

THE BLACK LENS

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★ ★ ★ THE POWER OF OUR PRESENCE ★ ★ ★

TO SERVE AND TO BELONG

Clyde Rivers on Black patriotism, Vietnam and the complexity of freedom

By April Eberhardt
THE BLACK LENS

Clyde Rivers was 18 years old when he walked into the Marine Corps recruiting office after a night shift at U.S. Steel. Young, Black and filled with a longing to be part of something greater than himself, he didn't wait to be drafted, so he

volunteered. His decision to serve in Vietnam wasn't about politics, college deferments, or protest. It was about purpose, about doing what he felt was his duty as an American, even when America had not always returned that sentiment in kind. "I really felt a little patriotic going into the Corps,"



Rivers

Black Americans have grappled with for generations: What does it mean to fight for a country that has not always fought for you?

The Choice to Serve
Rivers wasn't drawn to higher education. The booming steel industry offered immediate income

and material rewards—like his brand-new Ford Mustang—but they felt fleeting. "Suddenly I realized that I wanted to pursue something more meaningful," he recalls. That "something" became the United States Marine Corps. He recounts his experience entering the USMC: "Out of basic, after infantry training at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina, was transferred to 29 in California. After a couple of months there, they needed personnel at Barstow, which was

See **SERVE, 8**



COURTESY

Clyde Rivers, age 18 (at left with glasses), was stationed in the First Marine Air Wing in Da Nang, Vietnam.

HOMETOWN HEROES



COURTESY

Kirisha Marshall, a youth advocate, was raised in Spokane.

BECOMING KIRISHA

A journey from Spokane to selfhood

By April Eberhardt
THE BLACK LENS

Kirisha Marshall's story begins in Spokane, Washington – but it evolved in Washington, D.C. Hers is a story of survival and transformation. It's about what happens when a young Black woman leaves the Pacific Northwest and, for the first time, breathes freely in an environment where she is not one of a few, but one of many. It's a journey from microaggressions and psychological isolation to affirmation, purpose, and power. "I didn't even realize I had been shrinking myself until I got to Howard," Kirisha said. "Suddenly, I could breathe. I didn't have to explain my existence anymore." Raised in Spokane, Kirisha was shaped by the deep-rooted Black faith community. Her grandmother, Florence Everett, was a well-known figure at New Hope Baptist Church – a woman of grace, authority, and reverence. Her legacy gave Kirisha early lessons in belonging and spiritual grounding.

"Everyone knew who my grandmother was," she said. "You couldn't get away with anything – our family was known." Although she was raised attending St. Matthews, it was under Reverend Happy Watkins' leadership at New Hope that she shares memories of bonding with the community where she saw representing and felt kinship. Even though she didn't belong to Calvary Baptist, she sang in youth choir and attended events there – evidence of how tight-knit and spiritually resilient Spokane's Black community remains. But outside that sanctuary, Spokane could be isolating. She was only five when a white classmate called her the N-word. She punched him. "They wanted to suspend me," she remembered, "but my parents said 'absolutely not.' They told the school, 'This stuff starts at home. His parents are the problem.'" At 12, she visited Coeur d'Alene with a white friend's family – only to find herself in the middle of an Aryan Nation rally.

"I was terrified," she said. "And the adults with me just said, 'You'll be fine.' That moment never left me." Later came trucks with Confederate flags at Central Valley High. Being ignored at bars in Idaho on her 21st birthday. "I thought that was just how things were." "It wasn't until I left that I realized – this isn't normal." After high school, she enrolled at North Idaho College. The few other Black students were athletes. She wasn't. She drifted – until a cousin who played soccer at Howard told her, "Apply." She did. She got in. She turned down a full ride to San Diego State and chose the campus that spoke to her soul. "When I got to Howard, I felt seen. I didn't have to try to fit in with white people. I already fit, just by being." Howard changed everything. She no longer had to explain racism. She no longer carried the burden of being "the only one." She recalls laughing the first time the one white student in her class became the default respondent in a conversation on race. "It was the first

See **KIRISHA, 8**

'The Earth knows our name'

Environmental leadership, the ubuntu way

By April Eberhardt
THE BLACK LENS

For Dr. Bob Bartlett, the land is more than a backdrop. It's a living memory, a spiritual inheritance – a path to personal and collective rejuvenation. His dream of launching an environmental leadership camp for BIPOC youth isn't just about teaching skills or exploring nature. It's about restoration and responsibility – of self, of culture, and of the stewardship BIPOC people once held of the earth. "This came out of pure selfishness," Bartlett admits. "I was born and raised in the country with Black folks who loved their rivers and their mountains ... I grew up learning to hunt, to fish, to trap, to live off the land with Black folks in a racially divided town." But that relationship, he explains, was gradually lost. Moving West after the Vietnam War, Bartlett spent decades as an avid outdoorsman – hiking trails, fly fishing, and working in environmental justice circles – without once encountering another Black angler. It wasn't until 2020 that he met his first Black fly fisherman. "That's when I realized there was a huge hole – heart, soul – in my life," Bartlett said. "It took a lot of reflecting to figure out what that hole was about. And I'll tell you – that

See **UBUNTU, 13**

Josh Dawson, of 'MJ The Musical,' on Black art, legacy and living the music

By April Eberhardt
THE BLACK LENS

For Josh A. Dawson, art is more than performance – it's purpose. A son of the Midwest and a descendant of a long line of pastors, he grew up surrounded by the rhythm of church choirs. Ministry – including dance – was a family tradition. It's no surprise that he was drawn early to music, movement and storytelling, stepping into his first musical by sixth grade. "It just made sense to me," he reflects. "The arts were where I felt most alive." He has acted in a theater production every year since. From July 8-11, "MJ The Musical" arrives at the First Interstate Center for the Arts. Dawson stars as Tito Jackson and Quincy Jones – iconic roles he brings to life with integrity, talent and personal connection. "I'm a full-time musician when I'm not acting, so playing Tito – the musical heartbeat of the Jacksons – felt natural," Dawson explained. Portraying Quincy holds special meaning; Jones is one of his biggest inspirations and the creative force behind so much of Michael Jackson's iconic sound. Playing these figures also feels like stewardship – an act of preservation.

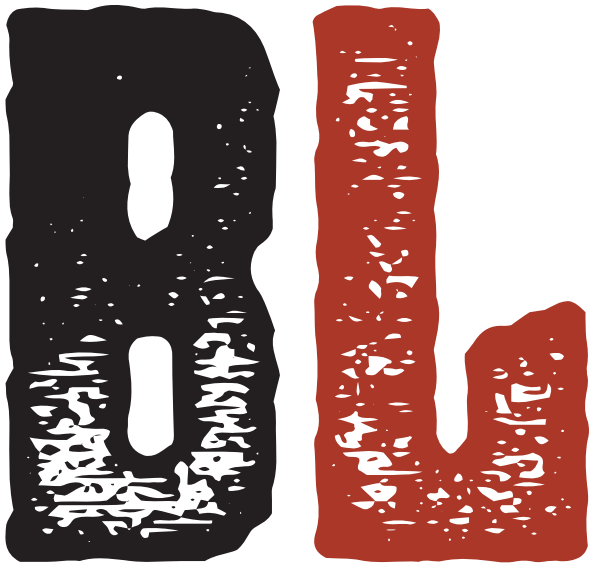


Dawson

See **DAWSON, 13**

WHITE ROSE BRUNCH BRINGS COMMUNITY TOGETHER
The 2025 brunch was more than a fundraiser and fashion show – it was an affirmation of The Links' mission to serve, empower and celebrate Black excellence in all forms. **PAGE 8**

THE POWER OF OUR PRESENCE



NEWS

BLACKLENS.NEWS

NEWS IN BRIEF

Dermatologists: Marines’ shaving waiver could hurt Black members’ careers

Air Force veteran Ed Anderson can’t recall any time past puberty when he didn’t get razor bumps after shaving his face. His coarse facial hair would often cause painful inflammation and itchy bumps as it grew back.

Anderson, now 70, remembers requesting a shaving waiver when he entered the service in 1975, allowing him to bypass the military’s requirements for men to be clean-shaven. For him and other Black airmen, the waivers became a symbol of unity.

“It was seen as an identifier of solidarity with other Black GIs having that shaving waiver,” Anderson told NBC News.

The military as a whole began issuing these waivers in the 1970s, with the Navy taking the strongest approach in 1970 to allow the elective wearing of beards to address medical conditions according to an article published by NBC News. But the policies of the different branches have changed multiple times since then.

Now, a new U.S. Marine Corps grooming policy that affects people with curly or coarse hair is drawing ire from critics who say it targets Black men. The guidance, issued in March, states a diagnosis of pseudofolliculitis barbae, or PFB, a skin condition commonly known as razor bumps or ingrown hairs, could lead to a service member’s expulsion from the branch if the issue persists. The U.S. Air Force updated its guidance on PFB earlier this year, saying shaving waivers will expire 90 days after an airman’s next annual health assessment. But the requirements for those who may still qualify for a waiver remain unclear.

The condition affects up to 60% of Black men, according to the American Osteopathic College of Dermatology, NBC News reported.

Anderson said he sees the move as yet another example of “ongoing attacks” on diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives in the federal government.

“It’s mostly soldiers of color who are impacted by this,” he said. “I don’t see this as a productive and effective means of retaining and recruiting troops.”

Kroger’s Juneteenth cakes spark backlash: ‘This is a mockery!’

A Kroger in Atlanta, Georgia is going viral for its Juneteenth cake offerings. A TikTok video posted on June 17 shows haphazardly decorated desserts sitting in the bakery section of the supermarket according to an article published by NBC News.

The video, which now has over 10 million views, shows shelves stocked with birthday cakes and other treats, then lands on a table selling Juneteenth cookie cakes.

“Y’all decorate everything else around here cute, everything else around here cute,” the TikTokker says. “But for Juneteenth, you wanna just throw something on a freakin’ cookie cake and expect someone to buy it.”

Several desserts are shown, some with printed designs, others featuring phrases like “FREE,” “June 19 Free,” “Congratulations” and “Free @ Last” written off-center in icing NBC News reported.

The phrase “free at last” is known for being a prominent part of Martin Luther King’s “I Have A Dream” speech, borrowed from the title of a Negro-Spiritual song. And now the phrase, which represents a hard-fought struggle, is being featured on a supermarket cake, casually scribbled in internet shorthand.

“Kroger count your days,” they added in the post’s caption. “Why even bother if you’re going to lack creativity ... This is a mockery!”

INDEX

NEWS AND POLITICS	2
CULTURE	3 & 7
BUSINESS AND FINANCE.....	4
EDUCATION.....	5
YOUTH CONNECTION.....	6
ARTS AND INSPIRATION	9
WELLNESS	10
REST IN POWER	13
EVENTS AND LISTINGS.....	14
COMICS AND LEISURE	15

FROM THE EDITOR

Black military service and the conundrum of patriotism

Black America has long grappled with its place in the United States military. Since the Revolutionary War, Black men have fought for a freedom they had not yet experienced – freedom they could only hope for. They entered battlefields believing in the ideals of liberty, even as those ideals excluded them. That contradiction has been a defining feature of the Black military experience ever since.

In every major conflict this country has faced – from the American Revolution to the Civil War to Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan – Black bodies have served under the banner of freedom, seeking independence touted in American democratic tributes. But what does it mean to fight for a nation that has not always fought for you? What does it mean to risk your life for a democracy that has, time and again, denied your full participation in it?

This is the irony of Black patriotism.

Many of our fathers, grandfathers, uncles – and in more recent generations, our grand-mothers and mothers – found their way into the armed forces not only as an act of service but as a step toward inclusion. Enlisting was never mistaken for a cure for racism or a solution to systemic oppression. But for many, it was a path – one that led to careers, education, travel, discipline, and purpose.

The military has offered a complicated form of access. It provided some Black Americans with tools to carve out a new life,



By April Eberhardt
THE BLACK LENS EDITOR



while simultaneously placing them within an institution that reflected the same racial inequities found throughout society.

When we look at the arc of Black military involvement, we must ask ourselves not only why individuals joined, but what they were reaching for. That search often comes back to the idea of freedom – not in its abstract form, but in the personal, deeply human sense of wanting to belong, to protect, to build, and to be respected.

Freedom, for Black Americans, is not just a civic condition. It is a psychological, generational, and spiritual longing. It lives in the bosom. It is part of the birthright we’ve fought to claim, time and time again, even when the nation withheld it.

For some, like Muhammad Ali, that fight took the form of refusal. Ali’s bold rejection of the draft during the Vietnam War was a radical claim of freedom – of the

right to say no to a government that refused to see his humanity. For others, the choice to serve was an equally radical act of belief – that they could help shape the country from within.

Both choices carry weight. Both are part of a long tradition of navigating contradictions. The real question is not who was right or wrong, but rather: what does it mean to be Black in America and still choose to serve? What does it mean to love a country that has often broken your heart?

In that tension lies a deeper truth. The military, like America itself, has never been free from racism. But within it, many Black servicemembers found a way to assert dignity, to claim space, to build futures. Their participation was not blind allegiance, but a conscious negotiation with a nation that remains unfinished.

As we reflect on Black military history, we must hold space for its complexity. We must acknowledge the pain, the sacrifice, the hope – and the contradictions. For in doing so, we honor not only those who served but the fuller truth of what it means to be Black and American: always striving, always questioning, always reaching for a freedom not yet touched.

To add context to what is often complex and deeply personal, I sat down with my father to explore his journey as a military servicemember during a time when enlisting was controversial and fighting for America was a convoluted matter for those of a darker hue. See “To serve and belong” to read more.

THE BLACK LENS

PRESENTS

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Corrections: Accuracy matters

Anthony Fain’s last name was misspelled in his June article.
The wrong name was listed for Adasha Gardner in the AA Graduation Caption for Medical Lake.
The year for the May issue was misprinted on the cover.
Jay Troutt’s name was misspelled in a Shades of Motherhood Network feature in June.

THE BLACK LENS

Serving Spokane’s Black community since 2015

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The Black Lens is a not-for-profit, independent newspaper that focuses on all aspects of the Black community in Eastern Washington. The Black Lens editor reports to its own board of directors, which was set up under the guidance of the founders’ family.
As journalism calls for increased transparency, The Black Lens believes in being transparent about its work. The Black Lens is funded through foundations, donors, subscribers and the community. That funding pays for the work of the editors, reporters, photographers, designers, correspondents and columnists who produce The Black Lens newspaper, website and other platforms.

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The Black Lens is a partner of the “comma” community journalism lab. The Black Lens will be located within the community journalism lab newsroom that is set to be stationed on the main campus of Gonzaga University in Spokane. Though The Black Lens and lab may be housed at Gonzaga, the university has no control or authority over the journalism created by The Black Lens or other newsrooms located within the lab. The comma community journalism lab is a nonprofit news organization with its own board of directors, separate from the university and separate from The Black Lens. The Black Lens’ board of directors works closely with the comma community journalism lab and its leaders to ensure that journalism’s protected First Amendment rights continue to be an essential part of our nation’s democracy.
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HAPPENING AROUND TOWN

JUNETEENTH: IN PHOTOS

Holiday’s Pillar Awards honors Black community members

From staff reports

As part of Juneteenth 2025, many community members earned recognition at the Pillar Awards.

Here are the recipients:

- Individual Award – Kitara Johnson-Jones
- Business Award- Locked in Fatherhood Alliance
- Church/Religious Organization Award- Morning Start Missionary Baptist Church
- Nonprofit Award – The Way to Justice
- Joint Effort Award- Black Homeownership Spokane
- Heartwood Award – The Rev. CW Andrews



COURTESY PHOTOS

In celebration of Juneteenth, Spokane Indians players wore specialty King Carl jerseys, created as a tribute to local Civil Rights activist and champion boxer Carl Maxey, for a recent game against the Everett AquaSox.



Above: Former Seattle Seahawk and Super Bowl champion Cliff Avril joined the Spokane NAACP for a powerful Juneteenth fireside chat at Gonzaga’s Hemmingson Center. Pictured are members of the Executive Committee and volunteers who helped organize the event.



Above: People walk along booths stationed at the Martin Luther King Jr. Community Center’s Juneteenth celebration.



At right: People dance in Grant Park, as part of a Juneteenth celebration.

DO IT ANYWAY

Arnetta Mitchell on gymnastics, representation and the power of new paths

By April Eberhardt
THE BLACK LENS

When Arnetta Mitchell moved to Spokane from California at the age of 6, she brought with her a spark – one that had been lit while watching her first Olympic gymnastics meet on television. That moment ignited a love for the sport that would not only shape her childhood but influence the course of her adult life.

“Gymnastics just made sense,” she says. “I was always bouncing off things, and my mom thought it would be the perfect sport for me. She supported it from the start – even if we had to search all over Nine Mile to find a place where I could actually train.”

That early support – and Arnetta’s determination – set her on a path that would see her evolve from a young gymnast inspired by trailblazers like Dominique Dawes to a coach and mentor dedicated to making space for others. Today, Arnetta coaches the gymnastics team at North Central High School and works with youth at Evergreen Gymnastics, where the school program holds its practices due to a lack of school-owned facilities.

In a sport where Black people are historically underrepresented, Arnetta recalls how powerful it was to see Dominique Dawes on the Olympic stage.

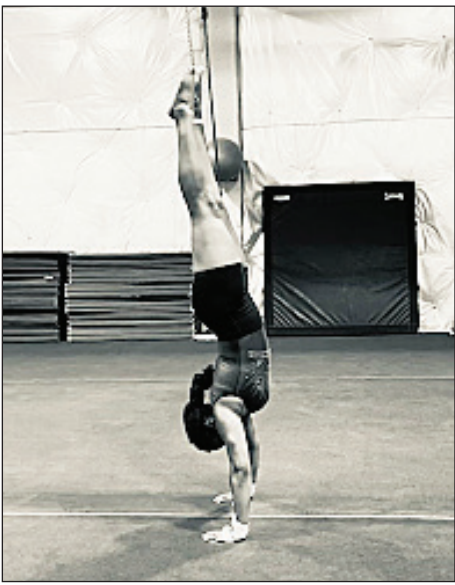
“I don’t remember them saying it on TV, like, ‘This is a Black gymnast,’” she explains. “But I noticed. She looked like me, and that mattered. It made me think – if she can do it, maybe I can too.”

Now, as a coach, Arnetta sees herself not just as a guide to physical technique, but as a mirror to possibilities – especially for young athletes who may never have imagined themselves in leotards or on balance beams.

“A lot of kids on my team have never done gymnastics before,” she says. “But this sport is mental. It’s about overcoming fear. And I want them to know that it doesn’t matter how you start – you belong here.”

For Arnetta, gymnastics is more than a sport. It’s a metaphor for possibility. It’s a reminder that we don’t have to fit into anyone’s limited expectations of what Black people can do or where we belong.

“I don’t believe in staying in boxes,” she says. “A lot of times, we don’t see ourselves in certain places, so we assume it’s not for



COURTESY

Gymnastics athlete Arnetta Mitchell does a handstand.

us. But the truth is, we are capable of so much more.”

Her dream? To build a community space in Nine Mile that offers gymnastics, dance, and other recreational outlets for youth – including non-sports options like arcade games or creative workshops. “Small towns don’t have a lot for kids,” she says. “Even Spokane has limited spaces. I want to change that.”

When asked what advice she’d give to someone who’s the only Black person – or only person of color – in a recreational space, Arnetta doesn’t hesitate: **“Do it anyway.”**

Whether it’s stepping onto the mat or into a field where few others look like you, Arnetta believes that simply showing up can be revolutionary. “It helps people see what’s possible,” she says. This, she contends, helps communities grow.”

In the end, it’s not just about gymnastics. It’s about movement – in body, mind, and spirit. It’s about reimagining the spaces we’re allowed to occupy and creating new ones when they don’t yet exist.

“I just love gymnastics,” Arnetta says. “It teaches you to try even when something looks scary. It helps you grow. And more than anything, it reminds you that you’re stronger than you think.”

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BUSINESS

SIPS 'N' TIPS

Red, white, financially right

Declaring your independence through financial freedom

As Americans celebrate freedom each July, it's the perfect time to reflect on a different kind of independence—financial independence. Just like political liberty, financial freedom requires intention, planning, and action. The path toward it can be boiled down to six foundational principles:

- 1. **Cash Flow** – Maintain consistent income, manage spending, and plan for lifelong earnings.
- 2. **Debt Management** – Eliminate and consolidate debt where possible.
- 3. **Emergency Fund** – Save enough to cover 3, 6, or 12 months of expenses.
- 4. **Proper Protection** – Safeguard income, assets, and long-term care needs.
- 5. **Building Wealth** – Invest wisely to outpace inflation and minimize taxes.
- 6. **Wealth Preservation** – Pass on your legacy while reducing tax burdens.

The Power of Time and Consistency

Wealth building is a long game. Time plays a crucial role, especially when combined with compound interest. Using the Rule of 72, you can estimate how quickly your money will double. Divide 72 by your interest rate—for example, at 10%, your money doubles in 7.2 years. The earlier you start saving, the more your money can grow. Waiting just 10 years to begin investing can result in dramatically less accumulated wealth by retirement. Start as soon as possible. Don't wait for the

raise, the promotion, or for your kids to finish school. Begin with what you can, build a habit, and remain consistent. Saving doesn't get easier later—it gets harder.

Inflation, Taxes and Risk

A major threat to your savings is inflation. If your money earns 4% interest but inflation is 3%, and taxes take another 1%, your "gain" is zero. Understanding the real impact of inflation and taxes on your money is vital. Choose savings vehicles that offer returns exceeding inflation and consider the tax implications of each option.

Risk tolerance also matters. Stocks can yield higher returns but come with volatility. Safer options offer slower growth but may reduce the risk of loss. Evaluate the time it takes to recover from downturns and always consider any management fees attached to your investments.

Tax Treatment Matters

There are three tax categories for your money:

- **Taxable accounts** (e.g., savings, CDs, stocks): You pay capital gains tax yearly on growth.
- **Tax-deferred accounts** (e.g., 401(k), IRAs): You defer taxes until withdrawal, but pay income tax on every dollar you take out.
- **Tax-advantaged accounts** (e.g., Roth IRAs, municipal bonds, cash value life insurance): Contributions are taxed upfront, but growth and distributions are tax-free.



By Rhonda Leonard-Horwitz
THE BLACK LENS CONTRIBUTOR



Diversifying across these categories can help maximize your retirement income and minimize tax liability.

Women and Retirement

Women typically live longer than men and may have shorter careers due to caregiving or maternity leave. This means women often need to save more, over fewer working years, to support longer retirements. Retirement planning should account for these realities, ensuring enough is saved to maintain quality of life despite rising costs.

Take Action This July

Financial independence doesn't happen by accident. It requires thoughtful planning and consistent effort. Use this month – our celebration of freedom – as your launching point. Set financial goals, start saving, and commit to your future. Declare your independence – not just from debt or worry, but from financial instability. This July choose financial freedom – the other independence.

More than a mortgage: A journey toward belonging and legacy

By April Eberhardt
THE BLACK LENS

For Jermaine Williams, homeownership wasn't just a milestone – it was a transformative step toward healing generational wounds and building a foundation for the future.

In December, Williams and his wife closed on their first home through Washington's Covenant Homeownership Program, an initiative designed to address historical housing discrimination by expanding access to homeownership for communities harmed by racially restrictive covenants. For the Williams family, the program offered more than a mortgage – it offered a path to stability.

"To me, generational wealth is essential for peace of mind and well-being. Between the ages of two and twelve, I lived in ten different places. That instability shaped everything. My mom never had a car or a driver's license, which meant we were limited in countless ways," said Williams. He shares that he knows what it means to be uprooted, to lose friends, and to never feel settled.

The couple learned about the program through their community network and began their application process in late September. Just a few months later, on Dec. 11, they closed on their new home. Williams credits the Covenant Homeownership Program with giving his family something that generations before them didn't have access to.

But it isn't just about owning property; it's about giving their son something they never had – a stable home and a sense of belonging. Housing instability had an adverse impact on them both growing up, affecting their mental health and behaviors into adulthood. Now, with their son yet two years old, they are already breaking generational cycles.

How to connect

- Call the Washington State Homeownership Hotline at 1-877-894-4663 to be connected to support, guidance and financial help through the Covenant Homeownership Program – and beyond. The hotline can also connect you with a lender, and share a wide range of other information and resources tailored to your location, income, and specific needs.
- Seek out a Commission-trained lender to prequalify for a mortgage loan and establish your eligibility for the Covenant or our other programs.
- Take a free homebuyer education class to start on your homebuying journey.

Source: wshfc.org/covenant



COURTESY

Jermaine Williams, alongside his wife and son, is breaking generational cycles by investing in their future.

"If all you've ever known is survival, trauma, and instability, that's what you pass down," he said. "We want something different for our children." That, he says, is probably one of the greatest things they have gained from this program.

Williams is passionate about helping others understand that money is important, but many other factors contribute to a good quality of life.

"Wealth isn't just money. It's health, it's stability, it's access," he said. "If all I've ever known is survival and trauma, that's what I'll pass on. But if I can change that, I can change everything for my son."

He and his wife have become advocates for the program, encouraging others – particularly in Spokane's Black and Indigenous communities – to explore the opportunity. However, he acknowledges that skepticism and un-

familiarity often prevent people from applying.

"Most people we talked to thought it was too good to be true, or they were overwhelmed by the process," Williams noted. "But sometimes people just need to see someone like them do it first before they believe they can too."

He urges realtors and housing professionals to help spread the word and make the process more accessible to those who have historically been left out.

"I don't care whether you're Black, Indigenous, or not—if you're a realtor in Spokane County and you know about the Covenant Homeownership Program, tell people," Williams said. "Whether they work with you or not, it's about community. We need to see more of us in these spaces."

For Williams, this journey is also a tribute to the late Sandy Williams, founder of The Black Lens and a fierce advocate for economic justice – a leader he continues to look up to. "There's only one obituary we have in our kitchen – and that's Sandy's. I know she would've been proud of us for doing this."

Williams' story serves as both testimony and invitation: breaking cycles is possible – and it starts with unlearning old patterns, creating new ones, gaining new information, and believing that a different future is within reach.

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"To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a state of rage almost all of the time..."

James Baldwin

Black humanity is collateral damage

IN HER WORDS

By April Eberhardt
THE BLACK LENS

Once again, Black humanity became collateral damage – trivialized and tossed aside – when a West Valley High School Spanish teacher, Matthew Mastronardi, reportedly chose to read the N-word aloud from the pages of “To Kill a Mockingbird” after a student dared him to do so in his Spanish class. The novel is part of the English curriculum – not the Spanish class where this incident occurred. The teacher was fired. On Tuesday, the West Valley School Board voted against renewing his contract.

Now, students and Mastronardi alike are rallying for his reinstatement, claiming his rights have been violated – even using the recent Juneteenth holiday to hold a press conference that co-opted the language of freedom, liberation, and civil rights. But let’s be clear: this is about preserving power and posturing – a soapbox from which to pontificate without accountability, to participate without humility, and to critique without understanding. That is the essence of privilege. This moment is an entire flex.

No intellectual or patriotic bravery is being demonstrated here – only cultural dominance, cloaked in democratic ideals. There is no championing of truth, just self-aggrandizement on a stage built to deflect from impact and consequence. And it is strategic.

We live in a city where Mead High School football players allegedly sexually assaulted Black students while hurling racial slurs – an act the district tried to soften as mere “hazing.” Atlanta Black Star reported: “Three of the Black football players were allegedly called racial epithets including the N-word, ‘monkeys,’ ‘chocolate praying mantis,’ and ‘dirty Q-tip,’ and told they need to be ‘leashed.’” When the videos circulated and more details became public, the Black players were labeled “snitches” and told that “Blacks squeal.”

In March, it was reported that a recent audit by the legal firm representing those students found the district refused to turn over evidence and “deliberately withheld internal documents related to its failure to inform parents about years of hazing and abuse in its football program,” KREM-TV reported. These actions aren’t new – but they send a menacing message: damage control replaces truth, and power controls the narrative.

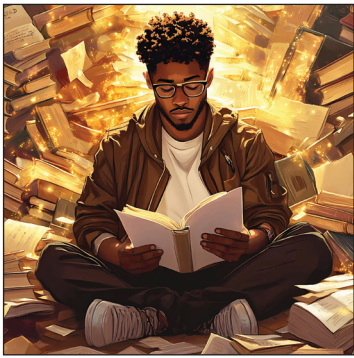
The emotional intelligence of an educator who cares more about his “right” to say the N-word – as a so-called “teachable moment” – ignores the weight of the dehumanization experienced by the very people that the central character of To Kill a Mockingbird, Tom Robinson, symbolizes. Tom, a powerless Black man, stood at the mercy of a white savior and moral hero, Atticus Finch. He was crushed by a racist Alabama community, a biased white jury, and a lying incest victim who accused him of rape. Reflect on that power dynamic. Whose privilege was centered? Who had agency? Black psychological safety has never been a priority under white supremacy and unchecked privilege.

And I dare ask: How much unpacking of historical and cultural trauma was actually done in that moment – beyond a shallow disclaimer to not use the word in a discriminatory way?

How much truth-telling was offered about the N-word’s roots in slavery and racial terrorism? The lynchings depicted on postcards? The Bloody Back? Human breeding farms? The fiery destruction that renamed Birmingham to “Bombingham”? The burning crosses lit with malice in the name of patriotism and Christianity? Was there any consideration for how this lands in the hearts of Black students – hearing it spoken aloud in the authoritative voice of a teacher?

If the goal were truly to educate, heal, or reckon with the legacy of that word, it wouldn’t have been delivered with a generic disclaimer. That was cheap and lazy. It dodged the real work. It bypassed the history, the harm, and the emotional baggage that word carries for Black people.

One must also wonder: how much personal awareness, training, or culturally responsive professional development has



Mastronardi actually received? It’s doubtful he understands the full weight of the word. No, this wasn’t a teachable moment. It was grandstanding. And the N-word was a prop for performance.

When teenagers cajoled him into saying the word, their motives should have been challenged. The real lesson should have been about emotional maturity, cultural humility, and the value of Black life.

How can a single novel truly unpack the ways cultural and historical trauma appear in everyday life? Or show how white supremacy lives in subtle, everyday nuance – especially to someone who’s never had to live it? What about the music and film industries – how they profit, year after year, from normalizing and commodifying a word rooted in dehumanization? A word that continues to create confusion, double-mindedness, deep cognitive dissonance, wrapped in flawed logic and hollow justification for many.

When schools fail to teach the roots of racism, colonization, and systemic oppression with intentionally, progressively, and comprehensively, that kind of dissection – the cultural, historical, and psychological unpacking that the N-word demands – cannot be done in one class period, one unit, or worse, on a dare.

