services Board of Cuyahoga County for the Addiction Treatment Program – Admin Fee SFY 25 Program.

Sponsors: Council Member Griffin (by departmental request).

Funding: Not applicable.

Ordinance No. 20-2025

Summary: Authorizes the Director of Finance to enter into an agreement with Holland & Knight LLP for federal lobbying services for the City of Cleveland for one year, with an option to renew for an additional year.

Sponsors: Council Member Griffin (by departmental request).

Funding: \$180,000 annually from Fund No. 01-9998-6320.

Ordinance No. 21-2025

Summary: Authorizes the Director



of Public Works to employ one or more professional consultants to provide education and training for employees and to enter into a contract with the Solid Waste Association of North America (SWANA) for one year, with a one-year option to renew.

Sponsors: Council Members Bishop and Griffin (by departmental request).

Funding: Payable from Fund No. 01-7013-6224.

Ordinance No. 22-2025

Summary: Authorizes the Directors of Public Works, Parks and Recreation, and/or Finance to employ professional consultants to assess, recommend, and procure property insurance for Huntington Bank Field at 100 Alfred Lerner Way, for one year.

Sponsors: Council Members Bishop and Griffin (by departmental request).

Funding: Paid from Fund No. 11 SF 600 and other funds approved by the Director of Finance.

Ordinance No. 40-2025

Summary: Authorizes the Directors of Public Works and Economic Development to enter into a ground lease with Rust Belt Riders Composting, LLC, for the use and occupancy of property at 3270 East 79th Street to consolidate its composting facility operations and to install a retail operation, for a period of ten years with two ten-year renewal options.

Sponsors: Council Members Starr, Bishop, Hairston, and Griffin (by departmental request).

Funding: Annual rental rate based on a fair market value appraisal.

Ordinance No. 42-2025

Summary: Authorizes the Director of Public Health to transfer the property at 4242 Lorain Avenue to the Department of Community Development or Economic Development for redevelopment by Pennrose Holdings LLC, including a sale or ground lease of the property.

Sponsors: Council Members McCormack, Conwell, Hairston, and Griffin (by departmental request).

Funding: Not applicable.

Ordinance No. 44-2025

Summary: Authorizes the revocation of the Encroachment Permit granted to the Tamir Rice Foundation under Ordinance No. 883-2020, passed December 9, 2020, for certain streetscape and landscape improvements on the old West Boulevard alignment between Detroit Avenue and Madison Avenue. Authorizes the conveyance of new permanent and utility easements to the Foundation to improve and maintain the Tamir Rice Memorial at Cudell Commons.

Sponsors: Council Members Bishop, Hairston, and Griffin (by departmental request).

Funding: Not applicable.

Ordinance No. 45-2025

Summary: Supplements Ordinance No. 746-2024, passed August 7, 2024, by adding provisions related to tax increment financing (TIF) agreements and construction-management contracts for public infrastructure improvements in the redevelopment of the Cuyahoga Riverfront area. Repeals Section 9 and amends Section 10 of Ordinance No. 746-2024 to include new terms for public improvement projects.

Sponsors: Council Members Bishop, Hairston, and Griffin (by departmental request).

Funding: TIF funding through District Service Payments and Extension Period Service Payments, not exceeding specified limits.

January 17, 2025

Ordinance No. 95-2025

Summary: Authorizes the Director of Economic Development to execute documents for the acquisition and conveyance of properties related to TDG Franklin North LLC for development purposes, with specified easements and compliance with Section 5709.41 of the Revised Code.

Sponsors: Council Members McCormack, Hairston, and Griffin (by departmental request).

Funding: Title-related costs covered by TDG Franklin North

Ordinance No. 96-2025

Summary: Authorizes the Mayor and the Commissioner of Purchases and Supplies to acquire and reconvey properties located at 3105 Franklin Boulevard for inclusion in the chain-of-title prior to tax increment financing legislation for the Franklin Yards South Project.

Sponsors: Council Members McCormack, Hairston, and Griffin (by departmental request).

Funding: Nominal consideration of \$1 and other fair market considerations.

Ordinance No. 99-2025

Summary: Reallocates **\$3,096,087.79** previously designated for capital improvements to the West Side Market to support enhancements authorized under Ordinance Nos. 532-2023 and 543-2024, including reconfiguration, HVAC installation, and structural upgrades.

Sponsors: Council Members McCormack, Bishop, and Griffin (by departmental request).

Funding: Reallocation of previously authorized funds.

2025 City Council Standing Committees Meetings Schedule

Monday (Alternating)

9:30 a.m. – **Health, Human Services and the Arts Committee**

Chair: Conwell

Vice-Chair: Maurer

Members: Gray, Harsh, Howse-Jones, Slife, Starr

9:30 a.m. – **Municipal Services and Properties Committee**

Chair: Bishop

Vice-Chair: Starr

Members: Hairston, Jones, Kazy, Kelly, Maurer

Monday

2 p.m. – **Finance, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee**

Chair: Griffin

Vice-Chair: McCormack

Members: Bishop, Conwell, Hairston, Kazy, Polensek, Santana, Spencer

Tuesday

1:30 p.m. – **Workforce, Education, Training and Youth Development Committee**

Chair: Santana

Vice-Chair: Howse-Jones

Members: Gray, Jones, Slife, Spencer, Starr

Tuesday (Alternating)

9:30 a.m. – **Development, Planning and Sustainability Committee**

Chair: Hairston

Vice-Chair: Santana

Members: Harsh, Howse-Jones, Jones, McCormack, Spencer

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Cleveland's Core Four Arts Institutions: How They Reinvest in the City: Part 2



By Lisa O'Brien

Editor's Note: In this article, TCO continues its exploration from the last issue about how Cleveland's four biggest arts institutions give back to the community. In this issue, we will look at the efforts of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and the Cleveland Museum of Art.



to local Cleveland organizations including the Cleveland Public Library, the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, and the Beck Center for the Arts.

