

THE BLACK LENS

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WOMEN WHO LEAD, COMMUNITIES THAT RISE



SHERRY MERRITT



MORGEN FLOWERS



MABLE DUNBAR



GAYE HALLMAN

WOMEN LEADING IN SPOKANE

'REACH ONE, TEACH ONE'

Sherry Merritt on 25 years of service through the African American Literature Program

By April Eberhardt
THE BLACK LENS

For 25 years, Sherry Merritt has volunteered at Airway Heights Corrections Center, supporting the African American Literature Program and helping build bridges between community, culture, and incarcerated men seeking knowledge and growth. Merritt will be recognized for her long-standing commitment to education, identity development, and community care through her work inside the institution.

Over the decades, the program has also been supported by dedicated community members and educators, including Dr. Bob Bartlett, the late Sandy Williams, and other local volunteers who contributed their time and knowledge to sustaining the work alongside Merritt. As the AALP has evolved and taken root, older participants encourage younger men to join, viewing the program as an opportunity to learn, grow, engaging in cultural learning as a pathway toward personal growth and positive life choices.

In this conversation, Merritt reflects on how the program began, what she has witnessed over the years, and why

See MERRITT, 10



From incarceration to advocacy

Hallman's mission to help others begin again

By April Eberhardt
THE BLACK LENS

Gaye Hallman is the kind of woman who turns survival into service, and pain into purpose. Formerly incarcerated, she knows firsthand what it means to rebuild a life while carrying the weight of other people's assumptions. She also knows what it takes to keep going anyway.

Now based in Spokane, Hallman is the founder of A Woman's Worth, a nonprofit established in 2022 that centers healing, restoration, and re-entry support for women impacted by trauma and incarceration. Her work is rooted in faith, community, and the long, patient practice of trust—creating spaces where women can be seen, believed, and supported without being reduced to what they've been through.

Hallman is a visionary and a bridge: between who women have been and who they can become with renewed strength; between isolation and belonging; between a past that tried to define them and a future still waiting to be claimed. Her story reminds us that we are not the sum total of our mistakes, and that transformation often begins when someone dares to believe a different ending is possible.

See HALLMAN, 10

Quiet consistency, possibility and visibility affirm the power of Black woman leader

Meet Spokane International Principal Morgen Flowers

By April Eberhardt
THE BLACK LENS

For generations, leadership in public education has been shaped by narrow ideas of who holds authority, whose voice carries weight, and what power looks like in schools. Women—particularly Black women—have long done the

See FLOWERS, 10

Who inspires you?

"I think everybody could say their grandmother inspires them, which is true. My grandma was like a reading was a huge thing for her. She would read to me and we'd read together, and she just kind of created this legacy of caring about academics," Flowers said.

Flowers points to historical leadership that modeled courage and conviction.

"I love Shirley Chisholm. I love the idea of being unbought and unbossed, being able to do what you think is right, values driven, making really good moves on behalf of the people that you serve."

Healing beyond survival

Mable Dunbar on domestic violence, trauma, community responsibility

By April Eberhardt
THE BLACK LENS

For more than 26 years, Mable Dunbar has worked in Spokane supporting survivors of domestic violence while educating the community about trauma, healing, and accountability. Her work extends beyond emergency response and focuses on long-term restoration, helping individuals understand their value, confront shame, and break intergenerational cycles of abuse.

Dunbar believes communities must move beyond awareness toward re-education by learning how trauma affects the mind, body, and spirit and understanding how silence, stigma, and even religious mis-