And a censored version of the American story is actively maintained – a successful model of indoctrination.

In his 1968 sermon “A Proper Sense of Priorities,” Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Nothing in the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity.”

White privilege leaves festering wounds, even when unconscious. For those on the receiving end, this moment isn’t about education – it’s about narrative control. Power is never truly shared with those considered disposable.

Want to have a brave and necessary dialogue about a racial slur that was often the last word my ancestors heard before being murdered? Then talk about it outside the teaching of a single novel.

Schools: create a viable hate speech and slurs policy – with teeth. Center Black voices – Black educators, Black experts with lived experience. Step outside your own lens. Stop tokenizing and look for the truth, even when it hurts.

Harper Lee’s “To Kill a Mockingbird” explores racial and social class dynamics in Maycomb County, Alabama. But it’s still a story told through the lens of a Southern white woman. The portrayal of Black oppression lacks the psychological depth of the lived experience of Black people. It doesn’t fully convey what it means to endure systemic racism – it merely observes and reports it.

The literary canon has long excluded substantial Black authorship. And when educators defend using the N-word by citing literary fidelity, without fully grappling with the trauma behind the word, its use becomes an act of erasure. Historical relevance must meet Black identity with care, context and cultural responsibility – especially in the classroom.

Teaching literature that includes racial slurs or anti-Black violence requires more than curriculum alignment. It demands humility and anti-racist, trauma-informed social-emotional pedagogy. When it doesn’t, educators reproduce the very harm they try to expose. If this cannot be done by qualified people, the text should not be taught. And by qualified, that must intentionally include Black educators who understand the full complexity of racism.

We live in a society that still pretends the past didn’t really happen. So when a teacher tries to pack a punch with the N-word – a word that’s been capitalized, commercialized, mocked, and diluted – it’s dismissive and tongue-in-cheek.

For legions of Black bodies, it was never vocabulary. It was violence.

EDUCATION

REDEFINING ENGAGEMENT IN A VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

By Dr. Shantara Smith
THE BLACK LENS

In traditional classrooms, engagement often looks like students collaborating in pairs, rotating through activity stations, or stepping up to the board to present. While these methods are rooted in physical interaction, the essence of engagement – active participation, collaboration and communication – can be effectively translated into the virtual classroom with the right tools and strategies.

Embracing Digital Tools for Active Learning

Digital tools are the backbone of a successful virtual classroom. When used thoughtfully, they can replicate – and even surpass – the interactivity of in-person learning. Here are several categories of tools and how they can be used to foster engagement:

1. Breakout Rooms

Breakout rooms simulate small group discussions, allowing students to collaborate in pairs or small teams. Teachers can:

- Assign specific tasks or roles within each group.
- Rotate between rooms to provide support and feedback.
- Use timers and prompts to keep discussions focused and productive.

2. Virtual Classroom Roles

Assigning roles gives students a sense of ownership and purpose. Examples include:

- Note Taker: Summarizes group discussions and shares with the class.
- Link Poster: Finds and shares relevant resources.
- Discussion Leader: Keeps the group on task and encourages participation.

These roles can rotate weekly to ensure all students develop different skills.

3. Collaborative Whiteboards

Tools like Microsoft Whiteboard, and Miro allow students to:

- Brainstorm ideas together in real time.
- Solve math problems collaboratively.
- Create visual mind maps or diagrams.

These tools support drawing, typing, and image insertion, making them versatile for all subjects.

4. Multimedia Presentations

Students can use platforms like Google Slides, Canva, or Loom to:

- Create and narrate presentations.
- Record video reflections or project summaries.
- Share their screens during



PIXABAY

Digital tools are the backbone of a successful virtual classroom.



By Dr. Shantara Smith
THE BLACK LENS CONTRIBUTOR



live sessions to present their work.

This not only builds communication skills but also boosts confidence.

5. Gamified Learning Platforms

Gamification turns learning into a fun, competitive experience. Popular tools include:

- Kahoot! and Quizizz for quizzes and trivia.
- Blooket and Gimkit for interactive games with educational content.

• Prodigy for math-based role-playing games.

These platforms often include leaderboards, points and rewards to motivate students.

6. Interactive Polls and Surveys

Using tools like Mentimeter, Poll Everywhere, or built-in Zoom polls, teachers can:

- Gauge student understanding in real time.
- Collect opinions or feedback.
- Spark discussion with thought-provoking questions.

7. Learning Management Systems (LMS) Integration

Platforms like Google Classroom, Canvas, or Schoology centralize resources and streamline communication. They allow:

- Easy access to assignments

and materials.

- Discussion boards for asynchronous engagement.
- Integration with third-party tools for a seamless experience.

Inclusive Participation for All Learners

One of the strengths of virtual classrooms is the ability to support diverse learning styles and needs. Students who may be shy or have learning differences can engage in ways that feel comfortable and accessible:

- Nonverbal Communication: Emojis, hand signals, and chat messages allow students to express themselves without speaking aloud.
- Assistive Technology: Tools like text-to-speech and screen readers can support students with reading or writing challenges, making learning more equitable.
- Flexible Engagement: Whether through typing, speaking, or visual cues, students can participate in the way that suits them best.

Meeting Students Where They Are

Today’s learners – especially those from Gen Z and Gen Alpha – are digital natives. They interact with technology in nearly every aspect of their lives, and education should be no exception. By leveraging the tools they’re already familiar with, educators can create dynamic, interactive and inclusive virtual classrooms.

The Bottom Line

The goal of any classroom, virtual or physical, is to engage every student in meaningful learning. With thoughtful planning and the right digital tools, online classrooms can be just as vibrant and interactive as their in-person counterparts. Engagement isn’t about the format – it’s about connection, creativity and community.

TAKING A GAP YEAR

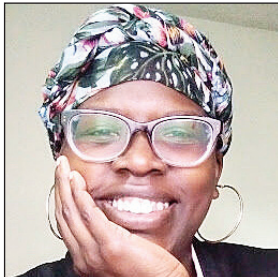
A valuable break or a risky detour?

As more students rethink the traditional path from high school directly into college, taking a “gap year” has gained widespread interest. Typically, a gap year is a structured or self-directed break for work, travel, volunteering, or skill-building. While it can benefit all students, it holds particular promise for African American youth – offering space for reflection, healing and financial preparation.

Pros: Financial Freedom, Personal Growth and Trade Skills

One major advantage of a gap year is its potential to reduce college debt. According to the Education Data Initiative, Black graduates owe an average of \$25,000 more in student loan debt than white graduates – often due to borrowing more for tuition and cost of living. A year of working or saving can ease this burden significantly (Education Data Initiative, 2024).

Another overlooked opportunity is using a gap year to learn a trade. Vocational skills – such as HVAC, barbering, coding, or automotive repair – can be acquired in under a year through certification programs or apprenticeships. These skills offer pathways to immediate employment or side income during college. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES),



By Dr. Sharah Zaab
THE BLACK LENS CONTRIBUTOR



African American students are underrepresented in vocational training programs, but participation is growing due to the rising cost of four-year degrees (NCES, 2023).

Programs like Year Up and Job Corps specifically target underserved communities and offer training in high-demand fields like tech, healthcare, and skilled trades, often with stipends or housing support.

Additionally, gap years can support personal and emotional development. Research from the Gap Year Association shows that 98% of students who take a structured gap year report increased maturity and self-confidence, and 75% say the experience helped clarify their college and career goals (Gap Year Association, 2023).

Cons: Academic Drift and Financial Barriers

Despite the benefits, gap years can pose risks. Students without a clear plan may struggle to stay motivated or return to school. A 2022 Inside Higher Ed survey noted that while most colleges support gap year deferrals, students who lack structure often delay reentry into formal education – or skip it altogether.

Another concern is the cost of certain gap year programs, especially international travel. While some offer scholarships, many are financially inaccessible to low-income students. However, low-cost or paid opportunities (e.g., AmeriCorps, local apprenticeships or part-time work) can provide meaningful alternatives without major expenses.

An Empowering Path Forward

Colleges, including many Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), are increasingly open to gap year deferrals for students with a purpose-driven plan. With guidance, African American students can use this time to build financial independence, clarify career paths, and gain the life skills necessary for long-term success.

A gap year is not a pause in progress – it can be a powerful launchpad.

YOUTH CONNECTION

DON'T COMPROMISE YOUR CULTURE

God knew what He was doing when He created you. He made no mistakes.

Culture, diversity and our differences – these are the things that make each one of us unique and the world beautiful. But I’ve noticed that sometimes, in admiring what others have, we start to lose pieces of ourselves. We compromise bits of our culture, our values, and our beliefs – often in the name of politeness or to avoid offending others. A couple of weeks ago, I was talking with a Mar-

shallese schoolmate about our end-of-year Black Student Union (BSU) hangout. We had invited the Pacific Islander Club to join us, and we were excited to celebrate together. The event was a bring-and-share, so I asked her if she planned to bring anything. Her answer was a joyful and immediate “Yes!” But then she hesitated. She told me she didn’t think we would like the traditional Marshallese dish she had in mind and said she was going to leave one of the ingredients out.

I tried to encourage her. I reminded her this was a dish from her culture, that her people liked it just the way it was – and whether we liked it or not shouldn’t make her feel like she needed to “edit” it. Long story short – she brought the dish (a Sushi Bake), and we all loved it. This may seem like a small thing, but it’s not. This is exactly how the loss of culture begins: when we start altering who we are to fit someone else’s expectations or standards. When we measure our traditions, beliefs, and

values against “foreign standards,” we slowly lose our sense of identity. We become stuck – torn between who we are and who we think we should be. But here’s the truth: we can’t expect others to appreciate our culture if we don’t value it ourselves. When we seem unsure or ashamed of who we are, people pick up on that. And sadly, that confusion can lead others to lose interest. But people do respect authenticity. They appreciate those who proudly

represent their roots. God made us diverse for a reason. He didn’t make a mistake. Can you imagine how dull the world would be without different cultures, languages, music, food, and traditions? I’m incredibly curious about other cultures. And I’d honestly be disappointed if someone gave me a “filtered” version of their traditions just to make it more “acceptable.” That completely defeats the purpose of wanting to understand and celebrate culture in the first place. We are all beautiful



By Anesu Whacha
THE BLACK LENS
CONTRIBUTOR



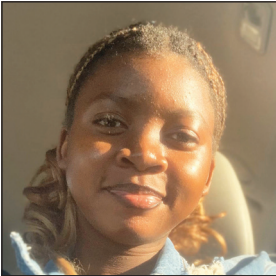
people. And by simply being who we truly are, we help make the world more vibrant, more interesting, and more beautiful.

Silent suffering

How Black people are conditioned to suppress emotions and reject psychotherapy

In many Black communities across the world—especially in America—emotional vulnerability is often treated not as a form of strength but as a weakness. Generations of trauma, systemic oppression, and cultural expectations have built a wall around the hearts and minds of Black people, forcing many to carry silent burdens. In a society that already stereotypes Black people as either overly emotional or dangerously aggressive, showing emotions like sadness, anxiety, or fear becomes a risk—a risk of being misunderstood, disrespected, or dismissed.

Historical Roots of Emotional Suppression
The roots of emotional suppression in Black communities run deep. During slavery, African people were forced to hide their pain to survive. Crying for their children being sold, showing anger at being beaten, or even expressing grief was met with further violence. Emotions became liabilities. This survival tactic carried into the Jim Crow era, and even now, the legacy of racism demands emotional silence. A Black man showing fear might be seen as weak or unstable. A Black woman crying might be told she’s too emotional or dramatic. The message is loud: strength means silence.



By Daniella Musesambili
SHADLE PARK HIGH



‘Toughness’ Over Healing

The phrase “man up” or “Black women are strong” has become a double-edged sword. While intended to uplift, these sayings often place unrealistic expectations on Black individuals to endure pain without complaint. The result is generations of people who don’t cry at funerals, don’t talk about depression, and don’t admit when they’re falling apart.

Mental health struggles are often dismissed as “a white people problem” or signs of spiritual failure. Seeking therapy is sometimes mocked or viewed with suspicion. Instead of professional help, some are told to “just pray about it” or “stop acting soft.” Faith and community are vital, yes – but so is therapy.

The Stigma Around Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy is not weakness. It’s healing. But many Black people are not given the space or language to even begin that healing process. Black men are told not to cry. Black women are told they have to “keep it together” for their families. The emotional armor they wear becomes their prison.

Even in 2025, despite more awareness, the stigma around mental health in Black communities remains strong. Racism in the healthcare system, lack of Black therapists, and mistrust rooted in real historical abuses (like the Tuskegee Study) only worsen the gap.

The Cost of Silence
Suppressing emotions doesn’t make them disappear. It makes them louder in hidden ways—through anxiety, rage, addiction, broken relationships, or self-harm. Black children grow up seeing adults who never talk about emotions, and so they learn to bottle theirs, too.

This silence is not strength. It’s inherited pain disguised as power. We must create spaces where Black people can feel without fear. Where crying is not weakness. Where therapy is not taboo. Where strength is redefined – not as silence, but as the courage to heal.



COURTESY

Keelah Lockhart, with her daughter and pregnant with her second child, just graduated from Lumen High School.

THROUGH THE STORM

By Keelah Lockhart
LUMEN HIGH SCHOOL
GRADUATE, CLASS OF 2025

At the age of 10, I lost my mother – a devastating thing that left me stuck in a world that suddenly seemed more uncertain. I found myself living with my father, a man I barely knew. It didn’t last long. Soon, I ran away to my sister’s house to be closer to peace. My mom’s absence made me feel different inside and I often found myself searching for her in the faces of strangers and in the quiet moments of my day. By the time I was 17, life had thrown another curveball my way: I was pregnant and that news was so overwhelming. How could I have a baby at such a young age and raise a child when I still felt like a child myself? I was still going to school!

But as the days passed, I realized that this little life growing inside me was not a burden, it was a chance to rebuild, to find purpose, and to honor the resilience my mother had shown throughout her life. The challenges were immense. Balancing schoolwork with the demands of pregnancy, enduring the whispers and judgments of peers, and facing the uncertainty of my future without the guidance of my mother was a lot for me. Even at a place like Lumen where I could have my daughter in class with me, it was still hard. Every year when my mom’s death day came around, I started losing myself again. But I was determined to get somewhere in life and couldn’t let it break me down. Graduation day came

last month, and I stand here working my butt off three months pregnant again with my second child, cap and gown waiting for me every day. Lumen has encouraged me to get to where I am today and continues to challenge me. Dreaming about the applause from the crowd feels so far but so close at the same time. There were sleepless nights, moments of doubt, and times when I questioned my ability to continue. But I remembered my mother’s strength, her unwavering belief in me, and I pushed forward. Today, I stand not just as a mother, but as a student who is trying to do the best she can for her child. This journey was hard, but it was mine and I walked it with my head held high, carrying my mother’s spirit with me every step of the way.

‘Other’

By Daniela Musesambili

I was born with fire in my chest
But taught to swallow it.
To bury screams in polite smiles,
To hide sorrow in “I’m blessed.”
They said, don’t be too angry,
Don’t cry, it makes you soft,
So I built walls with my silence,
Stacked them up, stone by thought.
They called me strong,
But never asked how heavy the strength was.
They called me resilient,

But never saw me shatter in quiet rooms.
They said, Black people don’t do therapy,
That’s white people stuff,
But my soul was tired of carrying
Centuries of “tough enough.”
I am not Other.
I feel. I fall. I rise. I heal.
And maybe my tears
Are the rebellion they fear most.
Let this be a reminder:
Black emotion is human.
Black healing is revolutionary.
And your softness is not shame – it’s sacred.

Repercussions, resistance and reimaging fairness in education

THE QUESTION OF MERIT, PART 3

By Z’Hanie Weaver
LIBERTY HIGH SCHOOL

In Part II, we examined how the language of “merit” has long been used to disguise systemic barriers that disproportionately exclude BIPOC, low-income, and immigrant communities. Standardized testing became a cornerstone of this exclusion—a seemingly objective metric masking generations of inequity. But now, in Part III, we shift toward the present and the possibilities ahead. As cracks form in the foundation of test-based

meritocracy, a new wave of educators, students, and advocates are reimaging what success looks like. From test-optional policies and culturally responsive pedagogy to grassroots movements demanding equity, the push to redefine merit is gaining momentum. This isn’t just a fight over education – it’s a challenge to who holds power, how we define intelligence, and what we choose to value in one another. Despite the entrenchment of standardized testing, cracks in the system are forming. The COVID-19

pandemic accelerated a shift: over 1,800 colleges went test-optional or test-blind, including the entire University of California system. Their findings? Eliminating the SAT did not reduce academic quality—but it did increase diversity and equity in admissions. Grassroots organizations are pushing back harder. Groups like FairTest, the National Center for Fair & Open Testing and local education justice coalitions are reframing the conversation: What if we evaluated students based on lived experience, resilience, creativity, and community impact – rather than numerical abstraction?

Educators are also demanding a shift in pedagogy. Culturally responsive teaching, trauma-informed education, and restorative justice practices are gaining momentum, acknowledging that intellect and learning thrive in environments of inclusion, not competition. What if merit wasn’t about outperforming others, but about rising within the community? What if our systems honored emotional intelligence, collaboration, and vision? Imagine college applications that weigh a student’s role as a caretaker or as an organizer fighting food insecurity in their neighborhood. Imagine employers who

seek out critical thinking nurtured in real-world settings rather than exclusive classrooms. Redefining merit also means redefining success. It means shifting from individual accolades to collective progress. It’s time to switch from asking, “What did you score?” to asking instead, “What did you change?” This isn’t idealism – it’s justice. At its heart, this is not a conversation about testing – it’s about power. It’s about who gets to be called brilliant, and who is told to try harder. It’s about how we measure value, and who we uplift in the process. Carl Brigham and those who followed him

built a system designed to crown certain people as “meritorious” and render others invisible. But visibility is power— and today’s students, educators, and activists are reclaiming that power by challenging the very foundations of meritocracy. If we want a future where talent is truly recognized – across every ZIP code, color and income bracket – then we must dismantle the illusions of neutrality and rebuild systems that honor every kind of intelligence. Because in truth, merit was never a measure of worth – it was a mirror reflecting the status quo. It’s time we shatter it.

CULTURE

THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA ON BLACK MEN

IN HIS WORDS

By Anthony Fain

BLACK PRISONERS CAUCUS, AIRWAY HEIGHTS CORRECTIONS CENTER

Does trauma really affect Black men? Yes, it does. As Black men, we have normalized abnormal behaviors and living environments to such a degree that we often fail to recognize when we are experiencing trauma or living in a traumatic state. For far too long, we have not addressed our trauma – let alone acknowledged that they are traumas. Socially, in the Black community, we have been taught to “man up,” “stop being soft,” and “get over it.” These messages and so many more are drilled into us from an early age, leading us to suppress our emotions. We are conditioned to push through pain, to ignore signs of distress, and to carry burdens that are far too heavy for us to bear alone. From a young age, we are taught that being vulnerable is a sign of weakness. As a result, many Black men feel that



they must bear the weight of the world on their shoulders without asking for help or even acknowledging the toll it takes on our mental and emotional well-being. This is a deeply ingrained mindset – one that has been passed down from generation to generation, often without question. It becomes so hard to distinguish what’s normal from what’s actually damaging. Moreover, there are generational traumas that have been passed down since slavery. Many people like to believe that we are so far removed from slavery that its impact no longer affects us today – but it absolutely does. We not only deal with modern-day trauma but also the trauma of the past. Living in poor neighborhoods, coming from single-parent homes, and witnessing the abuse of our people have all become so normalized that it is what many of us know and accept as a way of life. This historical trauma has manifested in our communities in many ways. It is present in the way we perceive authority figures, in the disproportionate

number of Black men incarcerated, in the way we are policed and treated as suspects rather than citizens. It is present in our health outcomes, in the constant stress we face just to survive, in the burden of always having to prove our worth and our humanity to a society that often views us as less than. These pressures create a cycle of trauma that many Black men are born into–without ever being given the tools or the space to process it. The trauma we face is not just the result of individual experiences but also of systemic oppression that spans centuries. The constant barrage of messages telling us that we don’t belong, that we are lesser, that we are dangerous, that we are expendable – this weighs heavily on our psyche. To begin understanding whether you are experiencing trauma, you must first know what constitutes a traumatic state or experience. Unfortunately, most of us don’t recognize those signs because they have become part of our norm. Others don’t want to be viewed as victims of something that might diminish their sense of manhood. We’ve internalized the idea that trauma is something only certain people experience

– that it’s a weakness, and that Black men should rise above it without letting it show. But in doing so, we deny ourselves the chance to heal. Trauma affects not only Black men – it affects us in ways that are unique and often more profound than other men. It has reached a point where we deny that trauma is something that happens to us – but it does. This denial can cause us to become numb to our own pain, leaving us stuck in a cycle of emotional suppression. We may start to act out in unhealthy ways – through anger, addiction, or isolation – because we have not been taught how to cope with our emotions in healthy ways. Those coping mechanisms are often misunderstood and further stigmatized, which only adds to the cycle of silence and suffering. But healing is possible. In order for us to begin healing from these traumas and become survivors, we must first recognize them. Acknowledging that we are experiencing trauma is not a sign of weakness – it is a step toward strength. I was once someone who didn’t believe in the trauma of being a Black man in America. But I’ve come to realize that it is real, as are my personal traumas.

Once I recognized that I had been affected by the weight of these experiences, I was able to take steps toward healing. The road isn’t easy, but it is necessary if we are to break the cycle of trauma and rise to our full potential. So I challenge all Black men: take a look at your life circumstances and assess if trauma is affecting you. Begin to question what’s been normalized in your life and whether it’s healthy. Let’s stop pretending that everything is fine when it’s not. Let’s stop burying our emotions and start expressing them in healthy, productive ways. Let’s start to heal. We must stop normalizing abnormal behaviors. We owe it to ourselves, our families, and our communities to confront our traumas head-on. Only by doing so can we start to reclaim our power and begin the process of healing. We have been taught to endure. Now let us teach ourselves how to heal. Let us redefine what strength truly means – not as the absence of pain, but as the ability to face it and overcome it. Let us show the world that Black men are not just survivors – we are resilient, we are powerful, and we are capable of true healing.

NAACP IS CHALLENGING THE NARRATIVE

NAACP
Spokane Branch
CELEBRATING
JUNETEENTH:
NAACP fireside
chat with Cliff Avril

The Spokane NAACP recently hosted a meaningful, “Challenging the Narrative” Juneteenth event that featured a “Fireside Chat” with former Seattle Seahawks player and Super Bowl champion Cliff Avril offered an engaging discussion aimed at bringing the community together and inspiring our youth to take on leadership roles and participate in organizations like the NAACP. Moderated by NAACP President Lisa Gardner, the fireside chat offered a lively platform for Avril to share his journey, insights and experiences as a regional sports figure and star athlete. Born to Haitian immigrants in Jacksonville, Florida, Avril talked about his ambition to support his family. Football and superstardom weren’t his priorities; finishing school and securing a job were. He spoke passionately about the importance of unity and teamwork, especially during these uncertain times. Avril emphasized the saying “it takes a village” to nurture and support the next generation of leaders. His message resonated deeply with attendees, reminding everyone that collective efforts can lead to meaningful change in our communities. Not everyone will become an entertainer or athlete, but there are opportunities within sports or entertainment to work as trainers, in front offices, or even in stadium jobs. He mentioned when the Seattle Seahawks won the Super Bowl, it wasn’t just the players who won; it was everyone a part of the overall franchise. The evening was enhanced by musical performances from the talented Alethea Dumas, whose soulful melodies set a lively tone for the gathering. Her music not only entertained but also uplifted the spirits of those present, creating a warm and welcoming atmosphere. Additionally, attendees enjoyed a special address from Spokane’s first Miss Juneteenth, Ane-su Whacha, who captivated the audience with her

youthful message of empowerment, pride, and resilience. Also present from the Miss Juneteenth Royal Court was first runnerup Mwajuma Ishibaleka. Her presence served as a reminder of the importance of Juneteenth and the fight for equality and justice. Key dignitaries in attendance included Judge Gloria Ochoa, Spokane City Council Member Jonathan Bingle, Spokane Public School Board President Nikki Lockwood and Superior Court Judge Mary Logan. Their presence highlighted the importance of community involvement and support for initiatives that uplift our youth. This Juneteenth fireside chat not only celebrated a pivotal moment in U.S. history but reinforced the NAACP’s ongoing commitment to fostering leadership among young people. By emphasizing the importance of collaboration, community involvement, and mentorship, this event aimed to inspire attendees to actively participate in creating a better future for everyone. As we reflect on this gathering, we’re reminded that together, we can develop the leaders our youth need to succeed in today’s world. The NAACP remains committed to empowering the next generation, making sure they have the tools, support and encouragement necessary to achieve their goals. We look forward to future events that continue to inspire, educate and unite. It is through innovative and engaging events like this that the NAACP aims to bring people together, encourage involvement, and build a community that moves from being isolated to one that progresses. The NAACP wishes to recognize the hard work and dedication of the event vendors, including Glos Creative Studio, Gonzaga University Guest Services, B&B Pro Video, Converge Media, Pop & Pose Photo Booth, and gives special thanks to the event sponsor, Better Health Together.

Courageous conversations with law enforcement

By Lisa Gardner
SPOKANE NAACP PRESIDENT

In an intimate gathering aimed at encouraging dialogue between law enforcement and the community, the Spokane NAACP hosted its “Challenging the Narrative” event. In partnership with the City of Spokane Human Rights Commission, the event was led by Criminal Justice Committee Co-Chair and NAACP 3rd Vice President, Kurtis Robinson, along with Luc Jasmin III, Member at Large for the NAACP and a commissioner with the City of Spokane Office of the Ombudsman. The panel included prominent figures from the criminal justice system, such as Spokane Police Department Chief Kevin Hall, City of Spokane Office of the Ombudsman Director Bart Logue, Office of Civil Rights, Equity, and Inclusion Director Jerrall Haynes, Pastor of Morning Star Baptist Church Walter Kendricks, Jim Leighty from the Washington State Coalition for Police Accountability, and Spokane Human Rights Commission Commissioner Anwar Peace. This event offered a vital platform for addressing urgent issues related to police accountability and community relations, creating a space for open and honest conversation. One of the main topics discussed was the troubling number of officer-involved shootings, a concern that deeply affects our communities.



COURTESY

The Spokane NAACP hosted its “Challenging the Narrative” event at the Central Public Library.

Panelists stressed the importance of transparency and accountability in these cases, highlighting ongoing efforts to create more effective oversight systems. They acknowledged the emotional toll these events take on families and communities, emphasizing that accountability is essential for rebuilding trust. Chief Hall mentioned that efficient training, adequate resources, and strategic recruitment will help in establishing a stronger, diverse police force. The discussion also emphasized the importance of diversity in the police force. President of NAACP, Lisa Gardner, underscored the need to recruit women and people

of color to ensure the police department reflects the diverse community it serves. This focus on inclusivity goes beyond simply representing different groups; it’s about understanding the unique challenges faced by various community members and building trust-based relationships. Importantly, the discussion was framed not as a criticism of law enforcement but as an opportunity for constructive dialogue. Community members were encouraged to listen and engage with law enforcement officers, fostering a sense of partnership between the NAACP and police representatives. This collaborative approach aimed to

break down barriers and promote understanding, ultimately improving relations. This event signifies a key step toward collaboration and mutual respect, paving the way for a more accountable and fair criminal justice system. The NAACP remains dedicated to working with law enforcement to promote change, ensuring that all community voices are heard and valued. By building these connections, we can collaborate for a safer and more just society. To watch this episode, please visit The Spokane NAACP YouTube page at youtube.com/@Spokane-NAACP Spokane NAACP #1137.

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HAPPENING AROUND TOWN / FROM THE FRONT PAGE

WHITE ROSE BRUNCH RETURNS

By Shalena Armstrong
THE BLACK LENS

After a seven-year pause, the Spokane (WA) Chapter of The Links, Incorporated proudly hosted its signature White Rose Brunch on May 31 – a morning filled with elegance, empowerment, and celebration.

The long-held community favorite returned with grace, bringing together community leaders, supporters and friends to raise funds, celebrate excellence, and uplift the next generation.

Guests enjoyed a vibrant atmosphere with live jazz from the Jason Evans Band and moving performances by Alethea Dumas and Jacqueline Sandoval. Pastor Betsy Williams delivered a powerful invocation.

The chapter proudly presented its Community Impact Awards to two outstanding honorees:

- Latisha Hill – for her work in National Trends and Services
- Michael Bethley – for his leadership in the Arts

Both were celebrated for their deep commitment to uplifting Spokane through service and innovation.

Four brilliant students – Donalda Brantley, Kamryn Richardson, Genae Langford and Opulukwa Jeremiah – were awarded scholarships, recognizing their academic promise and commitment to excellence.

The event concluded-



Links members and youth prepare to walk down the runway. Kerra Bower, in orange, and Stephaine Courtney, in pink, and Shalena Armstrong (Spokane Links president). Behind Kerra is her daughter Jordyn. To the left of Kerra is Mufaro Whacha.

PICS BY KEMONI



Fannie Bush and Mary-Jane McCoy, at right, are platinum members of Spokane (WA) Links, Incorporated.

BREW CITY FLASH

with the show-stopping “Black Excellence: Bring Your Own Style Fashion Show.” This unforgettable segment began with a powerful original poem by April Eberhardt, setting the

tone for a vibrant celebration of self-expression. What followed was a joyful runway walk that blended style, personality, and generational flair. From bold prints to timeless chic, each

participant lit up the stage, proudly showcasing their individuality and energy.