It is worth noting that while many artists make up the museum's collections, Black musicians are considered the foundation of rock and roll and its history, with "Rocket 88" by Ike Turner and The Kings of Rhythm being widely considered the first rock and roll song in 1951. With 108

by the Ohio Arts Council (OAC), which receives support from the State of Ohio and the National Endowment for the Arts." The museum receives approximately 770,000 visitors annually and is the fourth wealthiest art museum in the United States.

The museum houses worldwide exhibitions and brings thousands of new visitors yearly to the University Circle neighborhood. So, how does CMA serve Cleveland residents?



The Cleveland Museum of Art. Credit: ClevelandArt.com

The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (RRHOF) has been a major cornerstone of Cleveland's history, tourism, and arts since it opened in 1995. On October 19th, 2024, at the RRHOF induction ceremony, CEO and RRHOF President George Harris said that the hall has brought more than 15 million visitors since opening, resulting in an estimated economic impact of \$2.3 billion dollars.

The RRHOF received \$7 million dollars of funding from Ohio House Bill 2, a bill passed by Governor DeWine that allocated millions of Ohio state dollars to arts organizations and projects.

Those stats likely played a role in the decision for state funding. The museum benefits not only from the people of Cleveland's tax dollars and donations but also from the hundreds of Northeast Ohio artists and musicians who contributed to Cleveland's rich musical history. So, how does the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame give back?

The most notable way the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame invests back into the community is through their Cleveland VIP ticketing program which grants Cuyahoga County residents free admission to the museum.

The museum also produces a free summer concert series open to the public. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame also partners and donates

of the 380 inductees being Black artists, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame owes much of its content to this underrepresented group of artists in the music world.

To invest back into that community specifically, the museum has partnered with the Black Music Action Coalition, as of 2023, to create a mentorship program that provides 1 year of guaranteed income of \$1,000.00 a month and mentorship to emerging black and female musicians every year.

The goal of the program is to help the artists by creating opportunities for industry visibility and networking.

Although much of the Cleveland Museum of Art's (CMA) funding comes from private gifts and endowments, according to the museum website, "The museum is supported in part by residents of Cuyahoga County through a public grant from Cuyahoga Arts & Culture and made possible in part

related to their newest acquisitions as a part of this plan:

"He Was Meant for All Things to Meet," "The Gift," "Birdcage Kid (Boy)," "Heights III," and "A Scientist Seated at a Desk by Candlelight" are just a few examples of recent acquisitions from Black, Indigenous, and other underrepresented artists and communities. In addition, art by these artists can be found on the Rock Hall website.

The museum also offers a robust education program for Northeast Ohio schools. When asked about these programs, Mesek noted CMA's mobile art van "Studio Go" which "provides art-making activities and exploration for people of all ages, sparking curiosity and creating deeper connections to the museum's world-renowned collection." The van travels to schools and libraries around the city.

What is the Takeaway?

Whether through educational programming, artist funding, community access programs, or special events, these arts institutions are obligated to give back to the Cleveland community that supports them with funds and patronage.

Next time you donate to an organization or visit a museum, think about all the ways they can serve you. Each of these institutions have platforms for guests to share their experiences and wishes for the future, so make your voice heard, and keep supporting local art!

City Council Legislation Undergoes First Reading: January 2025 From page 5

2025 City Council Standing Committees Meetings Schedule

Wednesday (Alternating)

10 a.m. – **Safety Committee**

Chair: Polensek

Vice-Chair: Jones

Members: Gray, Howse-Jones, Kelly, Slife, Starr

10 a.m. – **Transportation and Mobility Committee**

Chair: McCormack

Vice-Chair: Slife

Members: Bishop, Gray, Kazy, Maurer, Santana

Thursday

10 a.m. – **Utilities Committee**

Chair: Kazy

Vice-Chair: Spencer

Members: Bishop, Gray, Harsh, Kelly, Polensek



Moderated by:
Imani Capri & Leon Bibb



SAVE THE DATE:
Every Thursday in
February 2025 @ 6 PM:

- **February 6:** Genetics & Alzheimer's Disease
- **February 13:** Caregiving 101: Preparing for the Future
- **February 20:** Taking Care of the Caregiver: The Importance of Self-Care
- **February 27:** Hypertension Control & Brain Health

Register with the QR Code or Link Below

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Music, Mentorship, and Legacy: The Journey of Dr. David M. Thomas



By Unity Powell

On a gray, rainy day at Cleveland School of the Arts, a choir of teens practiced an upbeat medley of songs accompanied by piano. Dr. David M. Thomas stood, watching his colleague lead the students through the arrangement. While passing through to get to his class, it was obvious that his presence had significance. He patted his feet and bobbed his head, smiling.

The magic of music and its ability to unite people is a sentiment that defines Thomas's decades-spanning career as a performer, educator, and composer. He has always used music as a means of connection and change. His journey from small-town origins to becoming a world-class versatile musical leader is a tale of purpose.

Born in Youngstown, Ohio, and raised in the suburb of Hubbard, he was surrounded by the rhythms of family and faith. His parents migrated from Alabama and brought the Southern traditions with them. They grew their food, kept chickens, cultivated community, and stressed the importance of church, a space in which music was a centerpiece.

Youngstown was once the "steel city" in its prime. "The steel mills were all that mattered," Thomas said. "It was how my father earned a living, but it wasn't my path." By the 1970s, when the industry was declining, that environment turned Thomas' pursuit of music into a leap of faith.

Thomas's first performance was in the fifth grade when his mother had him play a hymn for worshippers. "I didn't realize I had a natural talent," he said. "It was just fun to play something people can sing to." That excitement turned into passion, even as he was teased for it by his sports-loving brothers.

By high school, music was what drew his interest. His band teacher discovered he had perfect pitch, which is the ability to identify musical notes just by hearing them. "That teacher made the difference for me," Thomas said. "He proved to me that music could be my future."