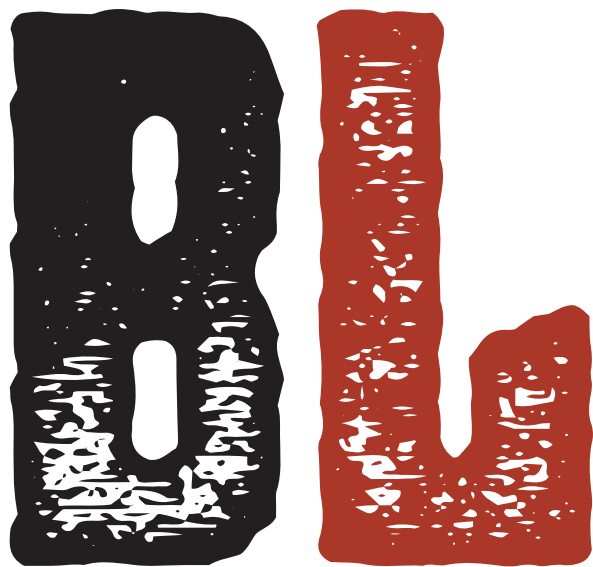
understanding can keep victims trapped. Mable C. Dunbar, Ph.D., is the Founder and President of the Women's Healing and Empowerment Network (WHEN). She holds a Ph.D. in Family Mediation as well as a Master's degree in Education and Counseling Psychology.

Dr. Dunbar is a Certified Cognitive Behavioral Therapist and a Clinically Certified Domestic Violence Counselor. Through programs that serve families, youth, and individuals seeking change, she continues to advocate for healing rooted in compassion and truth.

Q: How did you come to Spokane?
Dunbar: My husband and I were pastoring in Michigan, and a friend invited me to come here and talk about domestic violence issues because that was something they were involved with. After that, because the need was so great and there

See DUNBAR, 10

WOMEN WHO LEAD, COMMUNITIES THAT RISE



NEWS

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NEWS IN BRIEF

Obama responds to Trump's racist video

Former President Barack Obama has responded to the racist video posted by President Trump's social media account earlier this month.

During an interview with YouTuber Brian Tyler Cohen, Obama said many Americans "find this behavior deeply troubling," NPR reported.

"There doesn't seem to be any shame about this among people who used to feel like you had to have some sort of decorum and a sense of propriety and respect for the office," Obama said. "There's this sort of clown show that's happening in social media and on television," Obama added, describing noise around Trump's presidency as a "distraction."

Obama's response follows outrage over the video, which depicted Obama and former first lady Michelle Obama as apes. White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt defended the clip, saying "please stop the fake outrage." Trump refused to apologize for the social media post, telling reporters "I didn't make a mistake."

The video, posted at the beginning of Black History Month, has been deleted, NPR reported. The White House blamed a staffer for "erroneously" posting the video clip.

Federal court blocks anti-DEI directive

A federal court has permanently invalidated a U.S. Department of Education directive that sought to restrict diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in schools and colleges nationwide, marking a significant ruling for academic freedom and education policy.

The decision follows the federal government's concession that its Feb. 14, 2025, "Dear Colleague" letter and related certification requirement are vacated, meaning the policy is formally nullified and cannot be enforced anywhere in the United States. The district court's final ruling prohibits the government from enforcing, relying on, or reviving the directive.

Sharif El-Mekki, CEO of the Center for Black Educator Development, said the decision protects educators' ability to teach honestly and supports efforts to retain teachers during ongoing national shortages.

Update: ReFive Plan for Fifth Avenue

An earlier article published by The Black Lens referred to the redevelopment initiative along Fifth Avenue as the "Fifth Avenue Project." The correct and official name of the initiative is the ReFive Community Plan for 5th Avenue, a community-led planning effort focused on shaping the future of the Fifth Avenue corridor in the East Central neighborhood through resident engagement and decision-making.

Project organizers have confirmed that a public-facing draft of the Community Plan will be released in March, followed by continued engagement with residents and stakeholders throughout the spring. Community feedback gathered during this period will help shape the action items and strategies included in the final plan, which is expected to guide future land use, economic development, and neighborhood revitalization efforts.

Readers interested in learning more about the planning process, accessing updates, or contributing feedback are encouraged to visit the project website at: spokane5thavenue.com

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NEWS

'Don't be deceived' Gonzaga student speaks out after incidents following BSU event

This interview was originally published online Feb. 25, 2026, as an on-the-record account of racial bias, harassment and actions that caused distress and alarm among some students at Gonzaga University following a Saturday (Feb. 21) event.