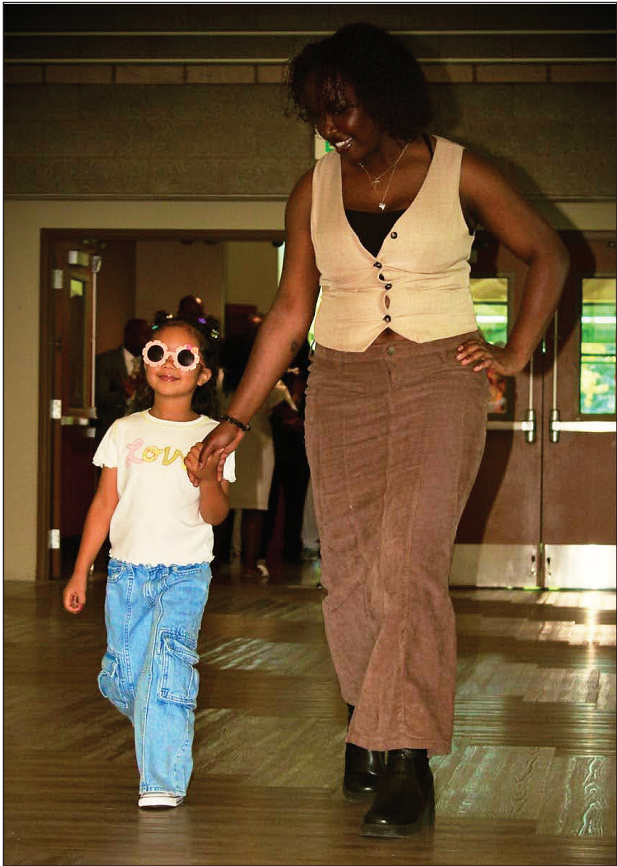
The 2025 White Rose Brunch was more than a fundraiser – it was an affirmation of The Links’ enduring mission to serve, empower, and celebrate Black excellence in all its forms. True to their mission, the chapter remains “committed to enriching, sustaining, and ensuring the culture and economic survival of African Americans and other people of African ancestry.”

Shalena Armstrong is the president of the Spokane (WA) Chapter of The Links, Incorporated.



BREW CITY FLASH

Pastor Betsy Williams, a champion of Beloved Community, delivers a powerful invocation.



PICS BY KEMONI

Amaya Nakamura is escorted for the finale of the fashion show by emcee Mayah Eberhardt.



Top left: Bob Hemphill, owner of Chicken N More, talks to City Council President Betsy Wilkerson.



Top right: Jason Evans and his band performs at the brunch.

At left: Lisa Gardner and Dr. Jeanne Baynes work the registration table at the Links’ White Rose Brunch.

PHOTOS BY BREW CITY FLASH



PICS BY KEMONI

Kim Ndlovu sports a contemporary chic outfit during the fashion show.

SERVE
Continued from 1

also located in the Mojave Desert. They needed help in the Food Service Department, specifically in a huge bakery. I volunteered.

“They sent me back East to Camp Lejeune where I went to school for Food Service for a couple of months. After that training, I returned to Barstow to work in the bakery. I made E-4 NCO, Corporal, in 18 months. After being in the Marines for almost two years, I was transferred to Camp Pendleton for Infantry training. With four other platoons, I was then sent to the First Marine Air Wing in Da Nang. I hung out with the wild bunch and lost a stripe there for being off-limits in a village named Dog Patch. I had the chance to stay in the Nam and try to get my stripe back, but my three-year enlistment was up. I called it a day. They flew us back to El Toro in California, where I received an Honorable Discharge.”

For Rivers, Vietnam represented not only a geographic departure from home but a symbolic one; it was a dare to do something that stretched beyond a steel mill job in blue-collar, industrial America – a leap toward purpose, identity, self-discovery and belonging in a country still learning to see him fully. He enlisted voluntarily, chasing what he now describes as “adventure,” though he acknowledges the weight of that choice.

“I went to the ‘Nam to do what I had to do. Serve the country,” he said simply. “If I didn’t enlist, they would get me anyway.”

Fear, Discipline and Pride

Boot camp at Parris Island tested Rivers’ mettle. “They scare the fear out of you,” he laughs. “They teach you to face fear and be afraid to be afraid.”

It was here that Rivers began to understand the meaning of discipline – not just as military proto-

col but as a mindset.

“The Corps taught me to always try to keep a strong mind and body. At times I strayed from that discipline, but I always tried to return to it.”

That training would carry him through deployments, the Tet Offensive, and long stretches guarding the perimeter at Da Nang. His unit—the First Marine Air Wing – was surrounded by bunkers and fences that separated them from Vietnamese neighborhoods known to harbor Viet Cong operatives.

The Paradox of Patriotism

Rivers’ story speaks to a larger, often unspoken question: What does patriotism look like for Black Americans?

From Crispus Attucks to the Tuskegee Airmen, Black service has always been paradoxical – risking life and limb for freedoms still withheld at home. Rivers’ reflections may generate more questions than answers. He didn’t march in protests or burn draft cards.

“It was a means to an end for a newly minted 18-year-old, seeking to claim his place in a nation still struggling to recognize the full humanity of those who looked like him – at a time marked by the assassinations of Malcolm X, Dr. King, and Fred Hampton, the uprising in Watts, and the deadly protests at Kent State against the Vietnam War.”

“Freedom and Democracy is the gift that Americans inherit at birth,” Rivers said. “Some have more opportunities than others, but at the end of the day, it’s up to the individual to make the right choices.”

War, Loss and Becoming

“I never compared love with death,” Rivers said, “but I know I loved leaving Vietnam, because I was leaving a lot of death behind.”

Rivers never sought to be a hero. He doesn’t romanticize war. He speaks candidly about friends lost, villages bombed, and the de-

humanizing cost of military conflict.

“When you see how people die in a war zone – civilians along with soldiers – it makes you love life.”

Yet amid that destruction, he also found glimpses of beauty and transformation: swimming in the China Sea, witnessing how people lived in third-world villages, and sharing beers off-duty at concerts near Hill 327. These experiences, while shaped by the trauma of war, expanded his worldview.

Black Man, U.S. Marine

For Rivers, service was also about belonging. Not just to a military unit, but to an idea of America that – while flawed – was still his to claim. He didn’t enlist to prove loyalty; he enlisted because it was an avenue open to him, one that felt purposeful.

“Everybody my age was getting drafted,” he says. “But I was ready to do something different.”

What does he tell his 18-year-old self now?

“Get a good education first. Chase your adventure later.”

Looking Ahead

Clyde Rivers’ story isn’t about glorifying war or denying the ugly truths of America’s racial history. It’s about a young Black man choosing to serve with dignity, knowing the contradictions of the nation he served. It’s about walking the tightrope between sacrifice and survival, discipline and disillusionment, love for country and love for self.

When asked if he’d do it all again, he doesn’t hesitate.

“Yes, I would. Only better.”

His words offer no easy answers to the question of Black patriotism—but they offer something more enduring: truth, layered with complexity, told by a man who lived it.

“I really wasn’t concerned about being a hero. There were already a lot of heroes who had died in the NAM. I just wanted to show up and do my best.” – Clyde Rivers

KIRISHA
Continued from 1

time I didn’t have to carry that weight.”

She earned her bachelor’s degree in 2013 and her J.D. from Howard Law in 2016. But her education didn’t just come from textbooks. It came from surviving.

“I’ve wanted to be a lawyer since I was four years old. But becoming a lawyer wasn’t just about a career. It was about being a voice for people like me – people who’ve survived.”

Kirisha is a survivor of sexual assault and domestic violence. Those experiences shape her legal work today. She practices family and immigration law, serving youth, survivors of abuse, and immigrants seeking legal protection. Her clients often carry invisible wounds – wounds she recognizes.

“I’m a domestic violence survivor myself. I was raped at 16. I survived an abusive relationship during law school. That experience informs everything I do.”

In court, in classrooms, in quiet conversations with clients – her advocacy is deeply personal. Her work centers not only on justice, but on healing.

“You can’t help people unless you listen to them. And sometimes, people just need someone who understands the pain they haven’t been able to say out loud.”

She teaches young people how to recognize healthy relationships. She challenges systems that fail them. And she’s adamant that mental wellness isn’t a luxury – it’s a necessity.

“When you’re taught to suppress your feelings, that becomes a habit. You internalize harm. And when something truly traumatic happens, you don’t even feel like you deserve to speak up.”

Kirisha is breaking that cycle – for herself, and for others.

And even as she rises, she remains grounded by the community that shaped her.

“Spokane gave me roots,” she said. Kirisha explains that even though she had to leave to fully see herself, Spokane still provided the soil that grew her.

To the next generation of Black youth growing up in Spokane, her message is clear: “Get out and see the world. Be around people who are dreaming big, who challenge you to grow. And when you do – come back and give something to the place that raised you.”

Kirisha Marshall’s story is one of return – not just geographically, but spiritually and emotionally. Her journey from Spokane to Howard University wasn’t just about changing locations – it was about reclaiming herself. She left to heal, to breathe, to rise – and now, she advocates so that others can do the same.

Her work with youth – teaching them to recognize healthy relationships, advocating in court on their behalf, pushing back when the system fails them – is a direct response to the silence she once felt forced to maintain.

“You can’t help people unless you listen to them. And sometimes, people just need someone who understands the pain they haven’t been able to say out loud.”

Mental wellness is central to her advocacy. For Kirisha, it’s not just about therapy – it’s about creating the psychological safety that so many young Black girls, especially in predominantly white spaces, are denied.

“When you’re taught to suppress your feelings, that becomes a habit. You internalize harm. And then when something truly traumatic happens, you don’t even feel like you deserve to speak up.”

She’s breaking that cycle – one case at a time.

ARTS AND INSPIRATION

LEGACY IN MOTION

Drey Davis remembered through award-winning composition and community tribute

By April Eberhardt
THE BLACK LENS

On March 22, the Cheney High School Band earned first place in indoor percussion at a regional competition hosted at Ridgeline High School. Their powerful and emotional performance featured an original composition titled “Grace” – written by the late Drey Davis, a beloved Spokane musician, educator and mentor whose influence continues to resonate.

Before his unexpected passing, Drey poured his heart into both the music and the young people he mentored. He regularly traveled from Spokane’s Northside to Cheney High School before school hours to work

with the drumline, sharing his time, talent, and passion. In addition to his work with Cheney, Drey also taught band for grades 6-12 at Northwest Christian School, where he cultivated a love for music and discipline in the classroom and beyond.

The band’s winning performance – led by Joshua Wisswell and supported by Cody Goforth – included contributions from a dedicated team of students, including Cory Jones, Mason Utz and Joanna Wilkerson, as well as several Cheney Middle School students who joined the high school ensemble. Their efforts were more than a competition – they served as a heartfelt tribute to the man who helped guide and inspire them.

A canvas displayed at the event echoed Drey’s lasting imprint: “Legacy is not leaving behind something for other people – it’s leaving something behind in people.”

That legacy lives on. In 2024, Mayor Lisa Brown officially proclaimed July 14 as “Drey Day” in Spokane. This year’s celebration returns to Chameleon (1801 W. Sunset Blvd.) with doors opening at 4 p.m. and performances beginning at 5:00 PM. The event will feature live music across genres – gospel, R&B, rock and jazz – and is open to all ages.

The evening will also raise funds for a community mural in Drey’s honor – a lasting tribute to a life that continues to uplift others through music, mentorship, and love.



Drey Davis’ mother Erica stands next to a tapestry depicting an image of Drey playing drums. COURTESY



BRIANNA FIELDS/THE BLACK LENS
Megan Thee Stallion talks on stage at Dreamcon 2025.

DREAMCON 2025: ANOTHER YEAR OF COMRADERY AND COLLABORATION

By Brianna Fields
THE BLACK LENS

Dreamcon 2025 has come and gone yet again, but with a bigger venue, larger number of attendees, and bigger talent! Dreamcon was held in Houston, Texas, from May 30-June 1.

The talent list was quite vast this year, ranging from voice actors, musicians, writers and many more. There was a panel dedicated to the Boondocks (Boondocks Celebration panel), so naturally, some of the people who were involved had to be there! From the Boondocks were Carl Jones, Gary Anthony Williams, Cedric Yarbrough, Rodney Barnes and Yamara Taylor.

Other actors/voice actors that attended were Khleo Thomas (“Holes”), Reed Shannon (“Arcane”), Zeno Robinson (“Ben 10,” “Big City Greens,” “Young Justice” and “My Hero Academia”), and Kimberly Brooks (“Steven Universe,” “Static Shock,” “Scooby Doo! Mystery Incorporated” and “Doc McStuffins”). The musicians who attended were Earthgang, Roxxy Haze, Leon Thomas, and three-time Grammy-winning artist Megan Thee Stallion!

The attendees were also overjoyed to see some of their favorite content creators, including Don-tai, AMP, Tony Weaver Jr., Tony Statovci, Tiffie Starchild, Zaynah Bear, Berleezy, and, we can’t forget, the YouTubers who started it all, RD-CWorld.

While there were many panels focused on fun and enjoying hobbies, there were just as many panels focused on careers, education, networking and community. Some of the panels presented by Dreamcon included the Opening and Closing Ceremonies, Bae Brigade (a DJ battle), “Mic Check: Unmasking the Voice,” “It’s Dangerous to Go Alone: Building Community and Collaboration” and “Power & Creativity: Building a Brand That Moves Culture.” I had the pleasure of attending the latter three panels.

In “Mic Check,” the panel was hosted by Yamara Taylor and featured the voice talents Carl Jones, Reed Shannon, Kimberly Brooks and

Zeno Robinson. Their panel was more focused on the career route with advice on how to get into voice acting, how they got into voice acting, and how important it is to have a support team, but to make sure you are your number one fan and cheerleader.

In the “It’s Dangerous To Go Alone” panel, YouTubers Leland of RD-CWorld, AXXChristine and Berleezy told us about the importance of community, and a fresh pair of eyes can take you to places you didn’t think were possible. And how the power of collaboration can help build that community and support system needed to keep going.

Finally, in “Building A Brand That Moves Culture,” host StoryModeBae interviewed Megan Thee Stallion on her business ventures and what she plans to do next. Meg walked out dressed head to toe in her Yorrichi cosplay (from the anime “Bleach”), stating that she “selects her cosplay based off of whose hair looks the best.” Megan talked about her love for Houston, the city that raised her, and how it shaped her into the woman she is today. She talked about her new affordable swimsuit line, Hot Girl Summer, sold exclusively at Walmart, and her new tequila, Chicas Divertidas, with differing flavors Tequila Blanco and Tequila Reposado. Megan also dropped some new information exclusively at Dreamcon, that she was creating her own anime alongside Carl Jones (Boondocks), which will be airing on Amazon Prime.

When StoryModeBae asked if Meg could share any advice with the crowd, she first joked by saying, “The next generation needs to be giving me advice.” But continued to say, “Everything you’re good at in your everyday life is a job” and that “your mind and God ain’t gonna lead you wrong!”

Later on that weekend, she and two other content creators went live on “The Sims” YouTube channel as part of the convention’s festivities.

Dreamcon ended with another successful year and record-breaking attendance compared to last year. Dreamcon 2026 will be held in Houston, Texas, from July 10-12, and badges will be on sale soon.

Met Gala 2025: The looks and history behind the red carpet’s theme



GETTY IMAGES
Actress and singer-songwriter Teyana Taylor attends the 2025 Met Gala Celebrating “Superfine: Tailoring Black Style” at Metropolitan Museum of Art on May 5 in New York City.

By Brianna Fields
THE BLACK LENS

Fashion’s biggest night has come and gone, but the looks this year will be talked about for years to come.

The 2025 Met Gala was held May 5 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. The annual Met Gala showcases the new spring costume exhibition.

• As for the fashion, I don’t think we’ve seen such jaw-dropping looks consecutively since 2018’s “Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination.” This year’s theme was “Superfine: Tailoring Black Style.” The theme “explores the importance of clothing and style to the formation of Black identities in the Atlantic diaspora, and will be arranged by the 12 characteristics of Black Dandyism,” Vogue reported. “Tailored For You” was the initial dress code for the red carpet this year. Described as a “sartorial mood that is purposefully designed to provide guidance and invite creative interpretation.”

A lot of different looks were expressed this year that leaned into the sleek and classic style of tailoring, but had more of a theatrical and avant-garde flair. While they all looked fantastic, Black women were especially eye-catching this year. Everyone showed up and showed out this year, but there was special attention drawn to the co-chairs of the event: A\$AP

Rocky, Pharrell Williams, Lewis Hamilton and Colman Domingo. A\$AP wowed with a beautiful ensemble from his label, AWGE. The look bore a slick double-breasted technical wool jacket that he was inspired by the outdoorsy marmot jackets that were around Harlem growing up.

“Marmots are a Harlem tradition. That was our teenage jacket!” A\$AP told Vogue while at his final fitting for the red carpet.

However, A\$AP wasn’t the only one making jaws drop. Other big-name Black actors were in stunning outfits as well. Zendaya, Doechee and Pharrell stunned in Louis Vuitton. Domingo was in Valentino. Ayo Edebiri wowed in Ferragamo. Khabylame in Boss. Janelle Monáe, Zoe Saldana, and Angel Reese in Thom Browne. Hamilton in Wales Bonner. Ugbad Abdi in Michael Kohrs. Cynthia Erivo in Givenchy. Jodie Turner-Smith in Burberry. Coco Jones in Manish Malhotra. Lupita Nyong’o in Chanel. Diana Ross in Ugo Moze. Chance the Rapper in Versace. Keke Palmer in Vera Wang. Rihanna in Marc Jacobs. And Teyana Taylor dazzled in Ruth E. Carter.

Other artists, such as Andre 3000, wore possible statement pieces with the grand piano on his back as a likely reference to him carrying the music industry on his back for decades. In a Washington Post article, “Met Celebration has a Dark Side,” writer Karen Attiah

expresses how this year’s Met Gala theme, while in celebration of Black history, is very complicated to be 100% joyful during a time of Black erasure. While praising the Met Gala for finally giving back history the recognition it deserves, it does feel rather odd in the current political climate.

“Finally, finally, the fashion world was devoting its big event to recognize the brilliance and boldness of the Black masculine aesthetic in meticulously tailored suits, bold colors, and fine accessories (i.e., power dressing),” Attiah said.

She said this year’s theme took inspiration from the book “Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism & the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity” (2009), written by Monica L Miller, Barnard College’s Chair of African Studies. She then goes into detail about the history of “the Black strategy of dandy dressing.” The Sapeurs (a historical subculture of Congo), dressed in fashionable suits from when the Congolese soldiers and émigrés went to France in the early 20th century, and returned with European style, fashion and even their mannerisms. A perfect example would be the Nigerian photographer, Iké Udé.

So, the Black community finally got the recognition it so rightly deserves, but we can’t let one single night deter us from what we’re facing nationally.

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Intergenerational blessings and challenges

FROM THE WATER'S EDGE



By Dr. Robert L. "Bob" Bartlett
THE BLACK LENS CONTRIBUTOR



Intergenerational care comes with blessings and challenges. Some of you know my – soon to turn 102-year-old – mother Frances Bartlett, known by many in this community as Grandma Bartlett or simply Grandma. Some know her well enough to occasionally stop by our home



Frances Bartlett, or simply Grandma.

in the Valley for a sit-down visit. When you do, you likely find her sitting in her big gray recliner in our living room leaning over a word search book bought at the Dollar Tree or a 300-piece jigsaw puzzle bought at Walmart. Mom survived the depression – she really knows how to stretch a dollar.

Folks marvel at how Mom doesn't act or look her age. She remains playful and quick to remind folks who question her age and looks that, "Black don't crack." She loves showing off her pink Sketchers and flowery dresses gifted to her by her oldest granddaughter in Spokane. She loves sharing family stories especially stories about how spoiled she was growing-up as an only child and the difference in how my older brother and I were raised. My brother was born while Pops was off to war. Mom lived with her parents at the time so my brother was equally spoiled by both her and his grandparents. My brother was three before Pops laid eyes on him and it didn't go well. "Spoiling" was not in Pops' make-up! Mom's longevity, memory, storytelling and spirits are nothing short of amazing.

She started staying with us over the winter months soon after Pops passed away in 2010. West Virginia winters are often colder and snowier than here. Fortunately, she loved to fly so friends or family would travel back and forth with her. She would stay with us until spring. She was a much younger woman back then – in her late 80s with more black hair than grey and she was very mobile. Her mobility has slowed a great deal and her hair is now totally grey.

A year before COVID my wife and I made the decision to move Mom here fulltime. She was reluctant at first but eventually gave in – we got lucky. We knew that the move had to be her choice. If it felt the least bit forced it would not go well. She was leaving the town of her birth, all of her life-long friends and the only home she ever knew as a married woman with two kids. Pops built that house with his own

hands and damn near everything in it. She was saying goodbye to her known world. Change is hard and challenging!

We moved her in the same home where my wife and I raised our four children. We were briefly empty-nesters living in a ranch style home with a finished downstairs. We moved Mom into our bedroom on the main floor and my wife and I retreated to the lower level.

Moving her across the country proved to be the easy part. It's been six years now. Losing her independence and relying more and more on others continues to be hard on her. She still misses her home and friends back East. For me, being a live-in caregiver can be especially hard at times – in addition to losing my own independence. Unlike raising children and watching them grow and becoming more independent, Mom is heading in the opposite direction. Seeing and experiencing those changes in her is hard. When putting on her socks and shoes or when cutting up her food, I have to think that it's only fair – it's my turn. We don't go shopping together anymore. Now I shop at the Dollar Tree and Walmart without her. Her leaving the house has been reduced to doctors' appointments. When helping her in and out of the car she will sometimes utter, "I'm so much trouble." I reply, "But you're good trouble, Mom."

My wife and I are both retired now so sometimes I get a little resentful that we are not living the "retired" life I thought we would. Fortunately, there are many more good days than bad. We both recognize how blessed we are to have Mom here with us. She makes us laugh daily and loves hugging her grandchildren and great grandchildren. She reminded us recently that, "I don't mind sticking around as long as my mind stays good." For me, it is love and care coming full circle in a way none of us could have imagined. Being a caregiver comes with blessings and challenges – like when Mom thanks me for doing the simplest things for her. I wonder if I ever said the same when the situation was reversed – likely not. Come by for a visit and plan to sit for a while.

Dr. Bartlett is a retired educator. He retired from Gonzaga University in 2007 and Eastern Washington University in 2020.



COURTESY

Ozell Wilkins showcases the importance of work in the trades.

Welded to purpose

Ozell Wilkins on trade work, stability and the high value of skills in today's workforce

By April Eberhardt
THE BLACK LENS

On June 23, Ozell Wilkins stood alongside labor leaders, clergy and community advocates at the Tribal Gathering Place in downtown Spokane to speak in support of the Public Dollars for Public Benefit Ordinance. Introduced by Councilmember Paul Dillon and backed by the Spokane Alliance, the ordinance aims to ensure that public infrastructure spending creates high-quality local jobs, expands apprenticeship opportunities, and prioritizes hiring from underrepresented communities.

As an ironworker and union member, Wilkins shared his personal journey – from uncertainty to economic stability – highlighting how access to the trades transformed his life. His story underscored the ordinance's potential to create equitable career pathways and lasting community impact.

Originally from Bloomington, Illinois, Wilkins moved to Spokane in 2013 and graduated from North Central High School. Like many students, he didn't hear much about trade op-

tions in school.

"I wasn't actually (interested in trades) – it sucks. The knowledge and the information wasn't really offered, so I was really unaware until I came to Spokane," he said.

That changed when Wilkins pursued a welding certificate at Spokane Community College. He gave over four years to the craft, and his passion quickly turned into a vision for independence.

"I wanted to become a mobile welder. I wanted to take welding and just turn it into my own profession – a side gig. I was looking for cash flow and just expressing the skill. I fell in love with it," he explained. "Welding is a form of connection – if it's done right, it lasts forever. You can see it in every house, every establishment. Your handrails – everything has something welded to it. It's an amazing process."

Eventually, Wilkins transitioned to the Ironworkers Union, Local 14, where he now earns \$28 an hour, with higher wages on the horizon. Journeymen, he noted, can make up to \$63 an hour – a solid and sustainable income. But for Wilkins,

it's about more than a paycheck. With six children, he's motivated by the ability to provide for his family without working multiple jobs. The union not only offered him financial stability but restored his sense of purpose.

"My life changed. The weekly wages inspired my mental. I thought I was out of a lot, but I feel safe with just this one job."

For students unsure about college, Wilkins recommends starting with a non-credit exploratory course like SCC's Skilled Trades Prep (STP).

"I was all over the place – firefighter, pilot, business. Someone told me to slow down and take the course, and it was not a waste of time. It introduced me to a plan."

"Education isn't for everybody, but a skill is. Sometimes the information goes over our heads – we gotta stay aware of our opportunities. It's a beautiful world."

One resounding message Wilkins makes clear: Skills are just as valuable as degrees in today's labor force – and exploring options and seizing opportunities is essential to the journey toward success.

A QUIET GOODBYE

By Karen Whitman
THE BLACK LENS

For most of my life, she was just "Mom." A beautiful Pastor's Wife and she always had a wonderful presence in our lives. I have amazing memories growing up – she was a wonderful mom. She loved church, laughter, telling stories that made no sense and made perfect sense at the same time. And above all, she loved her family. Fiercely.

When Mom's health began to decline from kidney failure, it felt like a slow unraveling. I remember the day I decided to quit my job to care for her. It wasn't a question, really – it was a knowing. She had taken care of me all my life; now it was my turn.

The early days weren't easy, but they were full of small, meaningful routines – making her breakfast, adjusting her pillows, watching old sitcoms together. And every week for a year, I took her to lunch. Just the two of us. Sometimes she laughed, cried and told stories from her youth like she was spinning gold from memory. Other times, she was quiet, far away.

Eventually, the strain grew. I was tired in a way I didn't know how to describe – tired in my bones, in my spirit. I asked my daughter to help, to step in where I was unraveling. That created tension neither of us saw coming. The shifting roles, the emotional weight – it was a lot. And then came the choice to bring in outside help. I needed to be her daughter again, not just her nurse.



COURTESY

Karen Whitman dances with her mother.

Toward the end, Mom changed. Her words grew sharper, sometimes cruel. I know now it was the illness, the pain, maybe even fear – but in those moments, it stung. I'd look at her and see the woman who held my hand through scraped knees and heartbreaks, and wonder why she now pushed me away. But even through the hurt, I stayed. I wanted to be there. I chose to be there.

When she passed, she was nonverbal. No last words. No "thank you," no "I love you," no "I'm sorry." I don't know what she was feeling, or if she knew I was sitting there, holding her hand one last time. But I hope she did. I hope, somehow, she knew

how much I loved her – even when we were tired, even when we were both hurting.

I look back now with mixed emotions. It was hard. But I also remember moments of closeness that I'll carry forever. A smile over lunch. The sound of her laugh in the middle of a hard day. The way she still tried to protect us, even when her body was failing.

Taking care of Mom was the hardest thing I've ever done. But I don't regret it. In the end, it was love. Complicated, messy, real love. The kind that spans generation after generation. The kind that lingers long after words are gone.

I miss you, Mama.

Tax credit would help families

Every day more than 820,000 Washingtonians perform a labor of love: caring for parents, spouses and other loved ones so they can stay at home – where they want to be.

Caring for a family member or close friend is one of the most important roles we are likely to play in our lifetime. However, hardworking family caregivers often spend their own money and may risk their jobs to help their loved ones. In fact, caregivers spend an average of more than \$7,200 a year of their own money – making it harder for them to afford groceries and pay bills. Many have had to cut down their work hours or quit their jobs because of caregiving responsibilities.

That's why AARP is urging Congress to pass the Credit for Caring Act. The federal tax credit of up to \$5,000 a year would put money back in the pockets of eligible family caregivers and help defray the costs of caring for a spouse or other loved one with long-term needs.



These stories were possible by funding support from AARP Washington and BECU. You can find more information, tips and resources for caregivers on their website at aarp.org/caregiverswa



WELLNESS

BLACK GENEALOGY Finding family in Audubon’s happy land

As America celebrates July 4, we must acknowledge the painful history tied to this national holiday. The freedom declared on July 4, 1776, from the British was not granted to all Americans; Black people remained enslaved on plantations and small farms. After years of research, it was time for me to confront my fears of visiting the plantation where my ancestors had been enslaved. Before I even learned the name of this plantation, I had already toured three others, but none were connected to my family. It feels different when you are related to people who were enslaved.

In my March 2025 article for the Black Lens, I wrote about discovering my ancestors in the book “The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom 1750-1925” by Herbert G. Gutman, which mentioned the Stirling Plantation and its location in St. Francisville, Louisiana, where my ancestors had been enslaved. While visiting New Orleans for a funeral in September 2012, my husband and I chose to explore St. Francisville in West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana – the place that my paternal grandmother had fondly remembered. Dubbed “Audubon’s Happy Land” in 1939 by Katherine Porter, St. Francisville was no happy land for people who were enslaved on one of Lewis Stirling’s three plantations.

Less than an hour from Baton Rouge, on the bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River, lies the historic community of St. Francisville, nestled in the rolling



A view of the Oakley Plantation and Audubon Memorial state park building near St. Francisville, La., not far from the Stirling (or Wakefield) Plantation.

hills of the Felicianas. It features landmark homes, B&Bs, shops, and antebellum plantations. This charming little town has inspired many creative artists, including John James Audubon, who was hired to tutor a child at the Oakley Plantation. It was here that the naturalist painted at least 80 of the 435 birds featured in his mammoth book, Birds of America.

The first stop was the West Feliciana Historical Society Museum. I saw photos of Stirling Plantation and inquired about

its location. I received a map and directions. While there, we also learned that six plantations – Afton Villa Gardens, Beechwood, Catalpa, Evergreenzine, Oakley, Rosedown, Rural Homestead, and Wakefield–would be open to the public during the 42nd Annual Audubon Pilgrimage, held March 15-17, 2013, to celebrate John James Audubon’s stay at the Oakley Plantation in West Feliciana Parish. We planned to return for that event. Stirling Plantation was

about ten minutes from the museum on Highway 61. Upon arriving, I noticed a plaque on the fence post that stated: “WAKEFIELD, 1834, Built in 1834 by Lewis and Sarah Turnbull Stirling. Two upper floors were removed in 1877 to effect partition of the estate. Private.” In Gutman’s book and the captions on the photos at the museum, the plantation was named Stirling, but the sign states Wakefield. I considered the private sign for about 30 seconds; it didn’t say “Keep Out or

No Trespassing.” The gate was open, so we drove in. The plantation was located at the end of a long road lined with oak trees and azaleas. We quickly took pictures and left after a few minutes. I did my homework before the 2013 trip. From my online research, I learned that the Stirling family had donated their family papers to the LSU Library in Baton Rouge. I hired Judy Riffel, a professional genealogist, to visit the LSU Library and copy the family papers relevant



By Patricia Bayonne-Johnson THE BLACK LENS CONTRIBUTOR



to my lineage, including Morgan, Weather, Stirling, and Sterling. Judy sent me copies of 29 pages of birth registers, lists of taxable properties (enslaved people), records of individuals who received shoes, lists of bushels of corn, agreements with freedmen, and other documents. I also researched Lewis Stirling and his family, as well as the Wakefield Plantation. I found that Stirling served with distinction as Quartermaster during the Battle of New Orleans in 1814, with the 10th and 20th Consolidated Regiments of the Louisiana Militia. He and his wife, Sarah Turnbull Stirling, built the Wakefield Plantation house in West Feliciana between 1834 and 1836. I discovered that the Civil War Battle of Stirling’s Plantation occurred on September 29, 1863, in Pointe Coupee Parish on land owned by Lewis Stirling. The Stirling Plantation once extended into another parish! Lewis Stirling was one of the first to plant sugar cane. He also grew indigo and cotton. I could hardly wait until March 15, 2013, to get here. To be continued ...