Thomas studied at Youngstown State University's Dana School of Music, where he developed his talents.

He formed the band "Neon Tranquility," which landed

a record deal and recorded at the legendary Sigma Sound Studios in Philadelphia. They later toured with Major Harris, who had a hit with "Love Won't Let Me Wait," which dominated the charts, and later with Rose Royce during their "Car Wash" period. Playing alongside legends like Dizzy Gillespie and Luther Vandross was exhilarating, but the industry's instability loomed large.



Dr. David M. Thomas Credit: Dr Dave Thomas

For many touring musicians in the 1970s, life on the road was a double-edged sword. The glamour of performing with top acts often came with financial instability, grueling schedules, and physical risks. This reality came to fruition for Thomas during a heavy snowstorm in Virginia. The bus rattled along the icy highway, its headlights barely cutting through the thickness of snow. The storm arrived quickly, covering the mountains. Thomas was sitting by the window, holding the arm rest tight, at every turn he felt his nervousness grow. "This might be it," he thought.

It wasn't only the weather that chilled him; it was the uncertainty after each tour, the long stretches of waiting for the next call, and the nagging sense that his dream might leave him stranded, figuratively and literally. To step away from touring was difficult but Thomas wanted more

stability. He returned to college, earning his degree in music education from Case Western Reserve University.

His versatility included major productions, as music director for Karamu House's Black Nativity. He reimagined the score by adding R&B and hip-hop flavors while preserving the original vision of Langston Hughes. "It's about respecting tradition and moving it forward," he said. Now,

Evelyn Wright, jazz vocalist, and long-time collaborator reflected on Thomas as a mentor and his work with under-represented youth. "He's always wanting to remain engaged, stay connected to teaching, making sure that the kids have a pathway to move on. Walter Barnes went on to play with Babyface."

At home, Thomas is simply a dad. Married for decades, he shares a life rooted in faith with his wife, whom he met in church. Together, they raised three daughters, each finding her unique path: one works as a doctor in Cleveland, another as a banker in Toledo, and the third as a choreographer and dance educator in California.

Parenthood brought a new dimension to his life, shifting his priorities and grounding his decisions. "You can't replace the connection with your kids," he says. Even as music remained central to his career, he appreciated the everyday moments.

Thomas has overcome personal struggles. He was deeply affected by the deaths of his parents; his father, 93, and his mother, 96. "You're never fully prepared," he said, "but just knowing it's coming allows you to grasp some strength."

His music, including arrangements based on his mother's favorite hymn, "Amazing Grace," is a testament to their legacy. His artistry was molded, he explained, by grief. "It alters how you make things. It gives it a new layer, a new type of passion." This philosophy resonates throughout much of his work, from compositions for orchestras to the fanfare he wrote for his daughter's wedding.

Thomas is a vibrant force in Cleveland's arts community. Whether leading a choir, creating original works, or motivating young performers, he takes each project with the same enthusiasm he had back in the fifth grade, as a boy playing his first hymn. "Music is a means of connection, healing, and celebration," he said. "That's why I do what I do."

the production has made its way to Cleveland's famed Playhouse Square allowing access to a much larger audience.

Thomas' students are working in shows on Broadway like Hamilton and students who are music directors for big performing art groups across the country.

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10 Simple Steps to Crush Your New Year's Resolutions and Love the Year Ahead



By Desiree R. James, MBA, LISW
gittinmyishtogether.com

Portions of this content were created with assistance from OpenAI's ChatGPT.

Every January, we make promises to eat better, work out, save more, and stress less. But let's be honest—it's hard to stick to resolutions. In fact, 23% of people give up in the first week, and by the end of the year, only 9% succeed according to author Richard Batts from OSU.EDU article "Why Most New Year's Resolutions Fail."

Here's the good news: It doesn't have to be that way. This year, let's rewrite the story. You don't need to be perfect, you just need to take small, meaningful steps daily. Ready? Let's make this your best year yet with these 10 simple, doable steps.

1. Focus on Intentions, Not Resolutions.

Resolutions can feel like a to-do list you have to check off. Instead, think about intentions. What kind of life do you want to create? For example, instead of "I want to lose weight," try "I want to feel healthy and strong." Intentions come from the heart, not outside expectations.

Try This: Write down one intention and put it where you'll see it daily, like your mirror or phone lock screen. Why Your New Year's Resolutions Fail?

2. Honestly Reflect on Last Year.

Before diving into new goals, take a moment to look back. What worked for you last year? What didn't? This isn't about beating yourself up. It's about learning. Celebrate your wins, even the tiny ones, and take note of the lessons from what didn't go as planned. "What's one thing you're proud of from last year? What's one thing I want to improve this year?"

3. Choose a Mantra to Guide You.

Mantras are like pep talks you give yourself. They help you stay grounded and motivated



when things get tough. Choose something simple, like "I am enough" or "Progress, not perfection." Repeat it often—it works. Write your mantra on a sticky note and put it on your desk or dashboard.

4. Surround Yourself with People Who Inspire You.

Who you spend time with matters. Seek out people who challenge you, lift you, and make you feel like you can conquer the world. They don't even have to be

people you know. Follow inspiring figures on social media, read their books, or listen to their podcasts. Be inspired by women like Fawn Weaver of Uncle Nearest Distillery (her story) and Pinky Cole of Slutty Vegan (read about her journey). Who inspires you?

5. Build Rituals That Ground You.

Daily rituals aren't just routines, they're reminders of who you want to be. Whether it's a morning cup of tea, a five-minute meditation, or a gratitude journal, rituals can help you stay focused and calm.

6. Rely on Discipline, Not Just Motivation.

Motivation is great when you have it, but what happens when you're not feeling it? That's where discipline comes in. Show up for yourself, even on the hard days. Remember, consistency beats perfection every time. Fact: It takes about 66 days to form a habit. Stick with it research by Phillippa Lally when she held a Medical Research Council PhD studentship.