Since its publication, additional reports of escalating student safety concerns emerged. This occurred despite a social media post shared by BSU leadership three days prior on the Gonzaga BSU Instagram page, calling on individuals to "address anti-Blackness head on" and "that you hold each other accountable. Whether that be within your cultural club, friend group, or any other organization."

This interview detailed the very concerns highlighted in that post through the recollection of the interviewee. The interview was conducted with the interviewee's consent and reflected the individual's personal perspective of the events at the time it was given.

As a news organization, The Black Lens has an ethical responsibility to document and follow up on reports of racism, safety and community experiences, particularly when they relate to issues circulating publicly through social media posts, screenshots and discussions regarding alleged incidents of racism and campus climate, especially when those issues are brought to us.

We do not undo coverage that has already been released after it was consented for publication and we stand by the rights of the First Amendment. We will update with corrections or clarifications as appropriate, but we do not censor.

Most importantly, we also recognize that acts of racism and bigotry may stoke fears of harm, retaliation, humiliation or embarrassment.

In consideration of those concerns, and out of an abundance of caution for student safety, The Black Lens aims to remain sensitive to potential harm that could arise from circumstances beyond our control while continuing to examine difficult and uncomfortable experiences involving race, which have been expressed. We stand against retaliation or reprisal and when considering impact, it should be realized that the impact of anti-Black racism on college students—as was shared on social media by those involved in what happened the weekend of Feb. 21—is, in and of itself, cause for safety concerns.

Additionally, the Gonzaga University Black Student Union requested that this disclaimer be published, which can be read in full online: "We would like to clarify that the views expressed in that interview do not represent the official position of the Gonzaga University Black Student Union Board. We recognize that individuals may have differing personal perspectives and experiences."

By April Eberhardt FOR THE BLACK LENS

For Rajane Edwards, what was meant to be a celebration of Black culture and achievement became another reminder of the challenges Black students say they continue to face at Gonzaga University.

Edwards, a senior and longtime member of Gonzaga's Black Student Union, served as dinner chair for this year's annual Harlem Renaissance event, a cultural gathering centered on community, history, and celebration. The evening began as intended, she said, filled with joy and pride.

"It was a really cool cultural dinner," Edwards said. "Everything went totally fine."

But according to Edwards, the atmosphere shifted as reports began circulating among students about concerning behavior during the event and later incidents at an off-campus celebration attended by Gonzaga students.

Cultural Celebration Interrupted

Edwards said she was informed during the dinner that some attend-

ees who were not involved with BSU appeared to be attending with intentions that made students uncomfortable.

"I was told that white women and Asian women were 'shopping for Black men,'" Edwards said. She explained that an attendee asked to be introduced to a Black student despite not participating in BSU activities. "They don't show up as often in BSU, but want the benefits."

She also learned from BSU leadership that another student experienced fetishizing behavior, involving comments about her hair and gestures perceived as inappropriate.

"When you talk about a Black person, first you don't do that," Edwards said. "It kind of got strange after a while."

While Edwards did not witness every incident directly, she said multiple students relayed similar concerns, contributing to discomfort during what was intended to be a cultural celebration.

After-Party Escalation

More serious incidents were reported later during an off-campus celebration following the dinner.

According to Edwards, students reported that a jacket belonging to a BSU board member was stolen and that someone used the N-word during the gathering. Gonzaga BSU confirmed this report on their Instagram page in a post by BSU President Daija Joy. BSU leadership attempted to shut down the celebration after learning about the slur.

"Our president said, 'Hey, we need to cut the celebration because I heard

someone say the N-word. We cannot do this,'" Edwards said. "Some people were very dismissive."

Online rumors soon followed. Edwards said anonymous posts appeared on a student-only social media platform called Fizz, where users shared allegations that BSU members had pulled guns, which she said was untrue.