HOME: A 3-PART SERIES

Breathe in. Breathe out. Begin.

Over the next three issues, I invite us to explore the construct of Home and collectively redefine not only what it is, but how we take action to create the homes we need. This series will explore our connection to home through the land we live on, the communities we co-exist with, and the bodies we experience life through.

At this moment in time, we are existing in an intensely fabricated world. Imagined boundaries have been drawn with blood on land that isn’t ours to own. The powers that be are bloated with ego, money and dominance, giving them the faux responsibility to tell us how and where we are allowed to belong, to find refuge, to be at home.

Though I wish there was a breath technique, a yoga class, or a meditation I could offer that would dissolve the injustice, the harm, the hate that infects this land, I do not. Though perhaps, if those in power practiced mindfulness and were surrounded with unconditional love earlier, we wouldn’t be here now – but I digress. What I can offer is space and practice for you to feel whole and safe: on this land that yearns for reciprocity, in communities starving for connection, and in your own body, mind, and soul.

Summer is a season of dreaming, blossoming, harvesting, and abundance. May we acknowledge our wants and needs, affirm their possibility, and manifest them into being. Each piece in this series will offer invitations for reflection and reclamation. The ongoing attacks on love and connection may be out of our control, but the ways in which we find home within and around us are not. May we rebel through connection and love.

At Home with Nature

According to Merriam-Webster, home is “a place where one resides permanently or for a long period of time.” What a narrow measure, when we remember that humans were once migratory beings, moving in sync with the land to find nourishment, safety, and renewal. That natural way of living is now wrapped in paperwork and rules, boundaries and bureaucracy. Humans, like all animals, are meant to live in deep connection to the land. The movement of seasons inspires the movement of life. Though we migrate for different resources now, choosing the places that sustain us for the time that they do is still natural. When I asked myself what home could be in a world rooted in connection and love I envisioned a place that teaches, accepts, and offers



By jasmine linane-booe THE BLACK LENS CONTRIBUTOR



safety, exploration, and community connection. I saw a bird’s nest. Birds don’t build nests just anywhere though, they listen. To the wind. To the trees. To the ecosystem they are part of. And so

must we. To be at home with nature is not only to walk barefoot or picnic under the sun, though those are beautiful beginnings. It is to be in relationship with the soil, the plants, the waters, the sky, and with the histories layered beneath our feet. It is to acknowledge the ancestors of the land. To remember that the Earth does not belong to us we belong to the Earth. We are not separate from nature. We are nature. And if home is to become a place of belonging, then we must return to the land with reverence and readiness to listen.

Invitation to Practice: Land Listening

- Find a quiet spot outside. Sit, stand or lie down with minimal distraction. This could be a park, a patch of wild growth or a tree in your neighborhood.
- 1. Arrival**
Breathe in. Breathe out. Greet the land. You might say: “Hello. I’m here. I’m listening.”
 - 2. Sense**
Close your eyes. What do you hear, feel, and smell? Don’t name, just notice.
 - 3. Remember**
Open your eyes. Ask: Who lived here before me? What in this land feels older than memory?
 - 4. Offer**
Leave a small token: a breath, a whisper, a strand of hair. Not to give back, but to honor the moment.
 - 5. Reflect**
What did the land teach you about home? About your place in it?

Jasmine Linane-Booe of Kazuko Wellness is a Somatic Energy Guide with certifications in Reiki, yoga and meditation, and somatic energy work. She is also a trained psilocybin guide and wellness coach. Contact: hello@kazukowellness.com | www.kazukowellness.com

YOUTH VOICE IN ACTION



COURTESY

NAACP Spokane Youth Council President Kyhia Holt protested twice in one week.

Spokane NAACP Youth Council President participates in local protests

Black Lens staff reports

“It was important for me to participate in the ICE protests because when it comes to injustice – even when it’s not directly impacting my community – I still need to show up.” – Kyhia Holt, President, Spokane NAACP Youth Council

Kyhia Holt, a rising voice in Spokane’s growing movement for youth-led civic engagement, was recently elected president of the newly chartered NAACP Spokane Youth Council. As one who is in Generation Z, Holt steps into the ring of young activists who are refusing to wait their turn to lead. Her activism is grounded in a deep sense of justice. “Even when something doesn’t directly impact my community, I still need to show up,” she said, reflecting on her decision to protest outside the local ICE detention center. Holt was

Spokane NAACP Youth Council

To learn more about the youth council, email youthcouncil@spokanenaacp.org or search @spokanenaacp_yc on Instagram.

shocked to learn it was located just across the street from her home. “It was happening right in front of me. We claim to be a place of refuge, but then we turn around and strip people of their opportunities. That didn’t sit right with me.” She also participated in the national No Kings protest, standing against authoritarianism and in defense of democracy. “We’re at a critical turning point in American politics. This moment could determine

what kind of country we become. I want my children and grandchildren to know I stood for something.” As president of the Youth Council, Holt’s mission is clear: to create space for young people to engage, learn, and lead. “It’s about building a community where our voices matter – even you can’t vote yet,” she said. Holt invites youth ages 16-24 to attend their monthly meetings, held both virtually and in person on the second Sunday from 12-1:30 p.m. at the Carl Maxey Center. Her call to action is simple but powerful: “Read news articles that are unbiased and provide the most comprehensive information about what’s going on – because it’s bound to move something within you and prompt you to act.” The Youth Council is a place to build both awareness and strategy.

IN MEMORIAM / FROM THE FRONT PAGE

in Memoriam



ANNA MAE ROBERTSON
(MAY 30, 2025)

Living a life dedicated to service, family and heroism, Anna Mae Robertson was one of the last living members of the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion, also known as the “Six Triple Eight,” making history as he only all-Black, all-female battalion deployed over seas during WWII. Robertson helped bridge millions of U.S. soldiers to their families sorting through and delivering thousands of letter and packages. Robertson was beacon, mother of eight, a community anchor who created a historic legacy in her wake.



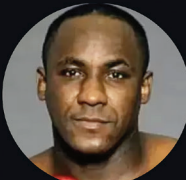
LYNN HAMILTON
(JUNE 19, 2025)

Lynn Hamilton, best known for her role as Donna Harris on “Sanford and Son,” died June 19 at age 95. Her illustrious career, spanning over five decades, left an indelible mark on the world of entertainment,” the Rev. Calvin Carson wrote in social media tribute to Hamilton. Some of Hamilton's most notable works – aside from her recurring stint as Fred Sanford's fiancée – included her appearances on “The Waltons, Roots: The Next Generation,” NBC's “Generations” and nighttime soap opera Dangerous Women.



ENA HARTMAN
(APRIL 16, 2025)

Ena Hartman was an actress who made history as the first African American to sign a contract with a major television network. Born in Arkansas, Hartman moved to New York at 13 where she and her family faced financial difficulties leading her to drop out of high school and at a restaurant to make ends meet and save for her modeling dreams. Hartman was discovered by a modeling agency after being rejected from an audition and in 1962, during talent competition, Suits from NBC network has her signed. Hartman appeared in a line of classic televisions shows during the 60s and 70s best known for her work as the trailblazing police dispatcher, Katy Grant, on “Dan August.”



MIKE MCCALLUM
(MAY 31, 2025)

International Hall of Fame boxer Mike McCallum was a 1970s ,80s and 90s boxer known by his nickname “The Bodysnatcher” due to his devastating body blows. Earning recognition an amateur from Jamaica, McCallum took is talents pro in 1981 where he fought his way to the top winning the super welterweight championship in ‘84, switching classes to middleweight and doing it again in ‘89 and finally moving to light heavyweight in ‘94 to win the title and complete his trifecta of championships.



AL FOSTER
(MARCH 25, 2025)

Al Foster was an acclaimed jazz drummer who spent a career playing with legends like trumpeter Miles Davis, pianist McCoy Tyner and saxophonist Sonny Rollins. Foster took to the drums as a teenager building his skills and making his debut at 20 in Blue Mitchell's album, “The Thing to Do” leading him on tour most of the 60s. In 1972, Foster joined Davis' band where his more aggressive grooves melded with the group seamlessly in which he stayed up to Davis’ final pieces in the 80s. For the next 44 years, Foster continued making music recording eight albums as a band leader.



CAVIN YARBROUGH
(JUNE 19, 2025)

Cavin Yarbrough, R&B legend and half of iconic duo Yarbrough & Peoples, was a Dallas native and best known for the early 1980s No. 1 hit “Don't Stop the Music.” Alisa Peoples, his musical partner and wife, told CBS News Texas that his death was sudden and unexpected. Yarbrough's musical roots ran deep. He was a classically trained pianist who first crossed paths with Peoples during childhood piano lessons. Their shared passion for music led to a professional partnership, and with the support of Gap Band frontman Charlie Wilson, they signed with Total Experience Records. The duo enjoyed a string of R&B hits throughout the 1980s.

Rest in Power, Ananda Lewis: Storyteller of Generation X

By April Eberhardt
BLACK LENS NEWS



Lewis

For those of us who came of age as Gen Xers, the evolution of BET and MTV offered more than reality TV and sitcoms in syndication – they gave us a front-row seat to popular culture, in full color. They do that now, but in their heyday, this was a vanguard movement that elevated urban life. These platforms created a space where we could see ourselves – our voices, fashion, brilliance and questions – reflected on screen.

“Teen Summit,” a groundbreaking BET production, was one of those rare spaces. It wasn't just a show; it was a platform for Black youth to speak truth, share struggles, and dream out loud. I watched it consistently, feeling the visibility of my generation. Ananda Lewis joined “Teen Summit” in the mid-1990s, part of a newer generation of hosts who brought poise, intellect and authenticity to the screen. She was magnetic – an example of what it looked like to hold space with confidence and care.

Watching her on BET's “Teen Summit,” and later as a VJ on MTV's “Total Request Live,” gave me a sense of connection to a broader Black identity that felt near and relevant. She helped build that bridge and showed many of us that representation matters.

When it comes to Black media in the era of Gen X, I personally can't imagine that wave without Lewis. She was a piece of the vibrant fabric that shaped how we saw ourselves – smart, capable, expressive, and worthy of being heard. She wasn't just a face on TV – she was a cultivator of Black culture. Her presence helped redefine what it looked like to be young, Black and thoughtful.

What made her stand out wasn't just her platform – it was how she used it. Lewis brought grace and sharpness to every conversation. She elevated voices, asked pointed questions, and challenged ideas, staying grounded in community. As a teen watching from afar, I was inspired. Her work showed me that storytelling could be a tool for empowerment – and that being Black, brilliant and bold had a place in media.

Her recent passing from breast cancer is devastating. But even in that final chapter, Ananda modeled courage. Having watched her mother battle the same illness, she made deeply personal choices about her own care – choices that reflected her knowledge, values, and lived experience. And she didn't hide. She chose to share. She used her diagnosis to educate others, to challenge assumptions, even sharing some of her regrets. This act of courage demonstrates that every person has the right to walk their own path with dignity.

That stance alone – turning her private struggle into a public offering – was one of the most powerful examples of journalism I've seen.

Even if her choices around care weren't ones we all would have made, she was firm in them. She was transparent. She was powerful. That's what it means to tell stories with integrity.

Lewis was more than a media personality. She was a cultural translator, a truth-teller, a symbol of what it meant to grow up Black in the '90s and feel proud of it. She was an early figure who inspired me to do the work I do today: telling stories that center us, challenge us and uplift us. In an era before Instagram, YouTube, or TikTok, Ananda showed us what being intentional and confident looked like on television as a Black woman.

Rest in power, Ananda Lewis. Thank you for being our voice, our mirror, and our reminder that storytelling – especially when it's rooted in community – is a radical and lasting act.

UBUNTU

Continued from 1

it was missing being with people like us outdoors.”

This void is what inspired Dr. Bartlett to create Ubuntu Fly Anglers – a community of BIPOC fly anglers brought together through their shared love of nature. What began as a way to find fellowship has grown into a larger project aimed at resurrecting BIPOC voices in fly fishing and environmental spaces.

Bartlett now hosts a podcast, where he shares conversations with other BIPOC anglers and outdoor enthusiasts. This summer, supported by grants, he plans to launch a weeklong environmental leadership camp for those who self-identify as BIPOC youth from July 28 to Aug. 2. For him, this is a way to pay it forward by nurturing a new generation of leaders who feel empowered to understand their relationship with the land.

Hosted at the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Community Center, the camp will include field trips, classroom learning, and hands-on fly fishing. It is designed to be small and intimate, serving no more than 15 students from Spokane's Northeast and East Central neighborhoods. Open to youth ages 12 to 18, the camp is completely free – transportation and meals will be provided.

But its impact is meant to be far-reaching. For Bartlett, this is legacy work –challenging internalized disconnection from land and countering the damage of generational oppression. This is about ownership.

“We used to live in relationship with nature,” he said. “We owned our own property. We owned the land. We grew our food. We could withstand downturns in the economy because we didn't need money.”

But capitalism, he says, changes

everything. It has commodified the earth and reduced people, particularly BIPOC people, to tools of extraction.

“Capitalism says we need to put a value on things,” Bartlett said. “That tree? The only value it has to me in a capitalist society is what I can turn it into – for my wellbeing – not realizing that the opposite is true. That tree provides shade, provides oxygen, provides carbon dioxide, and cools the planet.”

The consequences of this worldview, he says, are deeper than environmental destruction—they are psychological and spiritual. He's witnessed firsthand how nature has transformed people's lives, often at the edge of crisis.

Take Scot for example. “His father was incarcerated. He became a gangster. Youth gangster, drug dealer in high school,” Bartlett recalls. “He's (now) a fly fishing guide. His life changed – changed because of his connection with nature.”

Bartlett says these stories are not rare. “So I know from personal stories, testimony after testimony after testimony – how fly angling, being outdoors, has saved people like us. Completely flipped their world around.”

He shared the story of Ashley, a Black hunting and fishing guide in Minnesota. Ashley nearly ended his life after a traumatic medical emergency involving his wife and child. After firing therapists, it was a counselor who finally offered a different approach: to meet not in an office, but outside. They walked. Then hiked. And eventually, Ashley found himself standing in a river, fly rod in hand. That moment, Bartlett says, saved him. “It is being among something, in something, that you did not create,” Bartlett reflected. “The trees. The river. The fish. There's that in and of itself – that feeling of being vulnerable. Humbled by it.”

For Bartlett, this is sacred medicine. Nature doesn't just soothe – it

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reawakens.

He recalls a moment in Juneau, Alaska, when the sheer majesty of the mountains and rivers overwhelmed him with clarity. “I called my wife and said, ‘Babe, please send all my fishing, camping, and everything gear to me. I'm in heaven. I'm home.’”

Her response? “‘Sure thing, honey – I'll send your stuff and your four children. I'm not coming!’ ” he laughed.

But in that humor is something true: the undeniable pull of nature. And it's that connection to land that Bartlett wants to pass on to the next generation.

“Fly anglers overwhelmingly evolve into river advocates,” he

said. “Because we approach fishing from a different lens.”

Through the camp, youth will learn to fish – but also to listen to elders, revere the power of the earth, learn environmental history and connect to BIPOC outdoor leaders from around the country. Some, like fly-fishing Hall of Famer Joyce Shepherd, will travel to Spokane to mentor and guide. Others will offer a living testimony of what it means to heal in nature.

“If we don't get them outside and show them that they have the responsibility to be the next river warriors and environmental activists – it's our bad,” Bartlett said. “Our children's children won't have a chance.”

DAWSON

Continued from 1

“These are real people, real legacies. It's not just about mimicking them, it's about honoring them. That's a responsibility I don't take lightly,” Dawson said.

But Dawson's connection to the musical runs deeper. He was an architect of the production, playing a role in its creative development in New York, helping shape the show in its earliest stages.

“I've been working on this since 2018. It's been a long journey – and a personal one.”

After a stint touring in “Hamilton,” Dawson returned to the production he helped create – this time as Tito and Quincy. When asked about the pivot between playing both characters in a live production, he praised playwright Lynn Nottage for crafting a seamless narrative that intertwines the characters in a way that makes the transition feel natural.

Dawson channeled the emotional depth of portraying Tito

by leaning into the unspoken bond between brothers – the tension, loyalty and kind of love that doesn't require words. He emphasized “MJ The Musical” captures layered family dynamics: complex, sometimes strained, but always rooted in care. As Tito, he embodies a protector and a peer in Michael's journey.

His preparation began during the musical's workshop phase, where he immersed himself in research – reading, watching interviews and learning lesser-known truths of the Jackson family.

“There were so many things I didn't know,” he said. “Especially the complex dynamics between the brothers and their parents.”

That deep dive allowed him to bring authenticity and emotional nuance to the stage. He brought that insight into his relationships with castmates, cultivating creative synergy to reflect the bond of brotherhood on stage.

“It was fascinating to explore and portray those relationships. And now, doing it full-time – it's truly an honor.”

Dawson views representation as inspiration.

“You can't be it if you don't see it,” he says plainly. “When I was a kid in Iowa, I didn't always see people who looked like me doing this. That's why I do what I do now.”

Performing in cities like Spokane reinforces that mission.

“There's always someone in the audience – especially a kid – who maybe didn't think this kind of career or artistry was possible for them. And then they see it live.”

He acknowledges the complexity of being a Black actor in a world where roles are often limiting or typecast.

“I'm a human first and Black second. But if I'm going to be telling Black stories, I want to do it right.”

Conversely, playing roles that aren't specifically about Black identity is rewarding. Whether it's Aaron Burr in “Hamilton” or Tito Jackson, Dawson values the skill it takes to capture the humanity in every story.

So what does he hope the audi-

ence walks away with? A deeper understanding of who Michael Jackson was beyond the headlines – highlighting his work ethic, creative genius and the personal pressures he faced. He hopes people leave not just entertained, but with a renewed appreciation for the person behind the performer.

“This isn't just a jukebox musical. It's a story of humanity, resilience, genius and love. It's for everyone.”

Why does Black art matter? For Dawson, it's more than expression – it's the preservation of legacy.

“It's how we tell our stories. It's how we keep our history, our inspiration, and our ancestors alive.”

He believes deeply in the power of visibility: “You can't be it if you don't see it.”

That's why, for Dawson, performing isn't just about the moment – it's about the movement.

“There's a whole new generation of young performers who need to see how those who came before them grew, healed and found their voice. Black art is for them. It's for all of us.”

LEISURE AND COMICS

COMICS

CURTIS • BY RAY BILLINGSLEY

JUNE 30

CAN I HAVE SOME MONEY TO GO TO THE CONCERT IN THE PARK?

BUT THOSE SUMMER CONCERTS IN THE PARK ARE FREE!

BUT THE POPCORN, PEANUTS AND HERO SANDWICHES I EAT DURING THE CONCERT AIN'T FREE!

YOU'D BETTER PACK SOME APPLES AND TUNA SANDWICHES IN A PAPER BAG

JULY 1

CAN I HAVE SOME MONEY TO BUY A GRAPHIC NOVEL?

I'M NOT AN ATM

I DON'T NEED AN ATM...

I NEED YOUR CREDIT CARD TO ORDER IT ONLINE

JULY 2

CAN I HAVE SOME MONEY TO GO TO THE MOVIES?

IF YOU REALLY WANT TO SEE A MOVIE...

YOU'D BE WILLING TO EARN MONEY BY DOING A FEW SIMPLE CHORES

I WUV YOU PB8TPHH!

JULY 3

CAN I HAVE SOME MONEY?

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!!

I'M TIRED OF YOUR GOLDBRICKIN' WAYS! BEGGING FOR MONEY DAY BY DAY!

YOU ARE GETTING A SUMMER JOB!

NOOOO

JULY 4

MA! DAD WANTS ME TO GET A SUMMER JOB!! TALK TO HIM!

CURTIS NEEDS TO EARN HIS OWN MONEY, NOT RUN THE STREETS, AND GIVE YOU A LITTLE TIME FOR YOURSELF

THAT'S THE RAMBLING OF AN INSANE MAN! MA, TELL HIM SUMMER IS FOR HAVIN' FUN!!

A LITTLE TIME TO MYSELF, HMM?

YAA AAH!!

JULY 5

I OVERHEARD DAD SAYING YOU HAVE TO GET A SUMMER JOB

IT WON'T BE SO BAD... NOTHING HAPPENS HERE ANYWAY

AND I PROMISE NOT TO DO ANYTHING FUN WHILE YOU'RE AWAY AT WORK

THANKS, BARRY! DO YOU MEAN IT?

NOT A WORD

CRABGRASS • BY TAUHID BONDIA

JUNE 30

MR. B IS A KID NOW?

SORT OF.

HE'S GOT THIS MAGIC AMULET THAT DISGUISES HIM AS A HUMAN.

HOW THIS IS SO WEIRD.

WE'VE GOT A GOBLIN LIVING ON OUR STREET AND AN EVIL KEVIN RUNNING AROUND. DON'T THINGS USUALLY GO BACK TO NORMAL AFTER OUR ADVENTURES?

USUALLY.

DO YOU THINK WE'VE JUMPED THE SHARK?

THERE'S A SHARK NOW?

JULY 1

EPILOGUE

YOU SAID IT WOULD WORK THIS TIME.

I DON'T KNOW WHAT WENT WRONG.

I MUST HAVE GOTTEN MY CALCULATIONS WRONG BUT NO MATTER!

I WILL COMPLETE THE MACHINE.

WE WILL OPEN A DOOR TO ANOTHER UNIVERSE

AND WE WILL TAKE IT OVER.

JULY 2

GO LONG!

LONG!

GO LONG, MILES!

LONGER! LONGER!

YOU GOTTA GO LONG!

LONG, DUDE. GO LONG!

LOOOONG!

GO LONG!

LONG ENOUGH?

GAH!

JULY 3

MOM, HOW COME WE DON'T HAVE A FIREPLACE?

BECAUSE WE'RE NOT PILGRIMS AND DON'T NEED TO BURN WOOD FOR WARMTH.

OKAY, BUT... YOU COULD BURN OTHER STUFF IN A FIREPLACE TOO, RIGHT?

GROUND.

SO, WE'RE DOING THOUGHT CRIME NOW?

JULY 4

AND SHE SAID "THAT'S NOT MY WATCH!"

GET IT?

YEAH, I'M JUST LAUGHING ON THE INSIDE.

HAHA. YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE A JERK.

NO, REALLY. I'M DYING LAUGHING ON THE INSIDE.

CAN'T YOU TELL?

WHATEVER.

IT ACTUALLY KINDA HURTS.

OTHER PEOPLE CAN BE FUNNY, MILES!

JULY 5

HEY, KYLE.

GET LOST, BOOK HEAD.

BOOK HEAD?

YOU HEARD ME. BEAT IT, YOU... TABLE FACE!

ARE YOU JUST... NAMING STUFF IN THE ROOM?

I DUNNO. I'VE BEEN KIND OF ...OFF LATELY.

YOU WANNA TALK AB-

YEAH, RIGHT. SHOELACE!

DANG IT! WHAT IS WRONG WITH ME?

A KID'S COMIC • BY MJ BETHELY

PETS

AT THE MOVIES...

Don't eat the chocolate!

Who's Pets are these?!

I don't think we shoulda came here.

Do you mind if I Scream with you?

Sure, why not?

He ate the chocolate!

LEISURE

THE FOURTH OF JULY: A POEM

In the heart of July beneath the sun's glow,
A tale unfolds, as old as the winds blow,
Fourth of the month, a dream set to rise,
Yet here we stand, with our own painted skies.

Fireworks burst like stories untold,
In colors of freedom, both vibrant and bold.
Yet as we celebrate, with laughter and cheer,
Echoes of struggle still whisper near.

For this day of independence rings different for me,
A duality woven in history's tapestry.
While others toast to the liberty won,
We recall the battles that still must be done.

Our ancestors marched with hope in their eyes,
Yearning for justice beneath wide-open skies.

Chains once unbroken, now gifts in our hand,
Their sacrifices have helped shape this land.

As grills sizzle sweet with the smell of the day,
We gather like kin, in the warmth of the fray.
Songs of our heritage weave through the heat,
In rhythm and spirit, our hearts skip a beat.

The flag waves high, stitched with care,
A symbol of pride, yet, is it really fair?
For as we wave banners in bright shades of red,
Remember the stories of those long since dead.

Let's dance in the joy of both past and today,
Embrace all the layers in the festive display.
For freedom is more than a singular shout,
It's the hope that unites, despite lingering doubt.

Together we rise, under bright sparking lights,
With love as our weapon, we fight the good fights.
On this Fourth of July, we honor the blend,
Of struggle and triumph, our spirits transcend.

So here's to the laughter, tears, and the pride,
For all that we've built, and those who've died.
As the night sky sparkles with each fiery bloom,
We celebrate history, in unity's room.

Let not this day simply come and then fade,
But remember the journey, the price that we paid.
For the spirit of freedom belongs to us all,
As we rise hand in hand, together we stand tall.



By Anyla McDonald
THE BLACK LENS
CONTRIBUTOR



POETRY CORNER

Die DEI

By AJ the Wordsmith
The Black Lens

No mistake in the words , or so we have observed, from a culture
vulture society.

Quick to go from Macro aggressions to micro apologies.

DONT BLAME THE ECONOMY

We’ve been looking for justice since y’all said we’d be better off
dead.

Wonder why they all look red in the head?

How can we categorize the mutal feelings of others into basic
verbal nouns and adjectives.

Are we not by nature savage creatures of habbit that adapt to
our enviorment, there is a point to this long winded speech so
please listen as I teach to all those listening i hope my words will
reach.

We should not hinge our limitations on the ability to comprehend,
we need to allow ourselves to feel the thrill that comes from
adverse oppression.

This is not natural selection, so why do you look at life as if it is
some sort of boring lesson? So here is my question ...

Whose land is this anyway ?

Can you relate?

Let’s not be fake

resolving internal conflicts to get out of this depressive state.

Where we study others suffering to empathize with the other half
of our brain, such a shame.

Entanglement of established criticism prevents participation of
perception based off egotistical desires.

What prevents self-esteem from perspiring?

We need to defuse stressful situations with feelings and needs,
too quick to give cultural critiques on imaginary issues that
deserve no tissues.

This is a culture vulture society with skepticism surroundings that
people should see, instead we get rose colored glasses and only
get questions like “what’s your reality?”

Where acronyms like AAVE (African American vernacular
English), CRT (critical race theory), NVC (non violent
communication)

Get replaced with social media tags that make our intelligence
lag, like mustard music but if we say “turn the tv off” it’s
suddenly you vs me.

When we had justice it was just us, making up fictional characters
to live our lives that way we truly wish we could fight in the light.

Where liberty is unconditional unchained, when freedom actually
is free, how do we explain the pain of melanin memories, ironic or
iconic that both universe and community can’t exist without U & I
and yet THEY wonder why WE cry when another brown person is
socially hanged for opposing opinions that don’t fit in a society
niche!



DID YOU KNOW?

Fourth of July edition

During the **American Revolution**, thousands of **Black Americans jumped into the war, on both sides of the conflict**. But unlike their white counterparts, they weren't just fighting for independence – or to maintain British control. In a time when the vast majority of African Americans lived in bondage – their forced labor fueling the economy of the fledgling nation – most took up arms hoping to be freed from the literal shackles of chattel slavery.

In the American Revolution, **African American men, both enslaved and free fought in the Continental Army**. Black soldiers served in mostly integrated units at this time. The **First Rhode Island Regiment** is the most famous regiment that included African Americans during the American Revolution.

In 1778, **the Rhode Island Assembly voted** to allow “every able-bodied negro, mulatto, or Indian man slave in this state to enlist into either of the Continental Battalions being raised.”

The assembly further stipulated that **“every slave so enlisting shall, upon his passing muster before Colonel Christopher Greene, be immediately discharged from the service of his master or mistress, and be absolutely free.”**

Rhode Island Enslavers opposed this new law and in June 1778, the state repealed this provision. However, 100 African Americans enlisted during that four month period. Another 44 enlisted after June of 1778. In the end, **144 African Americans enlisted in the First Rhode Island** out of a total of 225.



A PLACE CALLED HOME

By Janet Tumasifu
THE BLACK LENS

Home ...
It's a place I remember being: home
A place I still call home despite being far
away
Being far away from home
Feels like home is a place I only recall in
my dreams
I remember being home
Where every day felt real and the same
But it was never boring
I remember home being fun
Despite having to do almost the same
things everyday
Home felt normal
Despite changes it still felt like home
Home was my normal
It left safe
When I walked into my home
It would hug me with warmness and
peace
It was filled with love
With peace
And joy
Home wasn't perfect
We cried
We got sick
We failed
But we were home
Where everywhere we went was like open
space
Just for us
At Home, we fought
But we never failed to stay friends
Home felt different
Everyday felt different
But the different felt normal
Home was our normal
Far from home
It's like learning how to walk again
It's like having eyes
But you can't see clearly
Being far from home
Feels like missing part of your heart

Part of Yourself
You change
Being far from home changes you
It's like you're not fully yourself
Like you're the same person but different
You wonder if you were to go home if you
would...
Still be like you used to be
Do you feel guilty about changing?
The guilty that's just there
It's there you can feel
It makes you question yourself
Don't you think you changed so much?
Why did you change?
Could you have stayed the same?
You feel guilty
"I had no choice"
I am not **home** anymore"
You explain yourself to guilt
Change is not bad
It was never a bad thing
But this change is huge...
It really is different
From home.
It's the change that comes unexpectedly
It comes when unwelcome
It comes when one is not ready for it
But it swears it's not a bad change
It whispers every night. "Change is not
bad"
"It's not. It's for the better"
This is not a change for the better
A change where I am not expected to
know anything
A change where I am being judged for
being different
A change where if I do something so
simple
It's something they didn't think I can do
The change made my voice shut
It got me quite
Really quiet
It is different from home
It isn't like the home I know
The home I miss

YOU TOLD ME TO LEAVE
THE DOOR OPEN LAST NIGHT

You told me to leave the door open last night.
So I listened.
In doing so, I heard my pride tell me that I'm opening
up my home to the world.
It continues as I turn the lock upright:
"Look at the man you have become. Don't you
remember the strife it took to get you in this house?
The LIVES that were claimed by draining time and
energy, heart and merit, LOVE and respect? Did you
forget?"
I didn't
You want love. I want love.
You want security. I want satisfaction.
So venture to the nearest goal, just to be prepared for
the next.
Love isn't to be shared, even if the feelings are. And
because of that – and that alone – I open this door.
I keep my heart open for you to own once more.