7. Make Peace with Feeling Lonely.

Working on yourself can feel isolating at times. Not everyone will understand your goals, and that's okay. Growth can be lonely, but it's also worth it. Find a support system that cheers you on, even if it's just one friend who "gets it."

Reminder: Loneliness doesn't last forever, but the confidence you gain from chasing your goals does.

8. Use Social Media as a Tool for Growth.

Social media can inspire or distract you. It all depends on how you use it. Follow accounts that motivate you, mute ones that don't, and be intentional about how much time you spend scrolling.

9. Celebrate Small Wins.

Don't wait until you've achieved your big goals to celebrate. Every step forward is progress and deserves recognition. Treat yourself to something small like a fancy coffee, a night off, or a mini dance party in your kitchen. Create a "wins jar." Every time you hit a milestone, write it on a piece of paper and add it to the jar. At the end of the year, you'll have a whole collection of accomplishments to look back on.

10. Step Outside Your Comfort Zone.

Growth doesn't happen when you're comfortable. Say "Yes" to opportunities that scare you a little, whether it's speaking up in a meeting, trying a new hobby, or meeting new people. You'll be amazed at what you can do. Challenge: This month, try one thing you've always wanted to do but felt nervous about. Go for it! You've got this.

Let's Make This Your Year

Encouraging Words for 2025 from the TCO Team



Be Certain That You Are Not Alone

Happy 2025! As the beginning of a new year always brings plenty of uncertainties with changing political climates, personal matters, weather, and you name it, I want to remind you of some things you can be certain. You can be certain that you have people who love you. You can be certain that who you are today may not be who you are tomorrow, the day after, or the day after, and that is wonderful. You can be certain that your voice matters and speaking your mind beats silence any day. You can be certain that you can and will grow from all the hardships

that may come with the new year. And most of all, you can be certain that you have a community here at TCO ready to support and uplift your stories through it all.

Sincerely,
Lisa O'Brien, Writer, The Cleveland Observer

Breathe Deep and Move Forward with Compassion for Yourself and Your Community

As we step into 2025, let us

take a moment to breathe deeply and reflect on the journey that has brought us to this point. Every new year offers a fresh chapter, a blank page, and an opportunity to write a story of hope, growth, and resilience.

This year, I encourage you to embrace the power of possibility. Even in uncertain times, there is strength in small steps forward. Every act of kindness, every effort to connect, and every moment

spent lifting one another up has the potential to create ripples that extend far beyond what we can see. 2025 is a time to dream boldly and work diligently. It is a year to learn from the past while moving forward with renewed purpose. As you set your intentions and goals, remember that progress is not always linear, and growth often comes in moments of challenge and perseverance. Be gentle with yourself, and celebrate every win, no matter how small.

I also encourage you to look outward and find ways to contribute to the greater good. Whether through volunteerism, mentorship, advocacy, or simply being a source of encouragement to someone in need, your contributions matter. Our collective strength lies in our ability to uplift one another and build a community rooted in



Continued on page 9

GCLEABJ Celebrates Black Media at Inaugural Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony



By Ajah Hales

The Greater Cleveland Association of Black Journalists (GCLEABJ), an affiliate chapter of the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ), is planning to bring some long-overdue recognition to Cleveland's Black Media professionals.

GCLEABJ's inaugural Hall of Fame induction ceremony will be held at the Cleveland History Center, a museum managed by the Western Reserve Historical Society, on February 22 at 5 p.m.

Greater Cleveland is home to several noteworthy Black journalists. Former Richmond Heights Mayor Miesha Wilson Headen is a Society of Professional Journalists award-winning reporter.

Wayne Dawson is an 11-time Emmy winner and member of the Broadcasters Hall of Fame. The now-retired Romona Robinson has a 30-year career full of historic firsts, including being the first Black woman to anchor a nightly news program in Cleveland.

Leon Bibb is the first Black American primetime news anchor in Cleveland and a member of the Associated Press' Ohio Broadcasters Hall of Fame.

With such a long and storied history of Black excellence in journalism, it's hard to believe Cleveland's Black journalists don't already have a Hall of Fame.

GCLEABJ director Rhonda Crowder agreed, calling the recognition past due. "My hope for this event is to create a space

where Black journalists are recognized and celebrated for their hard work and commitment to the industry."

According to the organization's January press release, inaugural GCLEABJ Hall of Fame inductees include six posthumous and six living media professionals. The organization recognizes the "best of" media professionals in nine categories: print media, broadcast, digital media, newcomer, student media, sports media, photojournalism, journalism education, and public relations.

Hall of Fame inductees:

PRINT

Dick Peery, The Plain Dealer
Constance "Connie" Harper, Call & Post - Posthumous

RADIO

Jimmy Malone, Newsradio WTAM 1100
Lynn Tolliver Jr., 93FM WZAK - Posthumous
Mansfield Frazier, Newsradio WTAM 1100 - Posthumous

BROADCAST

Leon Bibb, News 5 Cleveland WEWS & WKYC Studios 3 News
Ernest "Pete" Care, Fox8/WJW - Posthumous

PHOTOJOURNALIST/VISUAL

Richard "Zoom" Scott, Fox 8/WJW
Herb Thomas, Fox 8/WJW - Posthumous

DIGITAL

Nate Paige, Cleveland.com

MEDIA RELATED/PUBLIC RELATIONS

Alexandria "Alex" Johnson Boone, GAP Communications
Dargan Burns, Karamu House/ Burns Public Relations Services - Posthumous



The inaugural Hall of Fame induction ceremony is not the only major event GCLEABJ has coming up this year.

In August, the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ) will have its national convention in Cleveland. Over 4,000 media professionals will come together to network, celebrate, and job hunt. The convention includes a career fair that NABJ says "draws hundreds of recruiters from top media companies and journalism schools from across the country and around the world."

The convention is attended by some of the top decision makers and influencers within and outside of the media world. Past attendees include former Presidents Barack Obama, Joe Biden, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush, filmmaker Ava Duvernay, actor Michael B. Jordan and The Rev. Al Sharpton. The NABJ is accepting session proposals for this event until February 14.