"That re-establishes Black people as threatening," she said.

Students debated whether cultural organizations like BSU should exist at all, framing them as divisive rather than supportive spaces.

"The reason they want to have these clubs is so they can live together or have some type of solidarity between one another because they can't do it with you guys," she said.

A Pattern, Not an Isolated Incident

Gonzaga's BSU issued a statement to social media on Wednesday, reflecting on the university's response.

"The lack of transparency, acknowledgment, and immediate action to address the events we experienced does not fully reflect the commitment outlined in the Gonzaga University mission statement," it said. "Given the circumstances and concern over student safety and belonging in this community, we are severely disappointed with the timing and substance of the university's response. After an exhausting wait, we received and carefully read the campus-wide email from the Office of the President addressing these events."

Gonzaga President Katia Passerini released a statement to faculty, staff and students Tuesday night that university leadership had "received reports of racially insensitive comments, including anti-black sentiment." Administration blocked Fizz from the school's IT network and sent a letter to the company "express-

See RACISM, 4

DOCS WITH KSPS PRESENTS THE INQUISITOR A FREE film screening and panel discussion Meet Barbara Jordan: a civil rights icon whose powerful voice masked a complex private life. MARCH 25TH - 5:30PM-7PM THE MAGIC LANTERN, SPOKANE WA DISCUSSION PANELISTS Betsy Wilkerson, Spokane City Council President April Eberhardt, Editor of The Black Lens Newspaper Aerius Franklin, Disability Action Center NW Moderator: Kiantha Duncan, KSPS PBS board member and former Spokane NAACP President



THE BLACK LENS

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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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PULSE ON DEMOCRACY

The life of Jesse Louis Jackson, Sr.: An American Icon (1941-2026)

By Edmond W. Davis
FOR THE BLACK LENS

On Feb. 17, the nation pauses to honor the life and legacy of Jesse Jackson, an American icon whose voice shaped movements, elections, diplomacy, and generations of hope. For more than six decades, Reverend Jackson stood at the intersection of faith and freedom, preaching not only from pulpits but from podiums, picket lines, and presidential stages. His journey stretched from the segregated South to global diplomacy, marked by conviction, controversy, courage, and an unwavering belief in justice.

Born Oct. 8, 1941, in Greenville, South Carolina, Jesse Louis Burns entered a nation divided by law and custom. After being adopted by his stepfather, Charles Henry Jackson, he carried the Jackson name into history. Even in his youth, he exhibited an uncommon presence: athletic, articulate, and deeply

aware of the racial barriers surrounding him.

Scripture reminds us in Jeremiah 1:5, "Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee." Many who observed Jackson's life believed his calling was evident early. His destiny would be rooted in ministry and movement.

Jackson attended the University of Illinois before transferring to North Carolina A&T State University, where he thrived as a student leader. His path changed in 1965 when he joined the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and became a protégé of Martin Luther King Jr. Under Dr. King's mentorship, Jackson sharpened his organizing and oratorical skills. He was present in Memphis on April 4, 1968, when Dr. King was assassinated, a tragedy that deepened his commitment to carry the movement

See **JACKSON, 13**



MICHELLE V. AGINS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

The Rev. Jesse Jackson, center left, and civil rights figures lead a march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Ala., on the 25th anniversary of "Bloody Sunday," on March 6, 1990. Jackson, whose impassioned oratory and populist vision of a "rainbow coalition" of the poor and forgotten made him the nation's most influential Black figure in the years between the crusades of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the election of Barack Obama, died on Feb. 17.



MARK J. REBILAS/IMAGN IMAGES

Bad Bunny performs the halftime show on Feb. 8 during Super Bowl LX between the Seattle Seahawks and the New England Patriots at Levi's Stadium.

To make meaningful change, we need to look inward at our biases

INTENTIONAL FOCUS

Let's start off with: Yes, Bad Bunny. That was a thing. Well done!

Now, continuing to chew on some of the why's, let's take a little look at bias.