By Jā Corbett-Sparks
THE BLACK LENS
CONTRIBUTOR



THEBLACKLENS

JULY 2025 - VOL. 10 - ISSUE NO. 7

★ ★ ★ THE POWER OF OUR PRESENCE ★ ★ ★

TO SERVE AND TO BELONG

Clyde Rivers on Black patriotism, Vietnam and the complexity of freedom

By April Eberhardt
THE BLACK LENS

Clyde Rivers was 18 years old when he walked into the Marine Corps recruiting office after a night shift at U.S. Steel. Young, Black and filled with a longing to be part of something greater than himself, he didn't wait to be drafted, so he

volunteered. His decision to serve in Vietnam wasn't about politics, college deferments, or protest. It was about purpose, about doing what he felt was his duty as an American, even when America had not always returned that sentiment in kind. "I really felt a little patriotic going into the Corps,"



Rivers

Black Americans have grappled with for generations: What does it mean to fight for a country that has not always fought for you?

The Choice to Serve

Rivers wasn't drawn to higher education. The booming steel industry offered immediate income

and material rewards—like his brand-new Ford Mustang—but they felt fleeting. "Suddenly I realized that I wanted to pursue something more meaningful," he recalls. That "something" became the United States Marine Corps. He recounts his experience entering the USMC: "Out of basic, after infantry training at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina, was transferred to 29 in California. After a couple of months there, they needed personnel at Barstow, which was

See **SERVE, 8**



COURTESY

Clyde Rivers, age 18 (at left with glasses), was stationed in the First Marine Air Wing in Da Nang, Vietnam.

HOMETOWN HEROES



COURTESY

Kirisha Marshall, a youth advocate, was raised in Spokane.

BECOMING KIRISHA

A journey from Spokane to selfhood

By April Eberhardt
THE BLACK LENS

Kirisha Marshall's story begins in Spokane, Washington – but it evolved in Washington, D.C. Hers is a story of survival and transformation. It's about what happens when a young Black woman leaves the Pacific Northwest and, for the first time, breathes freely in an environment where she is not one of a few, but one of many. It's a journey from microaggressions and psychological isolation to affirmation, purpose, and power. "I didn't even realize I had been shrinking myself until I got to Howard," Kirisha said. "Suddenly, I could breathe. I didn't have to explain my existence anymore." Raised in Spokane, Kirisha was shaped by the deep-rooted Black faith community. Her grandmother, Florence Everett, was a well-known figure at New Hope Baptist Church – a woman of grace, authority, and reverence. Her legacy gave Kirisha early lessons in belonging and spiritual grounding.

"Everyone knew who my grandmother was," she said. "You couldn't get away with anything – our family was known." Although she was raised attending St. Matthews, it was under Reverend Happy Watkins' leadership at New Hope that she shares memories of bonding with the community where she saw representing and felt kinship. Even though she didn't belong to Calvary Baptist, she sang in youth choir and attended events there – evidence of how tight-knit and spiritually resilient Spokane's Black community remains. But outside that sanctuary, Spokane could be isolating. She was only five when a white classmate called her the N-word. She punched him. "They wanted to suspend me," she remembered, "but my parents said 'absolutely not.' They told the school, 'This stuff starts at home. His parents are the problem.'" At 12, she visited Coeur d'Alene with a white friend's family – only to find herself in the middle of an Aryan Nation rally.

"I was terrified," she said. "And the adults with me just said, 'You'll be fine.' That moment never left me." Later came trucks with Confederate flags at Central Valley High. Being ignored at bars in Idaho on her 21st birthday. "I thought that was just how things were." "It wasn't until I left that I realized – this isn't normal." After high school, she enrolled at North Idaho College. The few other Black students were athletes. She wasn't. She drifted – until a cousin who played soccer at Howard told her, "Apply." She did. She got in. She turned down a full ride to San Diego State and chose the campus that spoke to her soul. "When I got to Howard, I felt seen. I didn't have to try to fit in with white people. I already fit, just by being." Howard changed everything. She no longer had to explain racism. She no longer carried the burden of being "the only one." She recalls laughing the first time the one white student in her class became the default respondent in a conversation on race. "It was the first

See **KIRISHA, 8**

'The Earth knows our name'

Environmental leadership, the ubuntu way

By April Eberhardt
THE BLACK LENS

For Dr. Bob Bartlett, the land is more than a backdrop. It's a living memory, a spiritual inheritance – a path to personal and collective rejuvenation. His dream of launching an environmental leadership camp for BIPOC youth isn't just about teaching skills or exploring nature. It's about restoration and responsibility – of self, of culture, and of the stewardship BIPOC people once held of the earth. "This came out of pure selfishness," Bartlett admits. "I was born and raised in the country with Black folks who loved their rivers and their mountains ... I grew up learning to hunt, to fish, to trap, to live off the land with Black folks in a racially divided town." But that relationship, he explains, was gradually lost. Moving West after the Vietnam War, Bartlett spent decades as an avid outdoorsman – hiking trails, fly fishing, and working in environmental justice circles – without once encountering another Black angler. It wasn't until 2020 that he met his first Black fly fisherman. "That's when I realized there was a huge hole – heart, soul – in my life," Bartlett said. "It took a lot of reflecting to figure out what that hole was about. And I'll tell you – that

See **UBUNTU, 13**

Josh Dawson, of 'MJ The Musical,' on Black art, legacy and living the music

By April Eberhardt
THE BLACK LENS

For Josh A. Dawson, art is more than performance – it's purpose. A son of the Midwest and a descendant of a long line of pastors, he grew up surrounded by the rhythm of church choirs. Ministry – including dance – was a family tradition. It's no surprise that he was drawn early to music, movement and storytelling, stepping into his first musical by sixth grade. "It just made sense to me," he reflects. "The arts were where I felt most alive." He has acted in a theater production every year since. From July 8-11, "MJ The Musical" arrives at the First Interstate Center for the Arts. Dawson stars as Tito Jackson and Quincy Jones – iconic roles he brings to life with integrity, talent and personal connection. "I'm a full-time musician when I'm not acting, so playing Tito – the musical heartbeat of the Jacksons – felt natural," Dawson explained. Portraying Quincy holds special meaning; Jones is one of his biggest inspirations and the creative force behind so much of Michael Jackson's iconic sound. Playing these figures also feels like stewardship – an act of preservation.

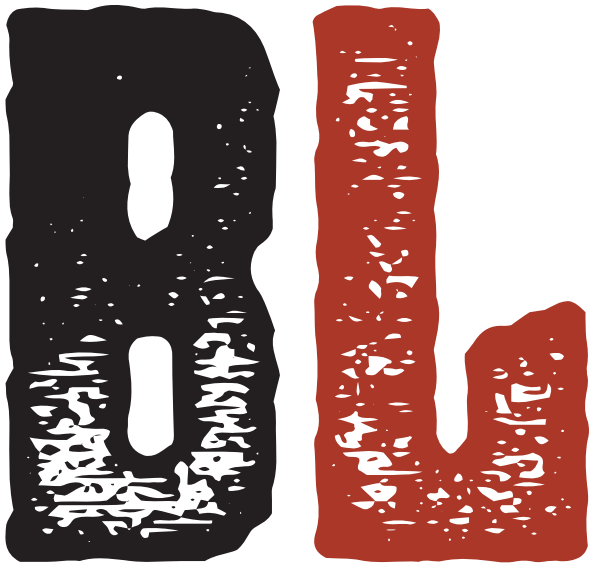


Dawson

See **DAWSON, 13**

WHITE ROSE BRUNCH BRINGS COMMUNITY TOGETHER
The 2025 brunch was more than a fundraiser and fashion show – it was an affirmation of The Links' mission to serve, empower and celebrate Black excellence in all forms. **PAGE 8**

THE POWER OF OUR PRESENCE



NEWS

BLACKLENS.NEWS

NEWS IN BRIEF

Dermatologists: Marines’ shaving waiver could hurt Black members’ careers

Air Force veteran Ed Anderson can’t recall any time past puberty when he didn’t get razor bumps after shaving his face. His coarse facial hair would often cause painful inflammation and itchy bumps as it grew back.

Anderson, now 70, remembers requesting a shaving waiver when he entered the service in 1975, allowing him to bypass the military’s requirements for men to be clean-shaven. For him and other Black airmen, the waivers became a symbol of unity.

“It was seen as an identifier of solidarity with other Black GIs having that shaving waiver,” Anderson told NBC News.

The military as a whole began issuing these waivers in the 1970s, with the Navy taking the strongest approach in 1970 to allow the elective wearing of beards to address medical conditions according to an article published by NBC News. But the policies of the different branches have changed multiple times since then.

Now, a new U.S. Marine Corps grooming policy that affects people with curly or coarse hair is drawing ire from critics who say it targets Black men. The guidance, issued in March, states a diagnosis of pseudofolliculitis barbae, or PFB, a skin condition commonly known as razor bumps or ingrown hairs, could lead to a service member’s expulsion from the branch if the issue persists. The U.S. Air Force updated its guidance on PFB earlier this year, saying shaving waivers will expire 90 days after an airman’s next annual health assessment. But the requirements for those who may still qualify for a waiver remain unclear.

The condition affects up to 60% of Black men, according to the American Osteopathic College of Dermatology, NBC News reported.

Anderson said he sees the move as yet another example of “ongoing attacks” on diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives in the federal government.

“It’s mostly soldiers of color who are impacted by this,” he said. “I don’t see this as a productive and effective means of retaining and recruiting troops.”

Kroger’s Juneteenth cakes spark backlash: ‘This is a mockery!’

A Kroger in Atlanta, Georgia is going viral for its Juneteenth cake offerings. A TikTok video posted on June 17 shows haphazardly decorated desserts sitting in the bakery section of the supermarket according to an article published by NBC News.

The video, which now has over 10 million views, shows shelves stocked with birthday cakes and other treats, then lands on a table selling Juneteenth cookie cakes.

“Y’all decorate everything else around here cute, everything else around here cute,” the TikTokker says. “But for Juneteenth, you wanna just throw something on a freakin’ cookie cake and expect someone to buy it.”

Several desserts are shown, some with printed designs, others featuring phrases like “FREE,” “June 19 Free,” “Congratulations” and “Free @ Last” written off-center in icing NBC News reported.

The phrase “free at last” is known for being a prominent part of Martin Luther King’s “I Have A Dream” speech, borrowed from the title of a Negro-Spiritual song. And now the phrase, which represents a hard-fought struggle, is being featured on a supermarket cake, casually scribbled in internet shorthand.

“Kroger count your days,” they added in the post’s caption. “Why even bother if you’re going to lack creativity ... This is a mockery!”

INDEX

NEWS AND POLITICS	2
CULTURE	3 & 7
BUSINESS AND FINANCE.....	4
EDUCATION.....	5
YOUTH CONNECTION.....	6
ARTS AND INSPIRATION	9
WELLNESS	10
REST IN POWER	13
EVENTS AND LISTINGS.....	14
COMICS AND LEISURE	15

FROM THE EDITOR

Black military service and the conundrum of patriotism

Black America has long grappled with its place in the United States military. Since the Revolutionary War, Black men have fought for a freedom they had not yet experienced – freedom they could only hope for. They entered battlefields believing in the ideals of liberty, even as those ideals excluded them. That contradiction has been a defining feature of the Black military experience ever since.

In every major conflict this country has faced – from the American Revolution to the Civil War to Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan – Black bodies have served under the banner of freedom, seeking independence touted in American democratic tributes. But what does it mean to fight for a nation that has not always fought for you? What does it mean to risk your life for a democracy that has, time and again, denied your full participation in it?

This is the irony of Black patriotism.

Many of our fathers, grandfathers, uncles – and in more recent generations, our grand-mothers and mothers – found their way into the armed forces not only as an act of service but as a step toward inclusion. Enlisting was never mistaken for a cure for racism or a solution to systemic oppression. But for many, it was a path – one that led to careers, education, travel, discipline, and purpose.

The military has offered a complicated form of access. It provided some Black Americans with tools to carve out a new life,



By April Eberhardt
THE BLACK LENS EDITOR



while simultaneously placing them within an institution that reflected the same racial inequities found throughout society.

When we look at the arc of Black military involvement, we must ask ourselves not only why individuals joined, but what they were reaching for. That search often comes back to the idea of freedom – not in its abstract form, but in the personal, deeply human sense of wanting to belong, to protect, to build, and to be respected.

Freedom, for Black Americans, is not just a civic condition. It is a psychological, generational, and spiritual longing. It lives in the bosom. It is part of the birthright we’ve fought to claim, time and time again, even when the nation withheld it.

For some, like Muhammad Ali, that fight took the form of refusal. Ali’s bold rejection of the draft during the Vietnam War was a radical claim of freedom – of the

right to say no to a government that refused to see his humanity. For others, the choice to serve was an equally radical act of belief – that they could help shape the country from within.

Both choices carry weight. Both are part of a long tradition of navigating contradictions. The real question is not who was right or wrong, but rather: what does it mean to be Black in America and still choose to serve? What does it mean to love a country that has often broken your heart?

In that tension lies a deeper truth. The military, like America itself, has never been free from racism. But within it, many Black servicemembers found a way to assert dignity, to claim space, to build futures. Their participation was not blind allegiance, but a conscious negotiation with a nation that remains unfinished.

As we reflect on Black military history, we must hold space for its complexity. We must acknowledge the pain, the sacrifice, the hope – and the contradictions. For in doing so, we honor not only those who served but the fuller truth of what it means to be Black and American: always striving, always questioning, always reaching for a freedom not yet touched.

To add context to what is often complex and deeply personal, I sat down with my father to explore his journey as a military servicemember during a time when enlisting was controversial and fighting for America was a convoluted matter for those of a darker hue. See “To serve and belong” to read more.

THE BLACK LENS

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Corrections: Accuracy matters

Anthony Fain’s last name was misspelled in his June article.
The wrong name was listed for Adasha Gardner in the AA Graduation Caption for Medical Lake.
The year for the May issue was misprinted on the cover.
Jay Troutt’s name was misspelled in a Shades of Motherhood Network feature in June.

THE BLACK LENS

Serving Spokane’s Black community since 2015

IN MEMORY OF SANDRA WILLIAMS
FOUNDING EDITOR AND PUBLISHER

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Statement of Independence

The Black Lens is a not-for-profit, independent newspaper that focuses on all aspects of the Black community in Eastern Washington. The Black Lens editor reports to its own board of directors, which was set up under the guidance of the founders’ family.

As journalism calls for increased transparency, The Black Lens believes in being transparent about its work. The Black Lens is funded through foundations, donors, subscribers and the community. That funding pays for the work of the editors, reporters, photographers, designers, correspondents and columnists who produce The Black Lens newspaper, website and other platforms.

The Black Lens retains full authority over its editorial content. This organization maintains a strict firewall between news coverage decisions and funding sources and in-kind help. Acceptance of financial support does not constitute implied or actual endorsement of donors or their products, services or opinions.

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HAPPENING AROUND TOWN

JUNETEENTH: IN PHOTOS

Holiday’s Pillar Awards honors Black community members

From staff reports

As part of Juneteenth 2025, many community members earned recognition at the Pillar Awards.

Here are the recipients:

- Individual Award – Kitara Johnson-Jones
- Business Award- Locked in Fatherhood Alliance
- Church/Religious Organization Award- Morning Start Missionary Baptist Church
- Nonprofit Award – The Way to Justice
- Joint Effort Award- Black Homeownership Spokane
- Heartwood Award – The Rev. CW Andrews



COURTESY PHOTOS

In celebration of Juneteenth, Spokane Indians players wore specialty King Carl jerseys, created as a tribute to local Civil Rights activist and champion boxer Carl Maxey, for a recent game against the Everett AquaSox.



Above: Former Seattle Seahawk and Super Bowl champion Cliff Avril joined the Spokane NAACP for a powerful Juneteenth fireside chat at Gonzaga’s Hemmingson Center. Pictured are members of the Executive Committee and volunteers who helped organize the event.



At right: People dance in Grant Park, as part of a Juneteenth celebration.



Above: People walk along booths stationed at the Martin Luther King Jr. Community Center’s Juneteenth celebration.

DO IT ANYWAY

Arnetta Mitchell on gymnastics, representation and the power of new paths

By April Eberhardt
THE BLACK LENS

When Arnetta Mitchell moved to Spokane from California at the age of 6, she brought with her a spark – one that had been lit while watching her first Olympic gymnastics meet on television. That moment ignited a love for the sport that would not only shape her childhood but influence the course of her adult life.

“Gymnastics just made sense,” she says. “I was always bouncing off things, and my mom thought it would be the perfect sport for me. She supported it from the start – even if we had to search all over Nine Mile to find a place where I could actually train.”

That early support – and Arnetta’s determination – set her on a path that would see her evolve from a young gymnast inspired by trailblazers like Dominique Dawes to a coach and mentor dedicated to making space for others. Today, Arnetta coaches the gymnastics team at North Central High School and works with youth at Evergreen Gymnastics, where the school program holds its practices due to a lack of school-owned facilities.

In a sport where Black people are historically underrepresented, Arnetta recalls how powerful it was to see Dominique Dawes on the Olympic stage.

“I don’t remember them saying it on TV, like, ‘This is a Black gymnast,’” she explains. “But I noticed. She looked like me, and that mattered. It made me think – if she can do it, maybe I can too.”

Now, as a coach, Arnetta sees herself not just as a guide to physical technique, but as a mirror to possibilities – especially for young athletes who may never have imagined themselves in leotards or on balance beams.

“A lot of kids on my team have never done gymnastics before,” she says. “But this sport is mental. It’s about overcoming fear. And I want them to know that it doesn’t matter how you start – you belong here.”

For Arnetta, gymnastics is more than a sport. It’s a metaphor for possibility. It’s a reminder that we don’t have to fit into anyone’s limited expectations of what Black people can do or where we belong.

“I don’t believe in staying in boxes,” she says. “A lot of times, we don’t see ourselves in certain places, so we assume it’s not for



COURTESY

Gymnastics athlete Arnetta Mitchell does a handstand.

us. But the truth is, we are capable of so much more.”

Her dream? To build a community space in Nine Mile that offers gymnastics, dance, and other recreational outlets for youth – including non-sports options like arcade games or creative workshops. “Small towns don’t have a lot for kids,” she says. “Even Spokane has limited spaces. I want to change that.”

When asked what advice she’d give to someone who’s the only Black person – or only person of color – in a recreational space, Arnetta doesn’t hesitate: **“Do it anyway.”**

Whether it’s stepping onto the mat or into a field where few others look like you, Arnetta believes that simply showing up can be revolutionary. “It helps people see what’s possible,” she says. This, she contends, helps communities grow.”

In the end, it’s not just about gymnastics. It’s about movement – in body, mind, and spirit. It’s about reimagining the spaces we’re allowed to occupy and creating new ones when they don’t yet exist.

“I just love gymnastics,” Arnetta says. “It teaches you to try even when something looks scary. It helps you grow. And more than anything, it reminds you that you’re stronger than you think.”

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BUSINESS

SIPS 'N' TIPS

Red, white, financially right

Declaring your independence through financial freedom

As Americans celebrate freedom each July, it's the perfect time to reflect on a different kind of independence—financial independence. Just like political liberty, financial freedom requires intention, planning, and action. The path toward it can be boiled down to six foundational principles:

- 1. **Cash Flow** – Maintain consistent income, manage spending, and plan for lifelong earnings.
- 2. **Debt Management** – Eliminate and consolidate debt where possible.
- 3. **Emergency Fund** – Save enough to cover 3, 6, or 12 months of expenses.
- 4. **Proper Protection** – Safeguard income, assets, and long-term care needs.
- 5. **Building Wealth** – Invest wisely to outpace inflation and minimize taxes.
- 6. **Wealth Preservation** – Pass on your legacy while reducing tax burdens.

The Power of Time and Consistency

Wealth building is a long game. Time plays a crucial role, especially when combined with compound interest. Using the Rule of 72, you can estimate how quickly your money will double. Divide 72 by your interest rate—for example, at 10%, your money doubles in 7.2 years. The earlier you start saving, the more your money can grow. Waiting just 10 years to begin investing can result in dramatically less accumulated wealth by retirement. Start as soon as possible. Don't wait for the

raise, the promotion, or for your kids to finish school. Begin with what you can, build a habit, and remain consistent. Saving doesn't get easier later—it gets harder.

Inflation, Taxes and Risk

A major threat to your savings is inflation. If your money earns 4% interest but inflation is 3%, and taxes take another 1%, your "gain" is zero. Understanding the real impact of inflation and taxes on your money is vital. Choose savings vehicles that offer returns exceeding inflation and consider the tax implications of each option.

Risk tolerance also matters. Stocks can yield higher returns but come with volatility. Safer options offer slower growth but may reduce the risk of loss. Evaluate the time it takes to recover from downturns and always consider any management fees attached to your investments.

Tax Treatment Matters

There are three tax categories for your money:

- **Taxable accounts** (e.g., savings, CDs, stocks): You pay capital gains tax yearly on growth.
- **Tax-deferred accounts** (e.g., 401(k), IRAs): You defer taxes until withdrawal, but pay income tax on every dollar you take out.
- **Tax-advantaged accounts** (e.g., Roth IRAs, municipal bonds, cash value life insurance): Contributions are taxed upfront, but growth and distributions are tax-free.



By Rhonda Leonard-Horwitz
THE BLACK LENS CONTRIBUTOR



Diversifying across these categories can help maximize your retirement income and minimize tax liability.

Women and Retirement

Women typically live longer than men and may have shorter careers due to caregiving or maternity leave. This means women often need to save more, over fewer working years, to support longer retirements. Retirement planning should account for these realities, ensuring enough is saved to maintain quality of life despite rising costs.

Take Action This July

Financial independence doesn't happen by accident. It requires thoughtful planning and consistent effort. Use this month – our celebration of freedom – as your launching point. Set financial goals, start saving, and commit to your future. Declare your independence – not just from debt or worry, but from financial instability. This July choose financial freedom – the other independence.

More than a mortgage: A journey toward belonging and legacy

By April Eberhardt
THE BLACK LENS

For Jermaine Williams, homeownership wasn't just a milestone – it was a transformative step toward healing generational wounds and building a foundation for the future.

In December, Williams and his wife closed on their first home through Washington's Covenant Homeownership Program, an initiative designed to address historical housing discrimination by expanding access to homeownership for communities harmed by racially restrictive covenants. For the Williams family, the program offered more than a mortgage – it offered a path to stability.

"To me, generational wealth is essential for peace of mind and well-being. Between the ages of two and twelve, I lived in ten different places. That instability shaped everything. My mom never had a car or a driver's license, which meant we were limited in countless ways," said Williams. He shares that he knows what it means to be uprooted, to lose friends, and to never feel settled.

The couple learned about the program through their community network and began their application process in late September. Just a few months later, on Dec. 11, they closed on their new home. Williams credits the Covenant Homeownership Program with giving his family something that generations before them didn't have access to.

But it isn't just about owning property; it's about giving their son something they never had – a stable home and a sense of belonging. Housing instability had an adverse impact on them both growing up, affecting their mental health and behaviors into adulthood. Now, with their son yet two years old, they are already breaking generational cycles.

How to connect

- Call the Washington State Homeownership Hotline at 1-877-894-4663 to be connected to support, guidance and financial help through the Covenant Homeownership Program – and beyond. The hotline can also connect you with a lender, and share a wide range of other information and resources tailored to your location, income, and specific needs.
- Seek out a Commission-trained lender to prequalify for a mortgage loan and establish your eligibility for the Covenant or our other programs.
- Take a free homebuyer education class to start on your homebuying journey.

Source: wshfc.org/covenant



COURTESY

Jermaine Williams, alongside his wife and son, is breaking generational cycles by investing in their future.

"If all you've ever known is survival, trauma, and instability, that's what you pass down," he said. "We want something different for our children." That, he says, is probably one of the greatest things they have gained from this program.

Williams is passionate about helping others understand that money is important, but many other factors contribute to a good quality of life.

"Wealth isn't just money. It's health, it's stability, it's access," he said. "If all I've ever known is survival and trauma, that's what I'll pass on. But if I can change that, I can change everything for my son."

He and his wife have become advocates for the program, encouraging others – particularly in Spokane's Black and Indigenous communities – to explore the opportunity. However, he acknowledges that skepticism and un-

familiarity often prevent people from applying.

"Most people we talked to thought it was too good to be true, or they were overwhelmed by the process," Williams noted. "But sometimes people just need to see someone like them do it first before they believe they can too."

He urges realtors and housing professionals to help spread the word and make the process more accessible to those who have historically been left out.

"I don't care whether you're Black, Indigenous, or not—if you're a realtor in Spokane County and you know about the Covenant Homeownership Program, tell people," Williams said. "Whether they work with you or not, it's about community. We need to see more of us in these spaces."

For Williams, this journey is also a tribute to the late Sandy Williams, founder of The Black Lens and a fierce advocate for economic justice – a leader he continues to look up to. "There's only one obituary we have in our kitchen – and that's Sandy's. I know she would've been proud of us for doing this."

Williams' story serves as both testimony and invitation: breaking cycles is possible – and it starts with unlearning old patterns, creating new ones, gaining new information, and believing that a different future is within reach.

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"To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a state of rage almost all of the time..."

James Baldwin

Black humanity is collateral damage

IN HER WORDS

By April Eberhardt
THE BLACK LENS

Once again, Black humanity became collateral damage – trivialized and tossed aside – when a West Valley High School Spanish teacher, Matthew Mastronardi, reportedly chose to read the N-word aloud from the pages of “To Kill a Mockingbird” after a student dared him to do so in his Spanish class. The novel is part of the English curriculum – not the Spanish class where this incident occurred. The teacher was fired. On Tuesday, the West Valley School Board voted against renewing his contract.

Now, students and Mastronardi alike are rallying for his reinstatement, claiming his rights have been violated – even using the recent Juneteenth holiday to hold a press conference that co-opted the language of freedom, liberation, and civil rights. But let’s be clear: this is about preserving power and posturing – a soapbox from which to pontificate without accountability, to participate without humility, and to critique without understanding. That is the essence of privilege. This moment is an entire flex.

No intellectual or patriotic bravery is being demonstrated here – only cultural dominance, cloaked in democratic ideals. There is no championing of truth, just self-aggrandizement on a stage built to deflect from impact and consequence. And it is strategic.

We live in a city where Mead High School football players allegedly sexually assaulted Black students while hurling racial slurs – an act the district tried to soften as mere “hazing.” Atlanta Black Star reported: “Three of the Black football players were allegedly called racial epithets including the N-word, ‘monkeys,’ ‘chocolate praying mantis,’ and ‘dirty Q-tip,’ and told they need to be ‘leashed.’” When the videos circulated and more details became public, the Black players were labeled “snitches” and told that “Blacks squeal.”

In March, it was reported that a recent audit by the legal firm representing those students found the district refused to turn over evidence and “deliberately withheld internal documents related to its failure to inform parents about years of hazing and abuse in its football program,” KREM-TV reported. These actions aren’t new – but they send a menacing message: damage control replaces truth, and power controls the narrative.

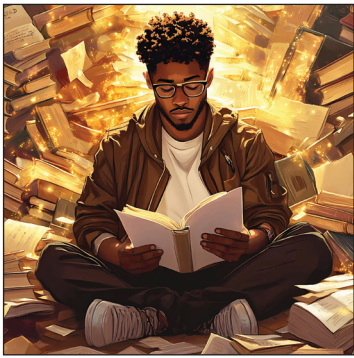
The emotional intelligence of an educator who cares more about his “right” to say the N-word – as a so-called “teachable moment” – ignores the weight of the dehumanization experienced by the very people that the central character of To Kill a Mockingbird, Tom Robinson, symbolizes. Tom, a powerless Black man, stood at the mercy of a white savior and moral hero, Atticus Finch. He was crushed by a racist Alabama community, a biased white jury, and a lying incest victim who accused him of rape. Reflect on that power dynamic. Whose privilege was centered? Who had agency? Black psychological safety has never been a priority under white supremacy and unchecked privilege.

And I dare ask: How much unpacking of historical and cultural trauma was actually done in that moment – beyond a shallow disclaimer to not use the word in a discriminatory way?

How much truth-telling was offered about the N-word’s roots in slavery and racial terrorism? The lynchings depicted on postcards? The Bloody Back? Human breeding farms? The fiery destruction that renamed Birmingham to “Bombingham”? The burning crosses lit with malice in the name of patriotism and Christianity? Was there any consideration for how this lands in the hearts of Black students – hearing it spoken aloud in the authoritative voice of a teacher?

If the goal were truly to educate, heal, or reckon with the legacy of that word, it wouldn’t have been delivered with a generic disclaimer. That was cheap and lazy. It dodged the real work. It bypassed the history, the harm, and the emotional baggage that word carries for Black people.

One must also wonder: how much personal awareness, training, or culturally responsive professional development has



Mastronardi actually received? It’s doubtful he understands the full weight of the word. No, this wasn’t a teachable moment. It was grandstanding. And the N-word was a prop for performance.

When teenagers cajoled him into saying the word, their motives should have been challenged. The real lesson should have been about emotional maturity, cultural humility, and the value of Black life.

How can a single novel truly unpack the ways cultural and historical trauma appear in everyday life? Or show how white supremacy lives in subtle, everyday nuance – especially to someone who’s never had to live it? What about the music and film industries – how they profit, year after year, from normalizing and commodifying a word rooted in dehumanization? A word that continues to create confusion, double-mindedness, deep cognitive dissonance, wrapped in flawed logic and hollow justification for many.

When schools fail to teach the roots of racism, colonization, and systemic oppression with intentionally, progressively, and comprehensively, that kind of dissection – the cultural, historical, and psychological unpacking that the N-word demands – cannot be done in one class period, one unit, or worse, on a dare.

And a censored version of the American story is actively maintained – a successful model of indoctrination.

In his 1968 sermon “A Proper Sense of Priorities,” Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Nothing in the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity.”

White privilege leaves festering wounds, even when unconscious. For those on the receiving end, this moment isn’t about education – it’s about narrative control. Power is never truly shared with those considered disposable.

Want to have a brave and necessary dialogue about a racial slur that was often the last word my ancestors heard before being murdered? Then talk about it outside the teaching of a single novel.

Schools: create a viable hate speech and slurs policy – with teeth. Center Black voices – Black educators, Black experts with lived experience. Step outside your own lens. Stop tokenizing and look for the truth, even when it hurts.