To learn more about how GCLEABJ is shaping the future of Black journalism in Cleveland, visit their website at <https://www.gcleabj.org>

Encouraging Words for 2025 From page 8

compassion, understanding, and action.

Imani Capri
Managing Editor, The Cleveland Observer

A New Attitude

Leaving 2024 let's not agonize over the things we did not do, but the things that we have accomplished no matter how small. As we move into the new year, let's go forward embracing joy, with a new attitude, in expecting new opportunities, new relationships and new challenges. Let's remember we are never too old to learn, to grow, to develop. Let's encompass positive thoughts and exhibit positive energy. Let's trust that this new year will bring blessings in abundance to all our TCO staff and readers.

Happy New Year!

Carla Calhoun

Focus on The Process

Focus on the process, not on perfection. Doing so positively improves the possibility of reaching any goal. (adapted from Winston Churchill) We are often our harshest critics. We expect no errors and immediate success. This year, let us give ourselves physical, emotional, and mental grace in all we do. We owe that to ourselves.

Marva White
Editor, The Cleveland Observer

The thoughts we entertain have the power to shape our lives and give us Peace.

Everyday we make decisions take actions and experience emotions based on what we think. It is often said that our thoughts are like seeds planted in the soil of our hearts. When we nurture them

they grow into what we eventually become. Taking control of our thoughts is the first step in taking control of our destiny. There is a battle being fought in the quiet corners of our mind and every moment we are presented with a choice to entertain thoughts that uplift and empower us or to dwell on those that discourage distract and destroy.

In this struggle it is essential to recognize that we have the power to choose. This process of taking control of our thoughts begin with becoming aware of what occupies our minds. We are not mere victims of our circumstances or of our minds. We can choose to reject thoughts that lead us into fear, anxiety, and doubt and replace them with thoughts that bring us peace, confidence, and hope. With self-awareness comes power, the power to change.

For many of us the key to controlling our thoughts lies in faith. When we place our trust in something greater than ourselves we can shift our focus away from the worries and distractions of this world. Faith redirects our attention toward what is true noble and good.

Our faith act as an anchor keeping us grounded in hope, even in the stormiest of circumstances. The work doesn't end there.

Renewing the mind is a daily process just as we nourish our bodies with food we must nourish our minds with truth.

Have you ever heard of 5X5X5+5 = Peace? Next Month's "Words of Encouragement 2025" will explain.

By Ron Calhoun
Publisher and Editor-in-Chief, The Cleveland Observer

Letter from the Managing Editor: Introducing the ‘Sankofa Series’



Dear Readers,

At The Cleveland Observer, we believe understanding our past is essential to navigating the present and shaping the future. That’s why we’re proud to introduce the Sankofa Series, inspired by the powerful Akan concept of “Sankofa,” which

reminds us: “It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten.”

In this series, we’ll revisit key moments, stories, and lessons from history—both local and global—to shed light on the challenges and opportunities of today. Through thoughtful storytelling and deep reflection, the Sankofa Series aims to connect the wisdom of the past with the pressing issues of our time, fostering a vision for a brighter tomorrow.

We invite you to join us on this journey of discovery, reflection, and hope. Together, let’s honor the legacy of those who came before us and build a future rooted in understanding and progress.

Ajah Hales kicks off this series with a powerful article on a key figure in Ohio history: Sara Lucy Bagby Johnson.

We encourage you to read these pieces and reflect upon them. Use them for further conversation with family, friends,

and community members. How do you think these stories from the past can assist all of us now?

Content in the collection will be tagged with the Sankofa bird. We look forward to your feedback on the content in this series and to growing the content with you!

Share your thoughts with us at: imanic@cleobserver.com and info@cleobserver.com

Warm regards,
Imani Capri
Managing Editor,
The Cleveland Observer

Searching for Sara Lucy Bagby Johnson



By Ajah Hales

On January 19, 1861, Sara Lucinda Bagby Johnson was arrested in Cleveland. Her crime? Escaping the Virginia plantation where she had been enslaved and starting a new life in Ohio, a free state. Sara was the last person returned to slavery through the Fugitive Slave Act.

Before 1850, enslaved Black people could escape to free states like Ohio and Pennsylvania and be recognized as free. However, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 changed everything. The law allowed enslavers to reclaim escaped individuals anywhere in the U.S. with only a sworn statement of ownership and a description. A U.S. Marshal could deputize anyone to assist in the capture.

Sara’s enslaver, William Goshorn, took the unusual step of traveling 150 miles to reclaim her himself. What motivated him, and what can we learn from Sara’s legacy today?

Who Was Sara Lucy Bagby Johnson?

Sara, often called Lucy, was born around 1843, but little is known about her early childhood. Many formerly enslaved people couldn’t remember their birth dates because enslavers rarely kept such records. Lucy was sold to John Goshorn when she was about nine years old for \$600, which would be about \$22,000 today. At 14, Lucy was passed on as a gift to Goshorn’s son, William.

Historical research suggests Lucy’s life under William was harsh. By 1860, Lucy had discovered she was pregnant and heard rumors that William planned to sell her to Cuba. These factors likely fueled her decision to run away.

A New Life in Cleveland

Lucy’s journey took her to

Cleveland, where she arrived alone, likely having lost her baby along the way. Once in Cleveland, she worked as a maid for Congressman Albert G. Riddle, an abolitionist and lawyer who played a role in the Oberlin-Wellington rescue case. Later, she worked for William Smith, another abolitionist, and eventually for Lucius A. Benton, a wealthy jeweler.

Reports about Lucy’s life in Cleveland are conflicting.



Sarah Lucy Bagby Johnson. Credit: Cuyahoga County Archives,

Some say she was well-treated and liked by her employers, while others suggest she felt bitterness about her treatment. Some claim Lucy stayed in Cleveland voluntarily, while others believe her abolitionist friends persuaded her not to go to Canada, a decision she later regretted.