Harper Lee’s “To Kill a Mockingbird” explores racial and social class dynamics in Maycomb County, Alabama. But it’s still a story told through the lens of a Southern white woman. The portrayal of Black oppression lacks the psychological depth of the lived experience of Black people. It doesn’t fully convey what it means to endure systemic racism – it merely observes and reports it.

The literary canon has long excluded substantial Black authorship. And when educators defend using the N-word by citing literary fidelity, without fully grappling with the trauma behind the word, its use becomes an act of erasure. Historical relevance must meet Black identity with care, context and cultural responsibility – especially in the classroom.

Teaching literature that includes racial slurs or anti-Black violence requires more than curriculum alignment. It demands humility and anti-racist, trauma-informed social-emotional pedagogy. When it doesn’t, educators reproduce the very harm they try to expose. If this cannot be done by qualified people, the text should not be taught. And by qualified, that must intentionally include Black educators who understand the full complexity of racism.

We live in a society that still pretends the past didn’t really happen. So when a teacher tries to pack a punch with the N-word – a word that’s been capitalized, commercialized, mocked, and diluted – it’s dismissive and tongue-in-cheek.

For legions of Black bodies, it was never vocabulary. It was violence.

EDUCATION

REDEFINING ENGAGEMENT IN A VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

By Dr. Shantara Smith
THE BLACK LENS

In traditional classrooms, engagement often looks like students collaborating in pairs, rotating through activity stations, or stepping up to the board to present. While these methods are rooted in physical interaction, the essence of engagement – active participation, collaboration and communication – can be effectively translated into the virtual classroom with the right tools and strategies.

Embracing Digital Tools for Active Learning

Digital tools are the backbone of a successful virtual classroom. When used thoughtfully, they can replicate – and even surpass – the interactivity of in-person learning. Here are several categories of tools and how they can be used to foster engagement:

1. Breakout Rooms

Breakout rooms simulate small group discussions, allowing students to collaborate in pairs or small teams. Teachers can:

- Assign specific tasks or roles within each group.
- Rotate between rooms to provide support and feedback.
- Use timers and prompts to keep discussions focused and productive.

2. Virtual Classroom Roles

Assigning roles gives students a sense of ownership and purpose. Examples include:

- Note Taker: Summarizes group discussions and shares with the class.
- Link Poster: Finds and shares relevant resources.
- Discussion Leader: Keeps the group on task and encourages participation.

These roles can rotate weekly to ensure all students develop different skills.

3. Collaborative Whiteboards

Tools like Microsoft Whiteboard, and Miro allow students to:

- Brainstorm ideas together in real time.
- Solve math problems collaboratively.
- Create visual mind maps or diagrams.

These tools support drawing, typing, and image insertion, making them versatile for all subjects.

4. Multimedia Presentations

Students can use platforms like Google Slides, Canva, or Loom to:

- Create and narrate presentations.
- Record video reflections or project summaries.
- Share their screens during



PIXABAY

Digital tools are the backbone of a successful virtual classroom.



By Dr. Shantara Smith
THE BLACK LENS CONTRIBUTOR



live sessions to present their work.

This not only builds communication skills but also boosts confidence.

5. Gamified Learning Platforms

Gamification turns learning into a fun, competitive experience. Popular tools include:

- Kahoot! and Quizizz for quizzes and trivia.
- Blooket and Gimkit for interactive games with educational content.

• Prodigy for math-based role-playing games.

These platforms often include leaderboards, points and rewards to motivate students.

6. Interactive Polls and Surveys

Using tools like Mentimeter, Poll Everywhere, or built-in Zoom polls, teachers can:

- Gauge student understanding in real time.
- Collect opinions or feedback.
- Spark discussion with thought-provoking questions.

7. Learning Management Systems (LMS) Integration

Platforms like Google Classroom, Canvas, or Schoology centralize resources and streamline communication. They allow:

- Easy access to assignments

and materials.

- Discussion boards for asynchronous engagement.
- Integration with third-party tools for a seamless experience.

Inclusive Participation for All Learners

One of the strengths of virtual classrooms is the ability to support diverse learning styles and needs. Students who may be shy or have learning differences can engage in ways that feel comfortable and accessible:

- Nonverbal Communication: Emojis, hand signals, and chat messages allow students to express themselves without speaking aloud.

- Assistive Technology: Tools like text-to-speech and screen readers can support students with reading or writing challenges, making learning more equitable.

- Flexible Engagement: Whether through typing, speaking, or visual cues, students can participate in the way that suits them best.

Meeting Students Where They Are

Today’s learners – especially those from Gen Z and Gen Alpha – are digital natives. They interact with technology in nearly every aspect of their lives, and education should be no exception. By leveraging the tools they’re already familiar with, educators can create dynamic, interactive and inclusive virtual classrooms.

The Bottom Line

The goal of any classroom, virtual or physical, is to engage every student in meaningful learning. With thoughtful planning and the right digital tools, online classrooms can be just as vibrant and interactive as their in-person counterparts. Engagement isn’t about the format – it’s about connection, creativity and community.

TAKING A GAP YEAR

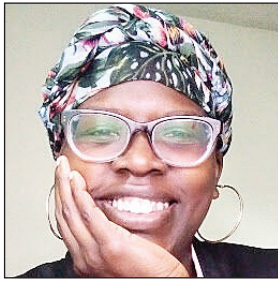
A valuable break or a risky detour?

As more students rethink the traditional path from high school directly into college, taking a “gap year” has gained widespread interest. Typically, a gap year is a structured or self-directed break for work, travel, volunteering, or skill-building. While it can benefit all students, it holds particular promise for African American youth – offering space for reflection, healing and financial preparation.

Pros: Financial Freedom, Personal Growth and Trade Skills

One major advantage of a gap year is its potential to reduce college debt. According to the Education Data Initiative, Black graduates owe an average of \$25,000 more in student loan debt than white graduates – often due to borrowing more for tuition and cost of living. A year of working or saving can ease this burden significantly (Education Data Initiative, 2024).

Another overlooked opportunity is using a gap year to learn a trade. Vocational skills – such as HVAC, barbering, coding, or automotive repair – can be acquired in under a year through certification programs or apprenticeships. These skills offer pathways to immediate employment or side income during college. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES),



By Dr. Sharah Zaab
THE BLACK LENS CONTRIBUTOR



African American students are underrepresented in vocational training programs, but participation is growing due to the rising cost of four-year degrees (NCES, 2023).

Programs like Year Up and Job Corps specifically target underserved communities and offer training in high-demand fields like tech, healthcare, and skilled trades, often with stipends or housing support.

Additionally, gap years can support personal and emotional development. Research from the Gap Year Association shows that 98% of students who take a structured gap year report increased maturity and self-confidence, and 75% say the experience helped clarify their college and career goals (Gap Year Association, 2023).

Cons: Academic Drift and Financial Barriers

Despite the benefits, gap years can pose risks. Students without a clear plan may struggle to stay motivated or return to school. A 2022 Inside Higher Ed survey noted that while most colleges support gap year deferrals, students who lack structure often delay reentry into formal education – or skip it altogether.

Another concern is the cost of certain gap year programs, especially international travel. While some offer scholarships, many are financially inaccessible to low-income students. However, low-cost or paid opportunities (e.g., AmeriCorps, local apprenticeships or part-time work) can provide meaningful alternatives without major expenses.

An Empowering Path Forward

Colleges, including many Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), are increasingly open to gap year deferrals for students with a purpose-driven plan. With guidance, African American students can use this time to build financial independence, clarify career paths, and gain the life skills necessary for long-term success.

A gap year is not a pause in progress – it can be a powerful launchpad.

YOUTH CONNECTION

DON'T COMPROMISE YOUR CULTURE

God knew what He was doing when He created you. He made no mistakes.

Culture, diversity and our differences – these are the things that make each one of us unique and the world beautiful. But I’ve noticed that sometimes, in admiring what others have, we start to lose pieces of ourselves. We compromise bits of our culture, our values, and our beliefs – often in the name of politeness or to avoid offending others. A couple of weeks ago, I was talking with a Mar-

shallese schoolmate about our end-of-year Black Student Union (BSU) hangout. We had invited the Pacific Islander Club to join us, and we were excited to celebrate together. The event was a bring-and-share, so I asked her if she planned to bring anything. Her answer was a joyful and immediate “Yes!” But then she hesitated. She told me she didn’t think we would like the traditional Marshallese dish she had in mind and said she was going to leave one of the ingredients out.

I tried to encourage her. I reminded her this was a dish from her culture, that her people liked it just the way it was – and whether we liked it or not shouldn’t make her feel like she needed to “edit” it. Long story short – she brought the dish (a Sushi Bake), and we all loved it. This may seem like a small thing, but it’s not. This is exactly how the loss of culture begins: when we start altering who we are to fit someone else’s expectations or standards. When we measure our traditions, beliefs, and

values against “foreign standards,” we slowly lose our sense of identity. We become stuck – torn between who we are and who we think we should be. But here’s the truth: we can’t expect others to appreciate our culture if we don’t value it ourselves. When we seem unsure or ashamed of who we are, people pick up on that. And sadly, that confusion can lead others to lose interest. But people do respect authenticity. They appreciate those who proudly

represent their roots. God made us diverse for a reason. He didn’t make a mistake. Can you imagine how dull the world would be without different cultures, languages, music, food, and traditions? I’m incredibly curious about other cultures. And I’d honestly be disappointed if someone gave me a “filtered” version of their traditions just to make it more “acceptable.” That completely defeats the purpose of wanting to understand and celebrate culture in the first place. We are all beautiful



By Anesu Whacha
THE BLACK LENS
CONTRIBUTOR



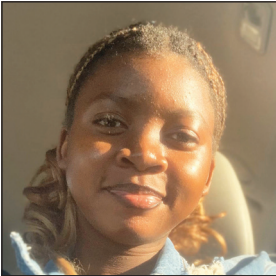
people. And by simply being who we truly are, we help make the world more vibrant, more interesting, and more beautiful.

Silent suffering

How Black people are conditioned to suppress emotions and reject psychotherapy

In many Black communities across the world—especially in America—emotional vulnerability is often treated not as a form of strength but as a weakness. Generations of trauma, systemic oppression, and cultural expectations have built a wall around the hearts and minds of Black people, forcing many to carry silent burdens. In a society that already stereotypes Black people as either overly emotional or dangerously aggressive, showing emotions like sadness, anxiety, or fear becomes a risk—a risk of being misunderstood, disrespected, or dismissed.

Historical Roots of Emotional Suppression
The roots of emotional suppression in Black communities run deep. During slavery, African people were forced to hide their pain to survive. Crying for their children being sold, showing anger at being beaten, or even expressing grief was met with further violence. Emotions became liabilities. This survival tactic carried into the Jim Crow era, and even now, the legacy of racism demands emotional silence. A Black man showing fear might be seen as weak or unstable. A Black woman crying might be told she’s too emotional or dramatic. The message is loud: strength means silence.



By Daniella Musesambili
SHADLE PARK HIGH



‘Toughness’ Over Healing

The phrase “man up” or “Black women are strong” has become a double-edged sword. While intended to uplift, these sayings often place unrealistic expectations on Black individuals to endure pain without complaint. The result is generations of people who don’t cry at funerals, don’t talk about depression, and don’t admit when they’re falling apart.

Mental health struggles are often dismissed as “a white people problem” or signs of spiritual failure. Seeking therapy is sometimes mocked or viewed with suspicion. Instead of professional help, some are told to “just pray about it” or “stop acting soft.” Faith and community are vital, yes – but so is therapy.

The Stigma Around Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy is not weakness. It’s healing. But many Black people are not given the space or language to even begin that healing process. Black men are told not to cry. Black women are told they have to “keep it together” for their families. The emotional armor they wear becomes their prison.

Even in 2025, despite more awareness, the stigma around mental health in Black communities remains strong. Racism in the healthcare system, lack of Black therapists, and mistrust rooted in real historical abuses (like the Tuskegee Study) only worsen the gap.

The Cost of Silence
Suppressing emotions doesn’t make them disappear. It makes them louder in hidden ways—through anxiety, rage, addiction, broken relationships, or self-harm. Black children grow up seeing adults who never talk about emotions, and so they learn to bottle theirs, too.

This silence is not strength. It’s inherited pain disguised as power. We must create spaces where Black people can feel without fear. Where crying is not weakness. Where therapy is not taboo. Where strength is redefined – not as silence, but as the courage to heal.



COURTESY

Keelah Lockhart, with her daughter and pregnant with her second child, just graduated from Lumen High School.

THROUGH THE STORM

By Keelah Lockhart
LUMEN HIGH SCHOOL
GRADUATE, CLASS OF 2025

At the age of 10, I lost my mother – a devastating thing that left me stuck in a world that suddenly seemed more uncertain. I found myself living with my father, a man I barely knew. It didn’t last long. Soon, I ran away to my sister’s house to be closer to peace. My mom’s absence made me feel different inside and I often found myself searching for her in the faces of strangers and in the quiet moments of my day. By the time I was 17, life had thrown another curveball my way: I was pregnant and that news was so overwhelming. How could I have a baby at such a young age and raise a child when I still felt like a child myself? I was still going to school!

But as the days passed, I realized that this little life growing inside me was not a burden, it was a chance to rebuild, to find purpose, and to honor the resilience my mother had shown throughout her life. The challenges were immense. Balancing schoolwork with the demands of pregnancy, enduring the whispers and judgments of peers, and facing the uncertainty of my future without the guidance of my mother was a lot for me. Even at a place like Lumen where I could have my daughter in class with me, it was still hard. Every year when my mom’s death day came around, I started losing myself again. But I was determined to get somewhere in life and couldn’t let it break me down. Graduation day came

last month, and I stand here working my butt off three months pregnant again with my second child, cap and gown waiting for me every day. Lumen has encouraged me to get to where I am today and continues to challenge me. Dreaming about the applause from the crowd feels so far but so close at the same time. There were sleepless nights, moments of doubt, and times when I questioned my ability to continue. But I remembered my mother’s strength, her unwavering belief in me, and I pushed forward. Today, I stand not just as a mother, but as a student who is trying to do the best she can for her child. This journey was hard, but it was mine and I walked it with my head held high, carrying my mother’s spirit with me every step of the way.

‘Other’

By Daniela Musesambili

I was born with fire in my chest
But taught to swallow it.
To bury screams in polite smiles,
To hide sorrow in “I’m blessed.”
They said, don’t be too angry,
Don’t cry, it makes you soft,
So I built walls with my silence,
Stacked them up, stone by thought.
They called me strong,
But never asked how heavy the strength was.
They called me resilient,

But never saw me shatter in quiet rooms.
They said, Black people don’t do therapy,
That’s white people stuff,
But my soul was tired of carrying
Centuries of “tough enough.”
I am not Other.
I feel. I fall. I rise. I heal.
And maybe my tears
Are the rebellion they fear most.
Let this be a reminder:
Black emotion is human.
Black healing is revolutionary.
And your softness is not shame – it’s sacred.

Repercussions, resistance and reimaging fairness in education

THE QUESTION OF MERIT, PART 3

By Z’Hanie Weaver
LIBERTY HIGH SCHOOL

In Part II, we examined how the language of “merit” has long been used to disguise systemic barriers that disproportionately exclude BIPOC, low-income, and immigrant communities. Standardized testing became a cornerstone of this exclusion—a seemingly objective metric masking generations of inequity. But now, in Part III, we shift toward the present and the possibilities ahead. As cracks form in the foundation of test-based

meritocracy, a new wave of educators, students, and advocates are reimaging what success looks like. From test-optional policies and culturally responsive pedagogy to grassroots movements demanding equity, the push to redefine merit is gaining momentum. This isn’t just a fight over education – it’s a challenge to who holds power, how we define intelligence, and what we choose to value in one another. Despite the entrenchment of standardized testing, cracks in the system are forming. The COVID-19

pandemic accelerated a shift: over 1,800 colleges went test-optional or test-blind, including the entire University of California system. Their findings? Eliminating the SAT did not reduce academic quality—but it did increase diversity and equity in admissions. Grassroots organizations are pushing back harder. Groups like FairTest, the National Center for Fair & Open Testing and local education justice coalitions are reframing the conversation: What if we evaluated students based on lived experience, resilience, creativity, and community impact – rather than numerical abstraction?

Educators are also demanding a shift in pedagogy. Culturally responsive teaching, trauma-informed education, and restorative justice practices are gaining momentum, acknowledging that intellect and learning thrive in environments of inclusion, not competition. What if merit wasn’t about outperforming others, but about rising within the community? What if our systems honored emotional intelligence, collaboration, and vision? Imagine college applications that weigh a student’s role as a caretaker or as an organizer fighting food insecurity in their neighborhood. Imagine employers who

seek out critical thinking nurtured in real-world settings rather than exclusive classrooms. Redefining merit also means redefining success. It means shifting from individual accolades to collective progress. It’s time to switch from asking, “What did you score?” to asking instead, “What did you change?” This isn’t idealism – it’s justice. At its heart, this is not a conversation about testing – it’s about power. It’s about who gets to be called brilliant, and who is told to try harder. It’s about how we measure value, and who we uplift in the process. Carl Brigham and those who followed him

built a system designed to crown certain people as “meritorious” and render others invisible. But visibility is power— and today’s students, educators, and activists are reclaiming that power by challenging the very foundations of meritocracy. If we want a future where talent is truly recognized – across every ZIP code, color and income bracket – then we must dismantle the illusions of neutrality and rebuild systems that honor every kind of intelligence. Because in truth, merit was never a measure of worth – it was a mirror reflecting the status quo. It’s time we shatter it.

CULTURE

THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA ON BLACK MEN

IN HIS WORDS

By Anthony Fain

BLACK PRISONERS CAUCUS, AIRWAY HEIGHTS CORRECTIONS CENTER

Does trauma really affect Black men? Yes, it does. As Black men, we have normalized abnormal behaviors and living environments to such a degree that we often fail to recognize when we are experiencing trauma or living in a traumatic state. For far too long, we have not addressed our trauma – let alone acknowledged that they are traumas. Socially, in the Black community, we have been taught to “man up,” “stop being soft,” and “get over it.” These messages and so many more are drilled into us from an early age, leading us to suppress our emotions. We are conditioned to push through pain, to ignore signs of distress, and to carry burdens that are far too heavy for us to bear alone. From a young age, we are taught that being vulnerable is a sign of weakness. As a result, many Black men feel that



they must bear the weight of the world on their shoulders without asking for help or even acknowledging the toll it takes on our mental and emotional well-being. This is a deeply ingrained mindset – one that has been passed down from generation to generation, often without question. It becomes so hard to distinguish what’s normal from what’s actually damaging. Moreover, there are generational traumas that have been passed down since slavery. Many people like to believe that we are so far removed from slavery that its impact no longer affects us today – but it absolutely does. We not only deal with modern-day trauma but also the trauma of the past. Living in poor neighborhoods, coming from single-parent homes, and witnessing the abuse of our people have all become so normalized that it is what many of us know and accept as a way of life. This historical trauma has manifested in our communities in many ways. It is present in the way we perceive authority figures, in the disproportionate

number of Black men incarcerated, in the way we are policed and treated as suspects rather than citizens. It is present in our health outcomes, in the constant stress we face just to survive, in the burden of always having to prove our worth and our humanity to a society that often views us as less than. These pressures create a cycle of trauma that many Black men are born into–without ever being given the tools or the space to process it. The trauma we face is not just the result of individual experiences but also of systemic oppression that spans centuries. The constant barrage of messages telling us that we don’t belong, that we are lesser, that we are dangerous, that we are expendable – this weighs heavily on our psyche. To begin understanding whether you are experiencing trauma, you must first know what constitutes a traumatic state or experience. Unfortunately, most of us don’t recognize those signs because they have become part of our norm. Others don’t want to be viewed as victims of something that might diminish their sense of manhood. We’ve internalized the idea that trauma is something only certain people experience

– that it’s a weakness, and that Black men should rise above it without letting it show. But in doing so, we deny ourselves the chance to heal. Trauma affects not only Black men – it affects us in ways that are unique and often more profound than other men. It has reached a point where we deny that trauma is something that happens to us – but it does. This denial can cause us to become numb to our own pain, leaving us stuck in a cycle of emotional suppression. We may start to act out in unhealthy ways – through anger, addiction, or isolation – because we have not been taught how to cope with our emotions in healthy ways. Those coping mechanisms are often misunderstood and further stigmatized, which only adds to the cycle of silence and suffering. But healing is possible. In order for us to begin healing from these traumas and become survivors, we must first recognize them. Acknowledging that we are experiencing trauma is not a sign of weakness – it is a step toward strength. I was once someone who didn’t believe in the trauma of being a Black man in America. But I’ve come to realize that it is real, as are my personal traumas.

Once I recognized that I had been affected by the weight of these experiences, I was able to take steps toward healing. The road isn’t easy, but it is necessary if we are to break the cycle of trauma and rise to our full potential. So I challenge all Black men: take a look at your life circumstances and assess if trauma is affecting you. Begin to question what’s been normalized in your life and whether it’s healthy. Let’s stop pretending that everything is fine when it’s not. Let’s stop burying our emotions and start expressing them in healthy, productive ways. Let’s start to heal. We must stop normalizing abnormal behaviors. We owe it to ourselves, our families, and our communities to confront our traumas head-on. Only by doing so can we start to reclaim our power and begin the process of healing. We have been taught to endure. Now let us teach ourselves how to heal. Let us redefine what strength truly means – not as the absence of pain, but as the ability to face it and overcome it. Let us show the world that Black men are not just survivors – we are resilient, we are powerful, and we are capable of true healing.

NAACP IS CHALLENGING THE NARRATIVE

NAACP Spokane Branch CELEBRATING JUNETEENTH: NAACP fireside chat with Cliff Avril

The Spokane NAACP recently hosted a meaningful, “Challenging the Narrative” Juneteenth event that featured a “Fireside Chat” with former Seattle Seahawks player and Super Bowl champion Cliff Avril offered an engaging discussion aimed at bringing the community together and inspiring our youth to take on leadership roles and participate in organizations like the NAACP. Moderated by NAACP President Lisa Gardner, the fireside chat offered a lively platform for Avril to share his journey, insights and experiences as a regional sports figure and star athlete. Born to Haitian immigrants in Jacksonville, Florida, Avril talked about his ambition to support his family. Football and superstardom weren’t his priorities; finishing school and securing a job were. He spoke passionately about the importance of unity and teamwork, especially during these uncertain times. Avril emphasized the saying “it takes a village” to nurture and support the next generation of leaders. His message resonated deeply with attendees, reminding everyone that collective efforts can lead to meaningful change in our communities. Not everyone will become an entertainer or athlete, but there are opportunities within sports or entertainment to work as trainers, in front offices, or even in stadium jobs. He mentioned when the Seattle Seahawks won the Super Bowl, it wasn’t just the players who won; it was everyone a part of the overall franchise. The evening was enhanced by musical performances from the talented Alethea Dumas, whose soulful melodies set a lively tone for the gathering. Her music not only entertained but also uplifted the spirits of those present, creating a warm and welcoming atmosphere. Additionally, attendees enjoyed a special address from Spokane’s first Miss Juneteenth, Ane-su Whacha, who captivated the audience with her

youthful message of empowerment, pride, and resilience. Also present from the Miss Juneteenth Royal Court was first runnerup Mwajuma Ishibaleka. Her presence served as a reminder of the importance of Juneteenth and the fight for equality and justice. Key dignitaries in attendance included Judge Gloria Ochoa, Spokane City Council Member Jonathan Bingle, Spokane Public School Board President Nikki Lockwood and Superior Court Judge Mary Logan. Their presence highlighted the importance of community involvement and support for initiatives that uplift our youth. This Juneteenth fireside chat not only celebrated a pivotal moment in U.S. history but reinforced the NAACP’s ongoing commitment to fostering leadership among young people. By emphasizing the importance of collaboration, community involvement, and mentorship, this event aimed to inspire attendees to actively participate in creating a better future for everyone. As we reflect on this gathering, we’re reminded that together, we can develop the leaders our youth need to succeed in today’s world. The NAACP remains committed to empowering the next generation, making sure they have the tools, support and encouragement necessary to achieve their goals. We look forward to future events that continue to inspire, educate and unite. It is through innovative and engaging events like this that the NAACP aims to bring people together, encourage involvement, and build a community that moves from being isolated to one that progresses. The NAACP wishes to recognize the hard work and dedication of the event vendors, including Glos Creative Studio, Gonzaga University Guest Services, B&B Pro Video, Converge Media, Pop & Pose Photo Booth, and gives special thanks to the event sponsor, Better Health Together.

By Lisa Gardner
SPOKANE NAACP PRESIDENT

In an intimate gathering aimed at encouraging dialogue between law enforcement and the community, the Spokane NAACP hosted its “Challenging the Narrative” event. In partnership with the City of Spokane Human Rights Commission, the event was led by Criminal Justice Committee Co-Chair and NAACP 3rd Vice President, Kurtis Robinson, along with Luc Jasmin III, Member at Large for the NAACP and a commissioner with the City of Spokane Office of the Ombudsman. The panel included prominent figures from the criminal justice system, such as Spokane Police Department Chief Kevin Hall, City of Spokane Office of the Ombudsman Director Bart Logue, Office of Civil Rights, Equity, and Inclusion Director Jerrall Haynes, Pastor of Morning Star Baptist Church Walter Kendricks, Jim Leighty from the Washington State Coalition for Police Accountability, and Spokane Human Rights Commission Commissioner Anwar Peace. This event offered a vital platform for addressing urgent issues related to police accountability and community relations, creating a space for open and honest conversation. One of the main topics discussed was the troubling number of officer-involved shootings, a concern that deeply affects our communities.

Courageous conversations with law enforcement



COURTESY

The Spokane NAACP hosted its “Challenging the Narrative” event at the Central Public Library.

Panelists stressed the importance of transparency and accountability in these cases, highlighting ongoing efforts to create more effective oversight systems. They acknowledged the emotional toll these events take on families and communities, emphasizing that accountability is essential for rebuilding trust. Chief Hall mentioned that efficient training, adequate resources, and strategic recruitment will help in establishing a stronger, diverse police force. The discussion also emphasized the importance of diversity in the police force. President of NAACP, Lisa Gardner, underscored the need to recruit women and people

of color to ensure the police department reflects the diverse community it serves. This focus on inclusivity goes beyond simply representing different groups; it’s about understanding the unique challenges faced by various community members and building trust-based relationships. Importantly, the discussion was framed not as a criticism of law enforcement but as an opportunity for constructive dialogue. Community members were encouraged to listen and engage with law enforcement officers, fostering a sense of partnership between the NAACP and police representatives. This collaborative approach aimed to

break down barriers and promote understanding, ultimately improving relations. This event signifies a key step toward collaboration and mutual respect, paving the way for a more accountable and fair criminal justice system. The NAACP remains dedicated to working with law enforcement to promote change, ensuring that all community voices are heard and valued. By building these connections, we can collaborate for a safer and more just society. To watch this episode, please visit The Spokane NAACP YouTube page at youtube.com/@Spokane-NAACP Spokane NAACP #1137.

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HAPPENING AROUND TOWN / FROM THE FRONT PAGE

WHITE ROSE BRUNCH RETURNS

By Shalena Armstrong
THE BLACK LENS

After a seven-year pause, the Spokane (WA) Chapter of The Links, Incorporated proudly hosted its signature White Rose Brunch on May 31 – a morning filled with elegance, empowerment, and celebration.

The long-held community favorite returned with grace, bringing together community leaders, supporters and friends to raise funds, celebrate excellence, and uplift the next generation.

Guests enjoyed a vibrant atmosphere with live jazz from the Jason Evans Band and moving performances by Alethea Dumas and Jacqueline Sandoval. Pastor Betsy Williams delivered a powerful invocation.

The chapter proudly presented its Community Impact Awards to two outstanding honorees:

- Latisha Hill – for her work in National Trends and Services
- Michael Bethley – for his leadership in the Arts

Both were celebrated for their deep commitment to uplifting Spokane through service and innovation.

Four brilliant students – Donalda Brantley, Kamryn Richardson, Genae Langford and Opulukwa Jeremiah – were awarded scholarships, recognizing their academic promise and commitment to excellence.

The event concluded-



Links members and youth prepare to walk down the runway. Kerra Bower, in orange, and Stephaine Courtney, in pink, and Shalena Armstrong (Spokane Links president). Behind Kerra is her daughter Jordyn. To the left of Kerra is Mufaro Whacha.

PICS BY KEMONI



Fannie Bush and Mary-Jane McCoy, at right, are platinum members of Spokane (WA) Links, Incorporated.

BREW CITY FLASH

with the show-stopping “Black Excellence: Bring Your Own Style Fashion Show.” This unforgettable segment began with a powerful original poem by April Eberhardt, setting the

tone for a vibrant celebration of self-expression. What followed was a joyful runway walk that blended style, personality, and generational flair. From bold prints to timeless chic, each

participant lit up the stage, proudly showcasing their individuality and energy.

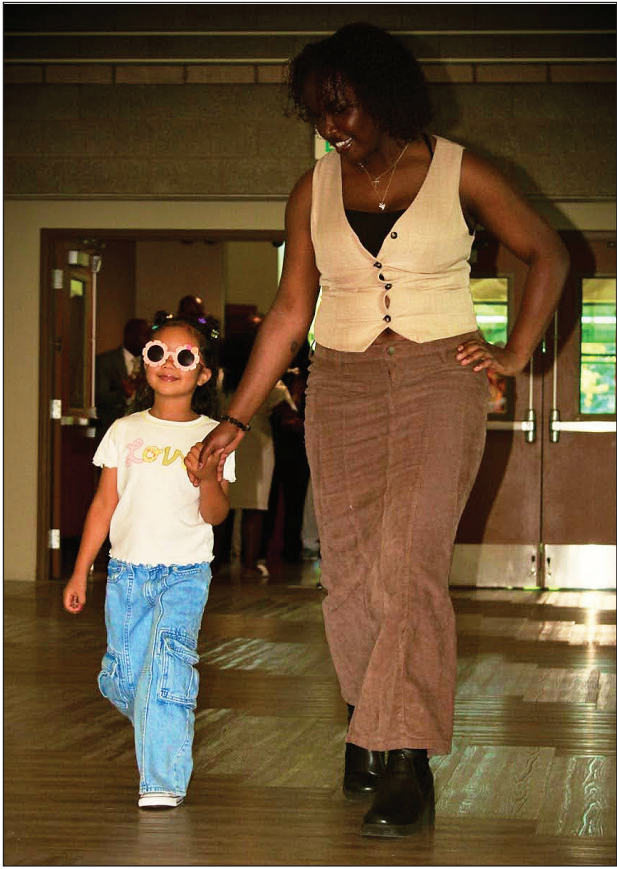
The 2025 White Rose Brunch was more than a fundraiser – it was an affirmation of The Links’ enduring mission to serve, empower, and celebrate Black excellence in all its forms. True to their mission, the chapter remains “committed to enriching, sustaining, and ensuring the culture and economic survival of African Americans and other people of African ancestry.”

Shalena Armstrong is the president of the Spokane (WA) Chapter of The Links, Incorporated.



BREW CITY FLASH

Pastor Betsy Williams, a champion of Beloved Community, delivers a powerful invocation.



PICS BY KEMONI

Amaya Nakamura is escorted for the finale of the fashion show by emcee Mayah Eberhardt.



Top left: Bob Hemphill, owner of Chicken N More, talks to City Council President Betsy Wilkerson.



Top right: Jason Evans and his band performs at the brunch.

At left: Lisa Gardner and Dr. Jeanne Baynes work the registration table at the Links’ White Rose Brunch.

PHOTOS BY BREW CITY FLASH



PICS BY KEMONI

Kim Ndlovu sports a contemporary chic outfit during the fashion show.

SERVE

Continued from 1

also located in the Mojave Desert. They needed help in the Food Service Department, specifically in a huge bakery. I volunteered.

“They sent me back East to Camp Lejeune where I went to school for Food Service for a couple of months. After that training, I returned to Barstow to work in the bakery. I made E-4 NCO, Corporal, in 18 months. After being in the Marines for almost two years, I was transferred to Camp Pendleton for Infantry training. With four other platoons, I was then sent to the First Marine Air Wing in Da Nang. I hung out with the wild bunch and lost a stripe there for being off-limits in a village named Dog Patch. I had the chance to stay in the Nam and try to get my stripe back, but my three-year enlistment was up. I called it a day. They flew us back to El Toro in California, where I received an Honorable Discharge.”

For Rivers, Vietnam represented not only a geographic departure from home but a symbolic one; it was a dare to do something that stretched beyond a steel mill job in blue-collar, industrial America – a leap toward purpose, identity, self-discovery and belonging in a country still learning to see him fully. He enlisted voluntarily, chasing what he now describes as “adventure,” though he acknowledges the weight of that choice.

“I went to the ‘Nam to do what I had to do. Serve the country,” he said simply. “If I didn’t enlist, they would get me anyway.”

Fear, Discipline and Pride

Boot camp at Parris Island tested Rivers’ mettle. “They scare the fear out of you,” he laughs. “They teach you to face fear and be afraid to be afraid.”

It was here that Rivers began to understand the meaning of discipline – not just as military proto-

col but as a mindset.

“The Corps taught me to always try to keep a strong mind and body. At times I strayed from that discipline, but I always tried to return to it.”

That training would carry him through deployments, the Tet Offensive, and long stretches guarding the perimeter at Da Nang. His unit—the First Marine Air Wing – was surrounded by bunkers and fences that separated them from Vietnamese neighborhoods known to harbor Viet Cong operatives.

The Paradox of Patriotism

Rivers’ story speaks to a larger, often unspoken question: What does patriotism look like for Black Americans?

From Crispus Attucks to the Tuskegee Airmen, Black service has always been paradoxical – risking life and limb for freedoms still withheld at home. Rivers’ reflections may generate more questions than answers. He didn’t march in protests or burn draft cards.

“It was a means to an end for a newly minted 18-year-old, seeking to claim his place in a nation still struggling to recognize the full humanity of those who looked like him – at a time marked by the assassinations of Malcolm X, Dr. King, and Fred Hampton, the uprising in Watts, and the deadly protests at Kent State against the Vietnam War.”

“Freedom and Democracy is the gift that Americans inherit at birth,” Rivers said. “Some have more opportunities than others, but at the end of the day, it’s up to the individual to make the right choices.”

War, Loss and Becoming

“I never compared love with death,” Rivers said, “but I know I loved leaving Vietnam, because I was leaving a lot of death behind.”

Rivers never sought to be a hero. He doesn’t romanticize war. He speaks candidly about friends lost, villages bombed, and the de-

humanizing cost of military conflict.

“When you see how people die in a war zone – civilians along with soldiers – it makes you love life.”

Yet amid that destruction, he also found glimpses of beauty and transformation: swimming in the China Sea, witnessing how people lived in third-world villages, and sharing beers off-duty at concerts near Hill 327. These experiences, while shaped by the trauma of war, expanded his worldview.

Black Man, U.S. Marine

For Rivers, service was also about belonging. Not just to a military unit, but to an idea of America that – while flawed – was still his to claim. He didn’t enlist to prove loyalty; he enlisted because it was an avenue open to him, one that felt purposeful.

“Everybody my age was getting drafted,” he says. “But I was ready to do something different.”

What does he tell his 18-year-old self now?

“Get a good education first. Chase your adventure later.”

Looking Ahead

Clyde Rivers’ story isn’t about glorifying war or denying the ugly truths of America’s racial history. It’s about a young Black man choosing to serve with dignity, knowing the contradictions of the nation he served. It’s about walking the tightrope between sacrifice and survival, discipline and disillusionment, love for country and love for self.

When asked if he’d do it all again, he doesn’t hesitate.

“Yes, I would. Only better.”

His words offer no easy answers to the question of Black patriotism—but they offer something more enduring: truth, layered with complexity, told by a man who lived it.

“I really wasn’t concerned about being a hero. There were already a lot of heroes who had died in the NAM. I just wanted to show up and do my best.” – Clyde Rivers

KIRISHA

Continued from 1

time I didn’t have to carry that weight.”

She earned her bachelor’s degree in 2013 and her J.D. from Howard Law in 2016. But her education didn’t just come from textbooks. It came from surviving.

“I’ve wanted to be a lawyer since I was four years old. But becoming a lawyer wasn’t just about a career. It was about being a voice for people like me – people who’ve survived.”

Kirisha is a survivor of sexual assault and domestic violence. Those experiences shape her legal work today. She practices family and immigration law, serving youth, survivors of abuse, and immigrants seeking legal protection. Her clients often carry invisible wounds – wounds she recognizes.

“I’m a domestic violence survivor myself. I was raped at 16. I survived an abusive relationship during law school. That experience informs everything I do.”

In court, in classrooms, in quiet conversations with clients – her advocacy is deeply personal. Her work centers not only on justice, but on healing.

“You can’t help people unless you listen to them. And sometimes, people just need someone who understands the pain they haven’t been able to say out loud.”

She teaches young people how to recognize healthy relationships. She challenges systems that fail them. And she’s adamant that mental wellness isn’t a luxury – it’s a necessity.

“When you’re taught to suppress your feelings, that becomes a habit. You internalize harm. And when something truly traumatic happens, you don’t even feel like you deserve to speak up.”

Kirisha is breaking that cycle – for herself, and for others.

And even as she rises, she remains grounded by the community that shaped her.

“Spokane gave me roots,” she said. Kirisha explains that even though she had to leave to fully see herself, Spokane still provided the soil that grew her.

To the next generation of Black youth growing up in Spokane, her message is clear:

“Get out and see the world. Be around people who are dreaming big, who challenge you to grow. And when you do – come back and give something to the place that raised you.”

Kirisha Marshall’s story is one of return – not just geographically, but spiritually and emotionally. Her journey from Spokane to Howard University wasn’t just about changing locations – it was about reclaiming herself. She left to heal, to breathe, to rise – and now, she advocates so that others can do the same.

Her work with youth – teaching them to recognize healthy relationships, advocating in court on their behalf, pushing back when the system fails them – is a direct response to the silence she once felt forced to maintain.

“You can’t help people unless you listen to them. And sometimes, people just need someone who understands the pain they haven’t been able to say out loud.”

Mental wellness is central to her advocacy. For Kirisha, it’s not just about therapy – it’s about creating the psychological safety that so many young Black girls, especially in predominantly white spaces, are denied.

“When you’re taught to suppress your feelings, that becomes a habit. You internalize harm. And then when something truly traumatic happens, you don’t even feel like you deserve to speak up.”

She’s breaking that cycle – one case at a time.

ARTS AND INSPIRATION

LEGACY IN MOTION

Drey Davis remembered through award-winning composition and community tribute

By April Eberhardt
THE BLACK LENS

On March 22, the Cheney High School Band earned first place in indoor percussion at a regional competition hosted at Ridgeline High School. Their powerful and emotional performance featured an original composition titled “Grace” – written by the late Drey Davis, a beloved Spokane musician, educator and mentor whose influence continues to resonate.

Before his unexpected passing, Drey poured his heart into both the music and the young people he mentored. He regularly traveled from Spokane’s Northside to Cheney High School before school hours to work

with the drumline, sharing his time, talent, and passion. In addition to his work with Cheney, Drey also taught band for grades 6-12 at Northwest Christian School, where he cultivated a love for music and discipline in the classroom and beyond.

The band’s winning performance – led by Joshua Wisswell and supported by Cody Goforth – included contributions from a dedicated team of students, including Cory Jones, Mason Utz and Joanna Wilkerson, as well as several Cheney Middle School students who joined the high school ensemble. Their efforts were more than a competition – they served as a heartfelt tribute to the man who helped guide and inspire them.

A canvas displayed at the event echoed Drey’s lasting imprint: “Legacy is not leaving behind something for other people – it’s leaving something behind in people.”

That legacy lives on. In 2024, Mayor Lisa Brown officially proclaimed July 14 as “Drey Day” in Spokane. This year’s celebration returns to Chameleon (1801 W. Sunset Blvd.) with doors opening at 4 p.m. and performances beginning at 5:00 PM. The event will feature live music across genres – gospel, R&B, rock and jazz – and is open to all ages.

The evening will also raise funds for a community mural in Drey’s honor – a lasting tribute to a life that continues to uplift others through music, mentorship, and love.



COURTESY
Drey Davis' mother Erica stands next to a tapestry depicting an image of Drey playing drums.



BRIANNA FIELDS/THE BLACK LENS
Megan Thee Stallion talks on stage at Dreamcon 2025.

DREAMCON 2025:
ANOTHER YEAR OF
COMRADERY AND
COLLABORATION

By Brianna Fields
THE BLACK LENS

Dreamcon 2025 has come and gone yet again, but with a bigger venue, larger number of attendees, and bigger talent! Dreamcon was held in Houston, Texas, from May 30-June 1.

The talent list was quite vast this year, ranging from voice actors, musicians, writers and many more. There was a panel dedicated to the Boondocks (Boondocks Celebration panel), so naturally, some of the people who were involved had to be there! From the Boondocks were Carl Jones, Gary Anthony Williams, Cedric Yarbrough, Rodney Barnes and Yamara Taylor.

Other actors/voice actors that attended were Khleo Thomas (“Holes”), Reed Shannon (“Arcane”), Zeno Robinson (“Ben 10,” “Big City Greens,” “Young Justice” and “My Hero Academia”), and Kimberly Brooks (“Steven Universe,” “Static Shock,” “Scooby Doo! Mystery Incorporated” and “Doc McStuffins”). The musicians who attended were Earthgang, Roxxy Haze, Leon Thomas, and three-time Grammy-winning artist Megan Thee Stallion!

The attendees were also overjoyed to see some of their favorite content creators, including Don-tai, AMP, Tony Weaver Jr., Tony Statovci, Tiffie Starchild, Zaynah Bear, Berleezy, and, we can’t forget, the YouTubers who started it all, RD-CWorld.

While there were many panels focused on fun and enjoying hobbies, there were just as many panels focused on careers, education, networking and community. Some of the panels presented by Dreamcon included the Opening and Closing Ceremonies, Bae Brigade (a DJ battle), “Mic Check: Unmasking the Voice,” “It’s Dangerous to Go Alone: Building Community and Collaboration” and “Power & Creativity: Building a Brand That Moves Culture.” I had the pleasure of attending the latter three panels.

In “Mic Check,” the panel was hosted by Yamara Taylor and featured the voice talents Carl Jones, Reed Shannon, Kimberly Brooks and

Zeno Robinson. Their panel was more focused on the career route with advice on how to get into voice acting, how they got into voice acting, and how important it is to have a support team, but to make sure you are your number one fan and cheerleader.

In the “It’s Dangerous To Go Alone” panel, YouTubers Leland of RD-CWorld, AXXChristine and Berleezy told us about the importance of community, and a fresh pair of eyes can take you to places you didn’t think were possible. And how the power of collaboration can help build that community and support system needed to keep going.

Finally, in “Building A Brand That Moves Culture,” host StoryModeBae interviewed Megan Thee Stallion on her business ventures and what she plans to do next. Meg walked out dressed head to toe in her Yorrichi cosplay (from the anime “Bleach”), stating that she “selects her cosplay based off of whose hair looks the best.” Megan talked about her love for Houston, the city that raised her, and how it shaped her into the woman she is today. She talked about her new affordable swimsuit line, Hot Girl Summer, sold exclusively at Walmart, and her new tequila, Chicas Divertidas, with differing flavors Tequila Blanco and Tequila Reposado. Megan also dropped some new information exclusively at Dreamcon, that she was creating her own anime alongside Carl Jones (Boondocks), which will be airing on Amazon Prime.

When StoryModeBae asked if Meg could share any advice with the crowd, she first joked by saying, “The next generation needs to be giving me advice.” But continued to say, “Everything you’re good at in your everyday life is a job” and that “your mind and God ain’t gonna lead you wrong!”

Later on that weekend, she and two other content creators went live on “The Sims” YouTube channel as part of the convention’s festivities.

Dreamcon ended with another successful year and record-breaking attendance compared to last year. Dreamcon 2026 will be held in Houston, Texas, from July 10-12, and badges will be on sale soon.

Met Gala 2025: The looks and history behind the red carpet’s theme



GETTY IMAGES
Actress and singer-songwriter Teyana Taylor attends the 2025 Met Gala Celebrating “Superfine: Tailoring Black Style” at Metropolitan Museum of Art on May 5 in New York City.

By Brianna Fields
THE BLACK LENS

Fashion’s biggest night has come and gone, but the looks this year will be talked about for years to come.

The 2025 Met Gala was held May 5 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. The annual Met Gala showcases the new spring costume exhibition.

• As for the fashion, I don’t think we’ve seen such jaw-dropping looks consecutively since 2018’s “Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination.” This year’s theme was “Superfine: Tailoring Black Style.” The theme “explores the importance of clothing and style to the formation of Black identities in the Atlantic diaspora, and will be arranged by the 12 characteristics of Black Dandyism,” Vogue reported. “Tailored For You” was the initial dress code for the red carpet this year. Described as a “sartorial mood that is purposefully designed to provide guidance and invite creative interpretation.”

A lot of different looks were expressed this year that leaned into the sleek and classic style of tailoring, but had more of a theatrical and avant-garde flair. While they all looked fantastic, Black women were especially eye-catching this year. Everyone showed up and showed out this year, but there was special attention drawn to the co-chairs of the event: A\$AP

Rocky, Pharrell Williams, Lewis Hamilton and Colman Domingo. A\$AP wowed with a beautiful ensemble from his label, AWGE. The look bore a slick double-breasted technical wool jacket that he was inspired by the outdoorsy marmot jackets that were around Harlem growing up.

“Marmots are a Harlem tradition. That was our teenage jacket!” A\$AP told Vogue while at his final fitting for the red carpet.

However, A\$AP wasn’t the only one making jaws drop. Other big-name Black actors were in stunning outfits as well. Zendaya, Doechee and Pharrell stunned in Louis Vuitton. Domingo was in Valentino. Ayo Edebiri wowed in Ferragamo. Khaby-Lame in Boss. Janelle Monáe, Zoe Saldana, and Angel Reese in Thom Browne. Hamilton in Wales Bonner. Ugbad Abdi in Michael Kohrs. Cynthia Erivo in Givenchy. Jodie Turner-Smith in Burberry. Coco Jones in Manish Malhotra. Lupita Nyong’o in Chanel. Diana Ross in Ugo Moze. Chance the Rapper in Versace. Keke Palmer in Vera Wang. Rihanna in Marc Jacobs. And Teyana Taylor dazzled in Ruth E. Carter.

Other artists, such as Andre 3000, wore possible statement pieces with the grand piano on his back as a likely reference to him carrying the music industry on his back for decades. In a Washington Post article, “Met Celebration has a Dark Side,” writer Karen Attiah

expresses how this year’s Met Gala theme, while in celebration of Black history, is very complicated to be 100% joyful during a time of Black erasure. While praising the Met Gala for finally giving back history the recognition it deserves, it does feel rather odd in the current political climate.

“Finally, finally, the fashion world was devoting its big event to recognize the brilliance and boldness of the Black masculine aesthetic in meticulously tailored suits, bold colors, and fine accessories (i.e., power dressing),” Attiah said.

She said this year’s theme took inspiration from the book “Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism & the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity” (2009), written by Monica L Miller, Barnard College’s Chair of African Studies. She then goes into detail about the history of “the Black strategy of dandy dressing.” The Sapeurs (a historical subculture of Congo), dressed in fashionable suits from when the Congolese soldiers and émigrés went to France in the early 20th century, and returned with European style, fashion and even their mannerisms. A perfect example would be the Nigerian photographer, Iké Udé.

So, the Black community finally got the recognition it so rightly deserves, but we can’t let one single night deter us from what we’re facing nationally.

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CAREGIVER STORIES / PATHWAYS TO PROVISION

Intergenerational blessings and challenges

FROM THE WATER'S EDGE



By Dr. Robert L. "Bob" Bartlett
THE BLACK LENS CONTRIBUTOR



Intergenerational care comes with blessings and challenges. Some of you know my – soon to turn 102-year-old – mother Frances Bartlett, known by many in this community as Grandma Bartlett or simply Grandma. Some know her well enough to occasionally stop by our home

in the Valley for a sit-down visit. When you do, you likely find her sitting in her big gray recliner in our living room leaning over a word search book bought at the Dollar Tree or a 300-piece jigsaw puzzle bought at Walmart. Mom survived the depression – she really knows how to stretch a dollar. Folks marvel at how Mom doesn't act or look her age. She remains playful and quick to remind folks who question her age and looks that, "Black don't crack." She loves showing off her pink Sketchers and flowery dresses gifted to her by her oldest granddaughter in Spokane. She loves sharing family stories especially stories about how spoiled she was growing-up as an only child and the difference in how my older brother and I were raised. My brother was born while Pops was off to war. Mom lived with her parents at the time so my brother was equally spoiled by both her and his grandparents. My brother was three before Pops laid eyes on him and it didn't go well. "Spoiling" was not in Pops' make-up! Mom's longevity, memory, storytelling and spirits are nothing short of amazing. She started staying with us over the winter months soon after Pops passed away in 2010. West Virginia winters are often colder and snowier than here. Fortunately, she loved to fly so friends or family would travel back and forth with her. She would stay with us until spring. She was a much younger woman back then – in her late 80s with more black hair than grey and she was very mobile. Her mobility has slowed a great deal and her hair is now totally grey. A year before COVID my wife and I made the decision to move Mom here fulltime. She was reluctant at first but eventually gave in – we got lucky. We knew that the move had to be her choice. If it felt the least bit forced it would not go well. She was leaving the town of her birth, all of her life-long friends and the only home she ever knew as a married woman with two kids. Pops built that house with his own



Frances Bartlett, or simply Grandma.

hands and damn near everything in it. She was saying goodbye to her known world. Change is hard and challenging! We moved her in the same home where my wife and I raised our four children. We were briefly empty-nesters living in a ranch style home with a finished downstairs. We moved Mom into our bedroom on the main floor and my wife and I retreated to the lower level. Moving her across the country proved to be the easy part. It's been six years now. Losing her independence and relying more and more on others continues to be hard on her. She still misses her home and friends back East. For me, being a live-in caregiver can be especially hard at times – in addition to losing my own independence. Unlike raising children and watching them grow and becoming more independent, Mom is heading in the opposite direction. Seeing and experiencing those changes in her is hard. When putting on her socks and shoes or when cutting up her food, I have to think that it's only fair – it's my turn. We don't go shopping together anymore. Now I shop at the Dollar Tree and Walmart without her. Her leaving the house has been reduced to doctors' appointments. When helping her in and out of the car she will sometimes utter, "I'm so much trouble." I reply, "But you're good trouble, Mom." My wife and I are both retired now so sometimes I get a little resentful that we are not living the "retired" life I thought we would. Fortunately, there are many more good days than bad. We both recognize how blessed we are to have Mom here with us. She makes us laugh daily and loves hugging her grandchildren and great grandchildren. She reminded us recently that, "I don't mind sticking around as long as my mind stays good." For me, it is love and care coming full circle in a way none of us could have imagined. Being a caregiver comes with blessings and challenges – like when Mom thanks me for doing the simplest things for her. I wonder if I ever said the same when the situation was reversed – likely not. Come by for a visit and plan to sit for a while.

Dr. Bartlett is a retired educator. He retired from Gonzaga University in 2007 and Eastern Washington University in 2020.



COURTESY

Ozell Wilkins showcases the importance of work in the trades.

Welded to purpose

Ozell Wilkins on trade work, stability and the high value of skills in today's workforce

By April Eberhardt
THE BLACK LENS

On June 23, Ozell Wilkins stood alongside labor leaders, clergy and community advocates at the Tribal Gathering Place in downtown Spokane to speak in support of the Public Dollars for Public Benefit Ordinance. Introduced by Councilmember Paul Dillon and backed by the Spokane Alliance, the ordinance aims to ensure that public infrastructure spending creates high-quality local jobs, expands apprenticeship opportunities, and prioritizes hiring from underrepresented communities. As an ironworker and union member, Wilkins shared his personal journey – from uncertainty to economic stability – highlighting how access to the trades transformed his life. His story underscored the ordinance's potential to create equitable career pathways and lasting community impact. Originally from Bloomington, Illinois, Wilkins moved to Spokane in 2013 and graduated from North Central High School. Like many students, he didn't hear much about trade op-

tions in school. "I wasn't actually (interested in trades) – it sucks. The knowledge and the information wasn't really offered, so I was really unaware until I came to Spokane," he said. That changed when Wilkins pursued a welding certificate at Spokane Community College. He gave over four years to the craft, and his passion quickly turned into a vision for independence. "I wanted to become a mobile welder. I wanted to take welding and just turn it into my own profession – a side gig. I was looking for cash flow and just expressing the skill. I fell in love with it," he explained. "Welding is a form of connection – if it's done right, it lasts forever. You can see it in every house, every establishment. Your handrails – everything has something welded to it. It's an amazing process." Eventually, Wilkins transitioned to the Ironworkers Union, Local 14, where he now earns \$28 an hour, with higher wages on the horizon. Journeymen, he noted, can make up to \$63 an hour – a solid and sustainable income. But for Wilkins,

it's about more than a paycheck. With six children, he's motivated by the ability to provide for his family without working multiple jobs. The union not only offered him financial stability but restored his sense of purpose. "My life changed. The weekly wages inspired my mental. I thought I was out of a lot, but I feel safe with just this one job." For students unsure about college, Wilkins recommends starting with a non-credit exploratory course like SCC's Skilled Trades Prep (STP). "I was all over the place – firefighter, pilot, business. Someone told me to slow down and take the course, and it was not a waste of time. It introduced me to a plan." "Education isn't for everybody, but a skill is. Sometimes the information goes over our heads – we gotta stay aware of our opportunities. It's a beautiful world." One resounding message Wilkins makes clear: Skills are just as valuable as degrees in today's labor force – and exploring options and seizing opportunities is essential to the journey toward success.

A QUIET GOODBYE

By Karen Whitman
THE BLACK LENS

For most of my life, she was just "Mom." A beautiful Pastor's Wife and she always had a wonderful presence in our lives. I have amazing memories growing up – she was a wonderful mom. She loved church, laughter, telling stories that made no sense and made perfect sense at the same time. And above all, she loved her family. Fiercely. When Mom's health began to decline from kidney failure, it felt like a slow unraveling. I remember the day I decided to quit my job to care for her. It wasn't a question, really – it was a knowing. She had taken care of me all my life; now it was my turn. The early days weren't easy, but they were full of small, meaningful routines – making her breakfast, adjusting her pillows, watching old sitcoms together. And every week for a year, I took her to lunch. Just the two of us. Sometimes she laughed, cried and told stories from her youth like she was spinning gold from memory. Other times, she was quiet, far away. Eventually, the strain grew. I was tired in a way I didn't know how to describe – tired in my bones, in my spirit. I asked my daughter to help, to step in where I was unraveling. That created tension neither of us saw coming. The shifting roles, the emotional weight – it was a lot. And then came the choice to bring in outside help. I needed to be her daughter again, not just her nurse.



COURTESY

Karen Whitman dances with her mother.

Toward the end, Mom changed. Her words grew sharper, sometimes cruel. I know now it was the illness, the pain, maybe even fear – but in those moments, it stung. I'd look at her and see the woman who held my hand through scraped knees and heartbreaks, and wonder why she now pushed me away. But even through the hurt, I stayed. I wanted to be there. I chose to be there. When she passed, she was nonverbal. No last words. No "thank you," no "I love you," no "I'm sorry." I don't know what she was feeling, or if she knew I was sitting there, holding her hand one last time. But I hope she did. I hope, somehow, she knew

how much I loved her – even when we were tired, even when we were both hurting. I look back now with mixed emotions. It was hard. But I also remember moments of closeness that I'll carry forever. A smile over lunch. The sound of her laugh in the middle of a hard day. The way she still tried to protect us, even when her body was failing. Taking care of Mom was the hardest thing I've ever done. But I don't regret it. In the end, it was love. Complicated, messy, real love. The kind that spans generation after generation. The kind that lingers long after words are gone. I miss you, Mama.

Tax credit would help families

Every day more than 820,000 Washingtonians perform a labor of love: caring for parents, spouses and other loved ones so they can stay at home – where they want to be. Caring for a family member or close friend is one of the most important roles we are likely to play in our lifetime. However, hardworking family caregivers often spend their own money and may risk their jobs to help their loved ones. In fact, caregivers spend an average of more than \$7,200 a year of their own money – making it harder for them to afford groceries and pay bills. Many have had to cut down their work hours or quit their jobs because of caregiving responsibilities. That's why AARP is urging Congress to pass the Credit for Caring Act. The federal tax credit of up to \$5,000 a year would put money back in the pockets of eligible family caregivers and help defray the costs of caring for a spouse or other loved one with long-term needs.



These stories were possible by funding support from AARP Washington and BECU. You can find more information, tips and resources for caregivers on their website at aarp.org/caregiverswa

Call for Submissions

CAREGIVER STORIES:
LOVE THROUGH THE
CIRCLE OF LIFE

What does intergenerational caregiving look like in your family? How have you shown up—or been shown love—through the journey of aging, illness, or daily life with your elders or as an elder? Share your story for editorial review, in 500 words.

Send your submission as a PDF, Word or Google Doc to the editor of *The Black Lens* via the e-mail below.

If you would rather be interviewed, please let us know.

aprileblacklensnews.com

WELLNESS

BLACK GENEALOGY Finding family in Audubon’s happy land

As America celebrates July 4, we must acknowledge the painful history tied to this national holiday. The freedom declared on July 4, 1776, from the British was not granted to all Americans; Black people remained enslaved on plantations and small farms. After years of research, it was time for me to confront my fears of visiting the plantation where my ancestors had been enslaved. Before I even learned the name of this plantation, I had already toured three others, but none were connected to my family. It feels different when you are related to people who were enslaved.

In my March 2025 article for the Black Lens, I wrote about discovering my ancestors in the book “The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom 1750-1925” by Herbert G. Gutman, which mentioned the Stirling Plantation and its location in St. Francisville, Louisiana, where my ancestors had been enslaved. While visiting New Orleans for a funeral in September 2012, my husband and I chose to explore St. Francisville in West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana – the place that my paternal grandmother had fondly remembered. Dubbed “Audubon’s Happy Land” in 1939 by Katherine Porter, St. Francisville was no happy land for people who were enslaved on one of Lewis Stirling’s three plantations.

Less than an hour from Baton Rouge, on the bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River, lies the historic community of St. Francisville, nestled in the rolling



A view of the Oakley Plantation and Audubon Memorial state park building near St. Francisville, La., not far from the Stirling (or Wakefield) Plantation.

hills of the Felicianas. It features landmark homes, B&Bs, shops, and antebellum plantations. This charming little town has inspired many creative artists, including John James Audubon, who was hired to tutor a child at the Oakley Plantation. It was here that the naturalist painted at least 80 of the 435 birds featured in his mammoth book, Birds of America.

The first stop was the West Feliciana Historical Society Museum. I saw photos of Stirling Plantation and inquired about

its location. I received a map and directions. While there, we also learned that six plantations – Afton Villa Gardens, Beechwood, Catalpa, Evergreenzine, Oakley, Rosedown, Rural Homestead, and Wakefield–would be open to the public during the 42nd Annual Audubon Pilgrimage, held March 15-17, 2013, to celebrate John James Audubon’s stay at the Oakley Plantation in West Feliciana Parish. We planned to return for that event. Stirling Plantation was

about ten minutes from the museum on Highway 61. Upon arriving, I noticed a plaque on the fence post that stated: “WAKEFIELD, 1834, Built in 1834 by Lewis and Sarah Turnbull Stirling. Two upper floors were removed in 1877 to effect partition of the estate. Private.” In Gutman’s book and the captions on the photos at the museum, the plantation was named Stirling, but the sign states Wakefield. I considered the private sign for about 30 seconds; it didn’t say “Keep Out or

No Trespassing.” The gate was open, so we drove in. The plantation was located at the end of a long road lined with oak trees and azaleas. We quickly took pictures and left after a few minutes. I did my homework before the 2013 trip. From my online research, I learned that the Stirling family had donated their family papers to the LSU Library in Baton Rouge. I hired Judy Riffel, a professional genealogist, to visit the LSU Library and copy the family papers relevant



By Patricia Bayonne-Johnson THE BLACK LENS CONTRIBUTOR



to my lineage, including Morgan, Weather, Stirling, and Sterling. Judy sent me copies of 29 pages of birth registers, lists of taxable properties (enslaved people), records of individuals who received shoes, lists of bushels of corn, agreements with freedmen, and other documents. I also researched Lewis Stirling and his family, as well as the Wakefield Plantation. I found that Stirling served with distinction as Quartermaster during the Battle of New Orleans in 1814, with the 10th and 20th Consolidated Regiments of the Louisiana Militia. He and his wife, Sarah Turnbull Stirling, built the Wakefield Plantation house in West Feliciana between 1834 and 1836. I discovered that the Civil War Battle of Stirling’s Plantation occurred on September 29, 1863, in Pointe Coupee Parish on land owned by Lewis Stirling. The Stirling Plantation once extended into another parish! Lewis Stirling was one of the first to plant sugar cane. He also grew indigo and cotton. I could hardly wait until March 15, 2013, to get here. To be continued ...