Regardless of these conflicting accounts, Lucy found powerful friends in Cleveland. Many were prominent abolitionists, including her lawyer, Rufus P. Spaulding. However, these influential supporters could not save her from William Goshorn and the U.S. Marshal he enlisted.

The Politics of Abolition

Lucy’s trial was politically significant. Cleveland was known for its abolitionist stance, while Goshorn was a Southern Democrat and a city councilman in Wheeling, Virginia. He hated Cleveland, calling it “the worst abolitionist

hole in the United States.” Goshorn saw Lucy’s case as an opportunity to test Cleveland’s commitment to abolition.

Two years earlier, 37 Oberlin abolitionists had helped free John Price from the Fugitive Slave Act, making the city a target for Southern enslavers. Goshorn was determined to make an example of Cleveland. He traveled to the city personally to ensure Lucy’s capture, perhaps in part to prove a point to abolitionists.

Local abolitionists raised \$1,200, double Lucy’s purchase price, in an attempt to buy her freedom. But Goshorn refused, indicating that once he returned her to Virginia, he might consider selling her. In a last-ditch effort, abolitionists planned to ambush the train carrying Lucy, disconnecting her car. This tactic had worked before in Oberlin, but the train conductor did not stop until they were in a slave state.

Sold Down the River and Back Again

When Lucy arrived in Virginia, she was held on the plantation of Goshorn’s cousin. Her escape to Cuba, however, was delayed. As she traveled south toward her fate, a Union officer rescued her in West Fayetteville, Tennessee.

Ironically, Goshorn was arrested in 1862 for refusing to sign a loyalty oath to the Union, becoming a fugitive himself. Lucy, now free, returned to Ohio. She moved to Athens, where she married a Union soldier, George Johnson. Two years later, she returned to Cleveland, where she lived the rest of her life. Lucy worked as a live-in domestic worker and later settled on Cleveland’s east side.

Lucy passed away in 1906 in her early 60s, outliving the average life expectancy for Black Americans at the time. George Johnson passed away a decade later.

Lucy’s Legacy

Sara Lucy Bagby Johnson’s story is part of Cleveland’s abolitionist history. For many years, Lucy’s grave remained unmarked. However, Michelle Day, a historian at Woodland Cemetery, submitted her gravesite to the National Park Service’s registry of historic Underground Railroad sites in 2015. The site was accepted, and Lucy’s legacy was finally recognized.

Michelle Day has worked tirelessly to bring attention to Lucy’s story. “She’s an amazing, remarkable woman,” Day says, “a major part of Cleveland history that was never taught in schools.” Day hopes to share Lucy’s story with a wider audience, through presentations and collaborations with local organizations like the Cleveland Public Library.

You can visit Lucy’s grave at Woodland Cemetery in Cleveland, located in Section D3, Tier 1, Grave 25. It is a place where we can remember the courage and perseverance of a woman who fought for her freedom—and whose legacy continues to inspire us today.

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Kent State University: The Birthplace of Black History Month



By Lisa O'Brien



SCAN LISTEN

As February approaches, many people are familiar with Black History Month but not as many are familiar with the fact that the monthly celebration began here in Northeast Ohio at Kent State University. Black History Month began as just a week-long celebration in the second week of February called Negro History Week, started in 1926 by Carter G. Woodson. It wasn't until 1970, after a year of advocating, that the first observance of Black History Month occurred at Kent State, six years before President Ford gave the month its formal national recognition.

It was students of Kent State's Black United Students organizations that conceptualized and advocated for a whole month dedicated to Black history and excellence. They achieved their goals with support from faculty and staff, and one of these early students has now had the chance to pay it forward as Professor and

that in 1926. But he founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in 1915!... He believed in the importance of African American history... and Woodson in a sense was a part of the black consciousness movement at that time, early in the twentieth century. I go back to that because Black United Students at Kent State walked out in protest because they allowed the Oakland [California] police force to recruit on-campus [the students were protesting the Oakland police's excessive use of force on the Black Panther Party and the killing of Bobby Hutton]. The university had to negotiate to get the students back [by meeting with leaders of the Black United Students and hearing their demands].

They demanded a Black Studies program, they demanded a Black cultural center, and they demanded more Black faculty and staff. So, in 1969 a man by the name of Edward Crosby was brought to campus and he founded the Black Studies program. That's important because those students understood they were a part of a larger Black Studies movement that was going on at the time.

I arrived as a first-year student in 1970, so the

academic unit, and we have a cultural center that provides our students with the depth and exploration of the entire experience. Which is what Carter G. Woodson intended.

L: What do you feel is the most important way institutions can support and empower their Black students on campus? Is it through the curriculum? Having designated spaces on campus? DEI programs?

O: It's all of that. Think about it. We are talking about Black History Month. Now there is Native American History Month. Now there is Women's History Month. Now there is a Hispanic/Latino History Month.

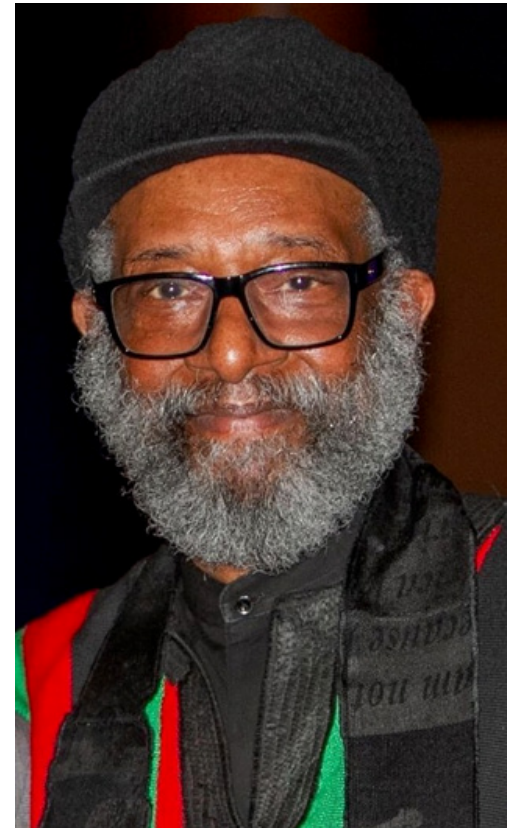
As a result of what Black students at Kent State did in terms of the Black Studies program, which is now the department of Africana Studies, we now have a women's center at Kent State. There's a Women's Studies program at Kent State. There's Latino Studies at Kent State. There's LGBTQ Studies at Kent State. So all of those areas, all of that expansion, all of that progress, came out of this Black struggle. You now have programs like that all around the country. But the pushback that's going on for your generation is the attempt to roll all of that back. You gotta wake up to stay woke!