HOME: A 3-PART SERIES

Breathe in. Breathe out. Begin.

Over the next three issues, I invite us to explore the construct of Home and collectively redefine not only what it is, but how we take action to create the homes we need. This series will explore our connection to home through the land we live on, the communities we co-exist with, and the bodies we experience life through.

At this moment in time, we are existing in an intensely fabricated world. Imagined boundaries have been drawn with blood on land that isn’t ours to own. The powers that be are bloated with ego, money and dominance, giving them the faux responsibility to tell us how and where we are allowed to belong, to find refuge, to be at home.

Though I wish there was a breath technique, a yoga class, or a meditation I could offer that would dissolve the injustice, the harm, the hate that infects this land, I do not. Though perhaps, if those in power practiced mindfulness and were surrounded with unconditional love earlier, we wouldn’t be here now – but I digress. What I can offer is space and practice for you to feel whole and safe: on this land that yearns for reciprocity, in communities starving for connection, and in your own body, mind, and soul.

Summer is a season of dreaming, blossoming, harvesting, and abundance. May we acknowledge our wants and needs, affirm their possibility, and manifest them into being. Each piece in this series will offer invitations for reflection and reclamation. The ongoing attacks on love and connection may be out of our control, but the ways in which we find home within and around us are not. May we rebel through connection and love.

At Home with Nature

According to Merriam-Webster, home is “a place where one resides permanently or for a long period of time.” What a narrow measure, when we remember that humans were once migratory beings, moving in sync with the land to find nourishment, safety, and renewal. That natural way of living is now wrapped in paperwork and rules, boundaries and bureaucracy. Humans, like all animals, are meant to live in deep connection to the land. The movement of seasons inspires the movement of life. Though we migrate for different resources now, choosing the places that sustain us for the time that they do is still natural. When I asked myself what home could be in a world rooted in connection and love I envisioned a place that teaches, accepts, and offers



By jasmine linane-booe THE BLACK LENS CONTRIBUTOR



safety, exploration, and community connection. I saw a bird’s nest. Birds don’t build nests just anywhere though, they listen. To the wind. To the trees. To the ecosystem they are part of. And so

must we. To be at home with nature is not only to walk barefoot or picnic under the sun, though those are beautiful beginnings. It is to be in relationship with the soil, the plants, the waters, the sky, and with the histories layered beneath our feet. It is to acknowledge the ancestors of the land. To remember that the Earth does not belong to us we belong to the Earth. We are not separate from nature. We are nature. And if home is to become a place of belonging, then we must return to the land with reverence and readiness to listen.

Invitation to Practice: Land Listening

- Find a quiet spot outside. Sit, stand or lie down with minimal distraction. This could be a park, a patch of wild growth or a tree in your neighborhood.
- 1. Arrival**
Breathe in. Breathe out. Greet the land. You might say: “Hello. I’m here. I’m listening.”
 - 2. Sense**
Close your eyes. What do you hear, feel, and smell? Don’t name, just notice.
 - 3. Remember**
Open your eyes. Ask: Who lived here before me? What in this land feels older than memory?
 - 4. Offer**
Leave a small token: a breath, a whisper, a strand of hair. Not to give back, but to honor the moment.
 - 5. Reflect**
What did the land teach you about home? About your place in it?

Jasmine Linane-Booe of Kazuko Wellness is a Somatic Energy Guide with certifications in Reiki, yoga and meditation, and somatic energy work. She is also a trained psilocybin guide and wellness coach. Contact: hello@kazukowellness.com | www.kazukowellness.com

YOUTH VOICE IN ACTION



COURTESY

NAACP Spokane Youth Council President Kyhia Holt protested twice in one week.

Spokane NAACP Youth Council President participates in local protests

Black Lens staff reports

“It was important for me to participate in the ICE protests because when it comes to injustice – even when it’s not directly impacting my community – I still need to show up.” – Kyhia Holt, President, Spokane NAACP Youth Council

Kyhia Holt, a rising voice in Spokane’s growing movement for youth-led civic engagement, was recently elected president of the newly chartered NAACP Spokane Youth Council. As one who is in Generation Z, Holt steps into the ring of young activists who are refusing to wait their turn to lead. Her activism is grounded in a deep sense of justice. “Even when something doesn’t directly impact my community, I still need to show up,” she said, reflecting on her decision to protest outside the local ICE detention center. Holt was

Spokane NAACP Youth Council

To learn more about the youth council, email youthcouncil@spokanenaacp.org or search @spokanenaacp_yc on Instagram.

shocked to learn it was located just across the street from her home. “It was happening right in front of me. We claim to be a place of refuge, but then we turn around and strip people of their opportunities. That didn’t sit right with me.” She also participated in the national No Kings protest, standing against authoritarianism and in defense of democracy. “We’re at a critical turning point in American politics. This moment could determine

what kind of country we become. I want my children and grandchildren to know I stood for something.” As president of the Youth Council, Holt’s mission is clear: to create space for young people to engage, learn, and lead. “It’s about building a community where our voices matter – even you can’t vote yet,” she said. Holt invites youth ages 16-24 to attend their monthly meetings, held both virtually and in person on the second Sunday from 12-1:30 p.m. at the Carl Maxey Center. Her call to action is simple but powerful: “Read news articles that are unbiased and provide the most comprehensive information about what’s going on – because it’s bound to move something within you and prompt you to act.” The Youth Council is a place to build both awareness and strategy.

IN MEMORIAM / FROM THE FRONT PAGE

in Memoriam



ANNA MAE ROBERTSON
(MAY 30, 2025)

Living a life dedicated to service, family and heroism, Anna Mae Robertson was one of the last living members of the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion, also known as the “Six Triple Eight,” making history as he only all-Black, all-female battalion deployed over seas during WWII. Robertson helped bridge millions of U.S. soldiers to their families sorting through and delivering thousands of letter and packages. Robertson was beacon, mother of eight, a community anchor who created a historic legacy in her wake.



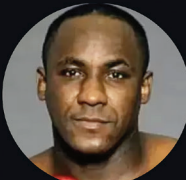
LYNN HAMILTON
(JUNE 19, 2025)

Lynn Hamilton, best known for her role as Donna Harris on “Sanford and Son,” died June 19 at age 95. Her illustrious career, spanning over five decades, left an indelible mark on the world of entertainment,” the Rev. Calvin Carson wrote in social media tribute to Hamilton. Some of Hamilton's most notable works – aside from her recurring stint as Fred Sanford's fiancée – included her appearances on “The Waltons, Roots: The Next Generation,” NBC's “Generations” and nighttime soap opera Dangerous Women.



ENA HARTMAN
(APRIL 16, 2025)

Ena Hartman was an actress who made history as the first African American to sign a contract with a major television network. Born in Arkansas, Hartman moved to New York at 13 where she and her family faced financial difficulties leading her to drop out of high school and at a restaurant to make ends meet and save for her modeling dreams. Hartman was discovered by a modeling agency after being rejected from an audition and in 1962, during talent competition, Suits from NBC network has her signed. Hartman appeared in a line of classic televisions shows during the 60s and 70s best known for her work as the trailblazing police dispatcher, Katy Grant, on “Dan August.”



MIKE MCCALLUM
(MAY 31, 2025)

International Hall of Fame boxer Mike McCallum was a 1970s ,80s and 90s boxer known by his nickname “The Bodysnatcher” due to his devastating body blows. Earning recognition an amateur from Jamaica, McCallum took is talents pro in 1981 where he fought his way to the top winning the super welterweight championship in ‘84, switching classes to middleweight and doing it again in ‘89 and finally moving to light heavyweight in ‘94 to win the title and complete his trifecta of championships.



AL FOSTER
(MARCH 25, 2025)

Al Foster was an acclaimed jazz drummer who spent a career playing with legends like trumpeter Miles Davis, pianist McCoy Tyner and saxophonist Sonny Rollins. Foster took to the drums as a teenager building his skills and making his debut at 20 in Blue Mitchell's album, “The Thing to Do” leading him on tour most of the 60s. In 1972, Foster joined Davis' band where his more aggressive grooves melded with the group seamlessly in which he stayed up to Davis’ final pieces in the 80s. For the next 44 years, Foster continued making music recording eight albums as a band leader.



CAVIN YARBROUGH
(JUNE 19, 2025)

Cavin Yarbrough, R&B legend and half of iconic duo Yarbrough & Peoples, was a Dallas native and best known for the early 1980s No. 1 hit “Don't Stop the Music.” Alisa Peoples, his musical partner and wife, told CBS News Texas that his death was sudden and unexpected. Yarbrough's musical roots ran deep. He was a classically trained pianist who first crossed paths with Peoples during childhood piano lessons. Their shared passion for music led to a professional partnership, and with the support of Gap Band frontman Charlie Wilson, they signed with Total Experience Records. The duo enjoyed a string of R&B hits throughout the 1980s.

Rest in Power, Ananda Lewis: Storyteller of Generation X

By April Eberhardt
BLACK LENS NEWS



Lewis

For those of us who came of age as Gen Xers, the evolution of BET and MTV offered more than reality TV and sitcoms in syndication – they gave us a front-row seat to popular culture, in full color. They do that now, but in their heyday, this was a vanguard movement that elevated urban life. These platforms created a space where we could see ourselves – our voices, fashion, brilliance and questions – reflected on screen.

“Teen Summit,” a groundbreaking BET production, was one of those rare spaces. It wasn't just a show; it was a platform for Black youth to speak truth, share struggles, and dream out loud. I watched it consistently, feeling the visibility of my generation. Ananda Lewis joined “Teen Summit” in the mid-1990s, part of a newer generation of hosts who brought poise, intellect and authenticity to the screen. She was magnetic – an example of what it looked like to hold space with confidence and care.

Watching her on BET's “Teen Summit,” and later as a VJ on MTV's “Total Request Live,” gave me a sense of connection to a broader Black identity that felt near and relevant. She helped build that bridge and showed many of us that representation matters.

When it comes to Black media in the era of Gen X, I personally can't imagine that wave without Lewis. She was a piece of the vibrant fabric that shaped how we saw ourselves – smart, capable, expressive, and worthy of being heard. She wasn't just a face on TV – she was a cultivator of Black culture. Her presence helped redefine what it looked like to be young, Black and thoughtful.

What made her stand out wasn't just her platform – it was how she used it. Lewis brought grace and sharpness to every conversation. She elevated voices, asked pointed questions, and challenged ideas, staying grounded in community. As a teen watching from afar, I was inspired. Her work showed me that storytelling could be a tool for empowerment – and that being Black, brilliant and bold had a place in media.

Her recent passing from breast cancer is devastating. But even in that final chapter, Ananda modeled courage. Having watched her mother battle the same illness, she made deeply personal choices about her own care – choices that reflected her knowledge, values, and lived experience. And she didn't hide. She chose to share. She used her diagnosis to educate others, to challenge assumptions, even sharing some of her regrets. This act of courage demonstrates that every person has the right to walk their own path with dignity.

That stance alone – turning her private struggle into a public offering – was one of the most powerful examples of journalism I've seen.

Even if her choices around care weren't ones we all would have made, she was firm in them. She was transparent. She was powerful. That's what it means to tell stories with integrity.

Lewis was more than a media personality. She was a cultural translator, a truth-teller, a symbol of what it meant to grow up Black in the '90s and feel proud of it. She was an early figure who inspired me to do the work I do today: telling stories that center us, challenge us and uplift us. In an era before Instagram, YouTube, or TikTok, Ananda showed us what being intentional and confident looked like on television as a Black woman.

Rest in power, Ananda Lewis. Thank you for being our voice, our mirror, and our reminder that storytelling – especially when it's rooted in community – is a radical and lasting act.

UBUNTU

Continued from 1

it was missing being with people like us outdoors.”

This void is what inspired Dr. Bartlett to create Ubuntu Fly Anglers – a community of BIPOC fly anglers brought together through their shared love of nature. What began as a way to find fellowship has grown into a larger project aimed at resurrecting BIPOC voices in fly fishing and environmental spaces.

Bartlett now hosts a podcast, where he shares conversations with other BIPOC anglers and outdoor enthusiasts. This summer, supported by grants, he plans to launch a weeklong environmental leadership camp for those who self-identify as BIPOC youth from July 28 to Aug. 2. For him, this is a way to pay it forward by nurturing a new generation of leaders who feel empowered to understand their relationship with the land.

Hosted at the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Community Center, the camp will include field trips, classroom learning, and hands-on fly fishing. It is designed to be small and intimate, serving no more than 15 students from Spokane's Northeast and East Central neighborhoods. Open to youth ages 12 to 18, the camp is completely free – transportation and meals will be provided.

But its impact is meant to be far-reaching. For Bartlett, this is legacy work – challenging internalized disconnection from land and countering the damage of generational oppression. This is about ownership.

“We used to live in relationship with nature,” he said. “We owned our own property. We owned the land. We grew our food. We could withstand downturns in the economy because we didn't need money.”

But capitalism, he says, changes

everything. It has commodified the earth and reduced people, particularly BIPOC people, to tools of extraction.

“Capitalism says we need to put a value on things,” Bartlett said. “That tree? The only value it has to me in a capitalist society is what I can turn it into – for my wellbeing – not realizing that the opposite is true. That tree provides shade, provides oxygen, provides carbon dioxide, and cools the planet.”

The consequences of this worldview, he says, are deeper than environmental destruction—they are psychological and spiritual. He's witnessed firsthand how nature has transformed people's lives, often at the edge of crisis.

Take Scot for example. “His father was incarcerated. He became a gangster. Youth gangster, drug dealer in high school,” Bartlett recalls. “He's (now) a fly fishing guide. His life changed – changed because of his connection with nature.”

Bartlett says these stories are not rare. “So I know from personal stories, testimony after testimony after testimony – how fly angling, being outdoors, has saved people like us. Completely flipped their world around.”

He shared the story of Ashley, a Black hunting and fishing guide in Minnesota. Ashley nearly ended his life after a traumatic medical emergency involving his wife and child. After firing therapists, it was a counselor who finally offered a different approach: to meet not in an office, but outside. They walked. Then hiked. And eventually, Ashley found himself standing in a river, fly rod in hand. That moment, Bartlett says, saved him. “It is being among something, in something, that you did not create,” Bartlett reflected. “The trees. The river. The fish. There's that in and of itself – that feeling of being vulnerable. Humbled by it.”

For Bartlett, this is sacred medicine. Nature doesn't just soothe – it

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reawakens.

He recalls a moment in Juneau, Alaska, when the sheer majesty of the mountains and rivers overwhelmed him with clarity. “I called my wife and said, ‘Babe, please send all my fishing, camping, and everything gear to me. I'm in heaven. I'm home.’”

Her response? “‘Sure thing, honey – I'll send your stuff and your four children. I'm not coming!’” he laughed.

But in that humor is something true: the undeniable pull of nature. And it's that connection to land that Bartlett wants to pass on to the next generation.

“Fly anglers overwhelmingly evolve into river advocates,” he

said. “Because we approach fishing from a different lens.”

Through the camp, youth will learn to fish – but also to listen to elders, revere the power of the earth, learn environmental history and connect to BIPOC outdoor leaders from around the country. Some, like fly-fishing Hall of Famer Joyce Shepherd, will travel to Spokane to mentor and guide. Others will offer a living testimony of what it means to heal in nature.

“If we don't get them outside and show them that they have the responsibility to be the next river warriors and environmental activists – it's our bad,” Bartlett said. “Our children's children won't have a chance.”

DAWSON

Continued from 1

“These are real people, real legacies. It's not just about mimicking them, it's about honoring them. That's a responsibility I don't take lightly,” Dawson said.

But Dawson's connection to the musical runs deeper. He was an architect of the production, playing a role in its creative development in New York, helping shape the show in its earliest stages.

“I've been working on this since 2018. It's been a long journey – and a personal one.”

After a stint touring in “Hamilton,” Dawson returned to the production he helped create – this time as Tito and Quincy. When asked about the pivot between playing both characters in a live production, he praised playwright Lynn Nottage for crafting a seamless narrative that intertwines the characters in a way that makes the transition feel natural.

Dawson channeled the emotional depth of portraying Tito

by leaning into the unspoken bond between brothers – the tension, loyalty and kind of love that doesn't require words. He emphasized “MJ The Musical” captures layered family dynamics: complex, sometimes strained, but always rooted in care. As Tito, he embodies a protector and a peer in Michael's journey.

His preparation began during the musical's workshop phase, where he immersed himself in research – reading, watching interviews and learning lesser-known truths of the Jackson family.

“There were so many things I didn't know,” he said. “Especially the complex dynamics between the brothers and their parents.”

That deep dive allowed him to bring authenticity and emotional nuance to the stage. He brought that insight into his relationships with castmates, cultivating creative synergy to reflect the bond of brotherhood on stage.

“It was fascinating to explore and portray those relationships. And now, doing it full-time – it's truly an honor.”

Dawson views representation as inspiration.

“You can't be it if you don't see it,” he says plainly. “When I was a kid in Iowa, I didn't always see people who looked like me doing this. That's why I do what I do now.”

Performing in cities like Spokane reinforces that mission.

“There's always someone in the audience – especially a kid – who maybe didn't think this kind of career or artistry was possible for them. And then they see it live.”

He acknowledges the complexity of being a Black actor in a world where roles are often limiting or typecast.

“I'm a human first and Black second. But if I'm going to be telling Black stories, I want to do it right.”

Conversely, playing roles that aren't specifically about Black identity is rewarding. Whether it's Aaron Burr in “Hamilton” or Tito Jackson, Dawson values the skill it takes to capture the humanity in every story.

So what does he hope the audi-

ence walks away with? A deeper understanding of who Michael Jackson was beyond the headlines – highlighting his work ethic, creative genius and the personal pressures he faced. He hopes people leave not just entertained, but with a renewed appreciation for the person behind the performer.

“This isn't just a jukebox musical. It's a story of humanity, resilience, genius and love. It's for everyone.”

Why does Black art matter? For Dawson, it's more than expression – it's the preservation of legacy.

“It's how we tell our stories. It's how we keep our history, our inspiration, and our ancestors alive.”

He believes deeply in the power of visibility: “You can't be it if you don't see it.”

That's why, for Dawson, performing isn't just about the moment – it's about the movement.

“There's a whole new generation of young performers who need to see how those who came before them grew, healed and found their voice. Black art is for them. It's for all of us.”

LEISURE AND COMICS

COMICS

CURTIS • BY RAY BILLINGSLEY

JUNE 30

CAN I HAVE SOME MONEY TO GO TO THE CONCERT IN THE PARK?

BUT THOSE SUMMER CONCERTS IN THE PARK ARE FREE!

BUT THE POPCORN, PEANUTS AND HERO SANDWICHES I EAT DURING THE CONCERT AIN'T FREE!

YOU'D BETTER PACK SOME APPLES AND TUNA SANDWICHES IN A PAPER BAG

JULY 1

CAN I HAVE SOME MONEY TO BUY A GRAPHIC NOVEL?

I'M NOT AN ATM

I DON'T NEED AN ATM...

I NEED YOUR CREDIT CARD TO ORDER IT ONLINE

JULY 2

CAN I HAVE SOME MONEY TO GO TO THE MOVIES?

IF YOU REALLY WANT TO SEE A MOVIE...

YOU'D BE WILLING TO EARN MONEY BY DOING A FEW SIMPLE CHORES

I WUV YOU PB8TPHH!

JULY 3

CAN I HAVE SOME MONEY?

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!!

I'M TIRED OF YOUR GOLDBRICKIN' WAYS! BEGGING FOR MONEY DAY BY DAY!

YOU ARE GETTING A SUMMER JOB!

NOOOO

JULY 4

MA! DAD WANTS ME TO GET A SUMMER JOB!! TALK TO HIM!

CURTIS NEEDS TO EARN HIS OWN MONEY, NOT RUN THE STREETS, AND GIVE YOU A LITTLE TIME FOR YOURSELF

THAT'S THE RAMBLING OF AN INSANE MAN! MA, TELL HIM SUMMER IS FOR HAVIN' FUN!!

A LITTLE TIME TO MYSELF, HMM?

YAA AAH!!

JULY 5

I OVERHEARD DAD SAYING YOU HAVE TO GET A SUMMER JOB

IT WON'T BE SO BAD... NOTHING HAPPENS HERE ANYWAY

AND I PROMISE NOT TO DO ANYTHING FUN WHILE YOU'RE AWAY AT WORK

THANKS, BARRY! DO YOU MEAN IT?

NOT A WORD

CRABGRASS • BY TAUHID BONDIA

JUNE 30

MR. B IS A KID NOW?

SORT OF.

HE'S GOT THIS MAGIC AMULET THAT DISGUISES HIM AS A HUMAN.

HOW THIS IS SO WEIRD.

WE'VE GOT A GOBLIN LIVING ON OUR STREET AND AN EVIL KEVIN RUNNING AROUND. DON'T THINGS USUALLY GO BACK TO NORMAL AFTER OUR ADVENTURES?

USUALLY.

DO YOU THINK WE'VE JUMPED THE SHARK?

THERE'S A SHARK NOW?

JULY 1

EPILOGUE

YOU SAID IT WOULD WORK THIS TIME.

I DON'T KNOW WHAT WENT WRONG.

I MUST HAVE GOTTEN MY CALCULATIONS WRONG BUT NO MATTER!

I WILL COMPLETE THE MACHINE.

WE WILL OPEN A DOOR TO ANOTHER UNIVERSE

AND WE WILL TAKE IT OVER.

JULY 2

GO LONG!

LONG!

GO LONG, MILES!

LONGER! LONGER!

YOU GOTTA GO LONG!

LONG, DUDE. GO LONG!

LOOOONG!

GO LONG!

LONG ENOUGH?

GAH!

JULY 3

MOM, HOW COME WE DON'T HAVE A FIREPLACE?

BECAUSE WE'RE NOT PILGRIMS AND DON'T NEED TO BURN WOOD FOR WARMTH.

OKAY, BUT... YOU COULD BURN OTHER STUFF IN A FIREPLACE TOO, RIGHT?

GROUND.

SO, WE'RE DOING THOUGHT CRIME NOW?

JULY 4

AND SHE SAID "THAT'S NOT MY WATCH!"

GET IT?

YEAH, I'M JUST LAUGHING ON THE INSIDE.

HAHA. YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE A JERK.

NO, REALLY. I'M DYING LAUGHING ON THE INSIDE.

CAN'T YOU TELL?

WHATEVER.

IT ACTUALLY KINDA HURTS.

OTHER PEOPLE CAN BE FUNNY, MILES!

JULY 5

HEY, KYLE.

GET LOST, BOOK HEAD.

BOOK HEAD?

YOU HEARD ME. BEAT IT, YOU... TABLE FACE!

ARE YOU JUST... NAMING STUFF IN THE ROOM?

I DUNNO. I'VE BEEN KIND OF ...OFF LATELY.

YOU WANNA TALK AB-

YEAH, RIGHT. SHOELACE!

DANG IT! WHAT IS WRONG WITH ME?

A KID'S COMIC • BY MJ BETHELY

PETS

AT THE MOVIES...

Don't eat the chocolate!

Do you mind if I Scream with you?

Sure, why not?

He ate the chocolate!

I don't think we shoulda came here.

Who's Pets are these?!

LEISURE

THE FOURTH OF JULY: A POEM

In the heart of July beneath the sun's glow,
A tale unfolds, as old as the winds blow,
Fourth of the month, a dream set to rise,
Yet here we stand, with our own painted skies.

Fireworks burst like stories untold,
In colors of freedom, both vibrant and bold.
Yet as we celebrate, with laughter and cheer,
Echoes of struggle still whisper near.

For this day of independence rings different for me,
A duality woven in history's tapestry.
While others toast to the liberty won,
We recall the battles that still must be done.

Our ancestors marched with hope in their eyes,
Yearning for justice beneath wide-open skies.

Chains once unbroken, now gifts in our hand,
Their sacrifices have helped shape this land.

As grills sizzle sweet with the smell of the day,
We gather like kin, in the warmth of the fray.
Songs of our heritage weave through the heat,
In rhythm and spirit, our hearts skip a beat.

The flag waves high, stitched with care,
A symbol of pride, yet, is it really fair?
For as we wave banners in bright shades of red,
Remember the stories of those long since dead.

Let's dance in the joy of both past and today,
Embrace all the layers in the festive display.
For freedom is more than a singular shout,
It's the hope that unites, despite lingering doubt.

Together we rise, under bright sparking lights,
With love as our weapon, we fight the good fights.
On this Fourth of July, we honor the blend,
Of struggle and triumph, our spirits transcend.

So here's to the laughter, tears, and the pride,
For all that we've built, and those who've died.
As the night sky sparkles with each fiery bloom,
We celebrate history, in unity's room.

Let not this day simply come and then fade,
But remember the journey, the price that we paid.
For the spirit of freedom belongs to us all,
As we rise hand in hand, together we stand tall.



By Anyla McDonald
THE BLACK LENS
CONTRIBUTOR



POETRY CORNER

Die DEI

By AJ the Wordsmith
The Black Lens

No mistake in the words , or so we have observed, from a culture
vulture society.

Quick to go from Macro aggressions to micro apologies.

DONT BLAME THE ECONOMY

We’ve been looking for justice since y’all said we’d be better off
dead.

Wonder why they all look red in the head?

How can we categorize the mutal feelings of others into basic
verbal nouns and adjectives.

Are we not by nature savage creatures of habbit that adapt to
our enviorment, there is a point to this long winded speech so
please listen as I teach to all those listening i hope my words will
reach.

We should not hinge our limitations on the ability to comprehend,
we need to allow ourselves to feel the thrill that comes from
adverse oppression.

This is not natural selection, so why do you look at life as if it is
some sort of boring lesson? So here is my question ...

Whose land is this anyway ?

Can you relate?

Let’s not be fake

resolving internal conflicts to get out of this depressive state.

Where we study others suffering to empathize with the other half
of our brain, such a shame.

Entanglement of established criticism prevents participation of
perception based off egotistical desires.

What prevents self-esteem from perspiring?

We need to defuse stressful situations with feelings and needs,
too quick to give cultural critiques on imaginary issues that
deserve no tissues.

This is a culture vulture society with skepticism surroundings that
people should see, instead we get rose colored glasses and only
get questions like “what’s your reality?”

Where acronyms like AAVE (African American vernacular
English), CRT (critical race theory), NVC (non violent
communication)

Get replaced with social media tags that make our intelligence
lag, like mustard music but if we say “turn the tv off” it’s
suddenly you vs me.

When we had justice it was just us, making up fictional characters
to live our lives that way we truly wish we could fight in the light.

Where liberty is unconditional unchained, when freedom actually
is free, how do we explain the pain of melanin memories, ironic or
iconic that both universe and community can’t exist without U & I
and yet THEY wonder why WE cry when another brown person is
socially hanged for opposing opinions that don’t fit in a society
niche!



DID YOU KNOW?

Fourth of July edition

During the **American Revolution**, thousands of **Black Americans jumped into the war, on both sides of the conflict**. But unlike their white counterparts, they weren't just fighting for independence – or to maintain British control. In a time when the vast majority of African Americans lived in bondage – their forced labor fueling the economy of the fledgling nation – most took up arms hoping to be freed from the literal shackles of chattel slavery.

In the American Revolution, **African American men, both enslaved and free fought in the Continental Army**. Black soldiers served in mostly integrated units at this time. The **First Rhode Island Regiment** is the most famous regiment that included African Americans during the American Revolution.

In 1778, **the Rhode Island Assembly voted** to allow “every able-bodied negro, mulatto, or Indian man slave in this state to enlist into either of the Continental Battalions being raised.”

The assembly further stipulated that **“every slave so enlisting shall, upon his passing muster before Colonel Christopher Greene, be immediately discharged from the service of his master or mistress, and be absolutely free.”**

Rhode Island Enslavers opposed this new law and in June 1778, the state repealed this provision. However, 100 African Americans enlisted during that four month period. Another 44 enlisted after June of 1778. In the end, **144 African Americans enlisted in the First Rhode Island** out of a total of 225.



A PLACE CALLED HOME

By Janet Tumasifu
THE BLACK LENS

Home ...
It's a place I remember being: home
A place I still call home despite being far
away
Being far away from home
Feels like home is a place I only recall in
my dreams
I remember being home
Where every day felt real and the same
But it was never boring
I remember home being fun
Despite having to do almost the same
things everyday
Home felt normal
Despite changes it still felt like home
Home was my normal
It left safe
When I walked into my home
It would hug me with warmness and
peace
It was filled with love
With peace
And joy
Home wasn't perfect
We cried
We got sick
We failed
But we were home
Where everywhere we went was like open
space
Just for us
At Home, we fought
But we never failed to stay friends
Home felt different
Everyday felt different
But the different felt normal
Home was our normal
Far from home
It's like learning how to walk again
It's like having eyes
But you can't see clearly
Being far from home
Feels like missing part of your heart

Part of Yourself
You change
Being far from home changes you
It's like you're not fully yourself
Like you're the same person but different
You wonder if you were to go home if you
would...
Still be like you used to be
Do you feel guilty about changing?
The guilty that's just there
It's there you can feel
It makes you question yourself
Don't you think you changed so much?
Why did you change?
Could you have stayed the same?
You feel guilty
“I had no choice”
I am not **home** anymore”
You explain yourself to guilt
Change is not bad
It was never a bad thing
But this change is huge...
It really is different
From home.
It's the change that comes unexpectedly
It comes when unwelcome
It comes when one is not ready for it
But it swears it's not a bad change
It whispers every night. “Change is not
bad”
“It's not. It's for the better”
This is not a change for the better
A change where I am not expected to
know anything
A change where I am being judged for
being different
A change where if I do something so
simple
It's something they didn't think I can do
The change made my voice shut
It got me quite
Really quiet
It is different from home
It isn't like the home I know
The home I miss

YOU TOLD ME TO LEAVE
THE DOOR OPEN LAST NIGHT

You told me to leave the door open last night.
So I listened.
In doing so, I heard my pride tell me that I'm opening
up my home to the world.
It continues as I turn the lock upright:
“Look at the man you have become. Don't you
remember the strife it took to get you in this house?
The LIVES that were claimed by draining time and
energy, heart and merit, LOVE and respect? Did you
forget?”
I didn't
You want love. I want love.
You want security. I want satisfaction.
So venture to the nearest goal, just to be prepared for
the next.
Love isn't to be shared, even if the feelings are. And
because of that – and that alone – I open this door.
I keep my heart open for you to own once more.



By Jā Corbett-Sparks
THE BLACK LENS
CONTRIBUTOR