L: That leads me right to my next question which is, with administration changes, there's talk of increasing book bans and efforts to do away with DEI initiatives in secondary and higher education. How do you foresee this impacting the Africana studies program now or in the future, if at all? And what advice do you have for people to take things into their own hands and fight against these policies?

O: Black Studies have always been under threat from the very beginning. Our program was created against the will of the university. Back in the 1970s when I was a student, the opposition to our program came from within the university itself. We were not in a struggle against the university to destroy the university, which is what they thought. We were in a struggle to improve the university.

These things run in cycles, so now they are moving to move these things back. So if these things are going to be preserved, the current generation of young people is going to have to organize themselves to challenge the system and do what's necessary. That's what the Black Lives Matter movement was about. The current generation is waking up to see that what's been happening to our people in the past is still happening.

When alumni come into



Credit: Mwatabu Okantah, Professor and Chair in the Department of Africana Studies at Kent State University, American poet and essayist

the building, oftentimes they are moved to tears because that was the dream vision that we had in the 1970s. The fact that I'm now back as a faculty member resonates with me because I knew what it took for that building to be there. And if students don't wake up to protect it, we could lose it.

L: Thank you. My next question is admittedly self-serving since I am a writer, but I know you are a poet. Do you have any recommendations of poets to check out specifically for Black History Month?

O: There's a wealth of Black poets and you can divide it into the different periods. I am a product of the Black Arts movement of the 1970s. I was influenced by people like Nikki Giovanni, Gwendolyn Brooks, Haki Matubuti, Larry Neal, and Maya Angelou, and I've been blessed to have done readings with these people. And now I have students who've been published!

L: Lastly, are there any events on campus in February you would like our readers to know about?

O: Yes! One of my part-time faculty members, Ismail Al-Almin, is a filmmaker. He produced an ESPN 30 for 30 documentary called "False Positive." It's about a world-class sprinter named Butch Reynolds who tested positive for steroids, but it was not his sample. And Professor Al-Almin has done this documentary about him. And we will be having a screening."

The screening will take place February 17 at 7:30 p.m. in Oscar Ritchie Hall. Both Professor Al-Almin and Butch Reynolds will be present to answer questions about the films. Visitors can also see from now until February 7 the photo exhibit in the Oscar Ritchie Art Gallery which focuses on the history of Black United Students at Kent State.

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Carter G. Woodson

Known as the "father of Black History," Woodson is the founder of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History.



Credit: Getty Images

Chair of Kent State's Africana Studies program. That former student is current Professor Mwatabu Okantah, who I had a chance to speak with and ask a few questions about Kent State's role in Black History Month:

Lisa: Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us! To start, how do you feel that the celebration and observance of Black History Month have changed over your time at Kent State both as a student and now as a faculty member?

Okantah: It's evolved. It all begins with Carter G Woodson. He is considered the father of what he called National Negro History Week and he launched

upperclassmen at that time had participated in the walkout so I was groomed by them. In 1976, Gerald Ford as president signed off on it. In some ways, once that happened, in many places it became reduced to studying the names of "famous" people. It really moved away from Cart G. Woodson's original intent. Where you go will determine how people will deal with it in terms of its depth.

L: And talking about the depth in how students celebrate the month, how do you feel that is specifically at Kent State right now?

O: Because our program is more than 50 years old, we have an

Cleveland Public Library Celebrates Opening of Martin Luther King Jr. Campus



By Ron Calhoun

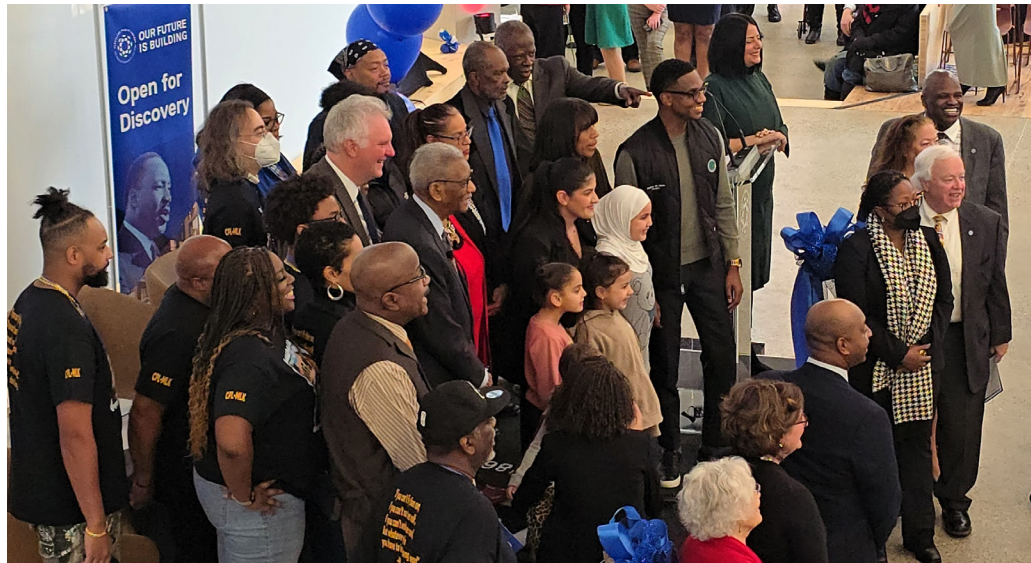
The Cleveland Public Library unveiled its long-awaited Martin Luther King Jr. campus on Jan 25th, marking the culmination of a decade of planning and development.

The new two-story branch includes 207 apartments located above the library, a first-of-its-kind partnership between the library system and a private developer. This milestone is part of the library's larger initiative to renovate, expand, or rebuild 27 neighborhood branches. The campus is also a key element of Circle Square, a transformative project reshaping two city blocks and the skyline on the edge of University Circle.

The grand opening drew an estimated 2,500 attendees for a day of celebration that included a ribbon-cutting ceremony, games, food, and prizes. The event was moderated by Danita Harris, WKYC 3News Anchor, who guided the proceedings with energy and warmth.

The keynote speakers were Black history icon Rev. Dr. Otis Moss Jr. and his wife, Edwina Moss. Edwina Moss emphasized that the civil rights movement would not have been possible without the tireless efforts of women working behind the scenes. Rev. Dr. Otis Moss Jr. urged elders in the Black community to teach younger generations about their cultural and historical journey, stressing the importance of preserving the legacy of the civil rights movement.

"This is a struggle and every generation is facing fierce opposition, and I think one of the best things we can do is to help the path of young people to be a part of the struggle—to be willing to serve, suffer, and sacrifice, but by all means be prepared for a lifelong struggle," Rev. Moss said.



Guest, speakers, dignitaries and children prepare to cut the ribbon at the Martin Luther King Jr. Cleveland Public Library grand opening.

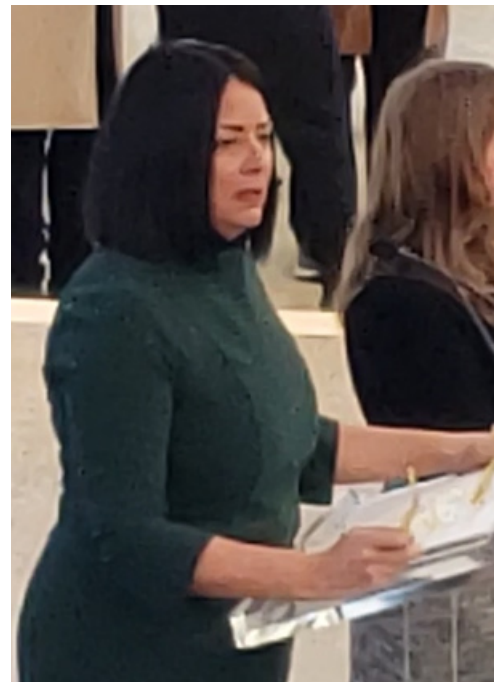
During a recent tour of the library, staff highlighted the thoughtful design elements inspired by Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy. At the heart of the space is a raised platform called the "table of brotherhood," a nod to King's iconic "I Have a Dream" speech from 1963. Congresswoman Shontel Brown opened the ceremony with an enthusiastic welcome, marveling at the massive 40-foot screen that descends from the ceiling, transforming the library into a movie theater or performance space.

Acknowledgment was given to Kimberly Hunter, branch manager of the new library, along with the dedicated library staff who will oversee operations. Midwest Development Partners, the construction trades, and the design team from SO-IL in Brooklyn, New York, and J. Kurtz Architects of Cleveland were also recognized for their contributions to the project.

Numerous politicians and dignitaries attended and spoke about the project's journey, including Maritza Rodriguez, Cleveland Public Library Board president; Lilian Kuri, President & CEO of the Cleveland Foundation, Cuyahoga County Executive Chris Ronayne; Mayor Justin Bibb; several members of Cuyahoga County and Cleveland City Councils; and representatives from the Divine Nine.

The new Martin Luther King Jr. campus stands as a testament to Cleveland's commitment to

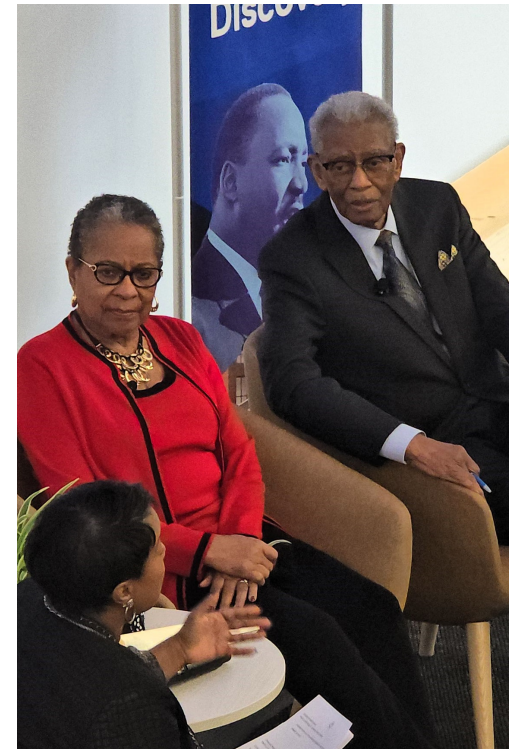
innovation, collaboration, and honors the legacy of one of America's most influential leaders.



Lilian Kuri, president of the Cleveland Foundation.



Cleveland City Councilman Kevin Conwell and Cuyahoga Councilwoman Yvonne Conwell and Felton Thomas, Jr, executive director and CEO of the Cleveland Public Library.



Danita Harris, WKYC 3News anchor interviews Edwina and Rev. Dr. Otis Moss Jr.



Cuyahoga County Executive Chris Ronayne



Maritza Rodriguez, Cleveland Public Library Board president. Credit: CPL video



The Alpha Phi Alpha Choir performs the Black National Anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing." Credit: Cleveland Public Library video.

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