We are in that age where some factions of our government openly kidnap children (after years of decrying children trafficking), where over 4,400 court rulings have found immigrants unlawfully detained just since October of 2024, and some lie in public and tell us not to believe our eyes, ears, hearts, and minds while continuing to openly murder individuals. FYI, those are just the cliff notes.

For centuries, we Black, Brown and poor peoples have lived under the power of open and subvert favoring and disfavoring, ridiculous levels of classism, racism, oppression, social control dynamics, media manipulations, and yes, conscious and unconscious bias. Thoughtful examination points clearly to the biases of the factions that implement these atrocious and dehumanizing outcomes. Yet, since bias, to the best of our understanding at this time, is a natural human condition, then where are we in our own?

I mean bluntly, is it totally OK for us to have, rightfully so, a problem

with their biases yet turn around and co-sign our own? Is it OK for us to use platforms of dehumanizing and belittling of some very not OK behaviors until we get to the place of power and then turn around and give headway to our own stuff to unleash? Is it possible that under the same critical examinations we use to justify criticizing the behavior of others, we also fail in that test comparative?

From what we currently understand about bias and brain dynamics, the unconscious mind absorbs and filters approximately a billion bits of information subconsciously in any given moment, yet we are only maybe consciously aware of about 10 bits. These same understandings point to up to 98% of our emotional cognition, awareness and reactions, being primarily within our subconscious mind.

I offer this to point to the question of trying to understand and come to terms with what we have absorbed. Author Ibram X. Kendi, and many others, have pointed to the experience of clean pain and dirty pain, healthy stress and toxic stress. Maybe those who are implementing some very terrible and problematic dynamics are even more caught up in that than we



By Kurtis Robinson
THE BLACK LENS
CONTRIBUTOR



are?

Many times I've asked the question concerning the U.S.: "How many think our system is broken?" Nine times out of ten, almost all the hands in the room go up. I invite this perspective: Our system is not broken. It's operating exactly how they designed it (Thank you JLW and Michelle Storms, 2018), and some of us are so potentially caught up in our own bias, trauma and brain dynamics that we struggle with even getting to that baseline reality, let alone meaningful, sustained actions for healthy change.

Always much love, and try chewing on this: "If you are not actively engaged in understanding and dismantling it, you are automatically under the influence of it and or giving it the thumbs up to continue."

ALLEN BATTLE'S JOURNEY TO ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND MAINTAINING CONSISTENCY

MEN OF COLOR IN MOTION - THIRD INSTALLMENT

By James Smith
THE BLACK LENS

For nearly five decades, Allen Battle has built a reputation grounded in relationships, credibility, and service to community. A longtime entrepreneur, business leader, and mentor, Battle's work spans business ownership, civic leadership, and economic empowerment initiatives designed to help aspiring entrepreneurs, particularly men of color, access opportunity and build sustainable success. Born in Columbus, Ohio, and rooted in Spokane since the mid-1970s, Battle's journey reflects the power of faith, consistency, and genuine connection.

In this third installment of Men of Color in Motion, Black Lens Contributor James Smith sits down with Battle to discuss entrepreneurship, mentorship, and the principles that have guided his leadership and community impact for nearly half a century.

Q: Tell us a little about yourself to get things started.

Battle: I was born and raised in Columbus, Ohio. I moved here in 1975 to go to college for one year, but life had other plans. I've been here ever since, and I love this community. I worked for the Postal Service for a long time, but I always had an entrepreneurial spirit. I always felt that I could do things better. I come from a family of entrepreneurs. They were entrepreneurs out of necessity because life was different growing up in the 40s, 50s, 60s, and 70s.

Everything starts with a good, solid foundation. My mother was a woman of God, and that spiritual foundation shaped my whole life. I'm not perfect, and I haven't done everything correctly, but you always know in the back of your mind when you shouldn't have done something.

Q: Can you share an experience that shaped your values?

Battle: I remember sitting on a porch with my brothers and sisters when police officers pulled a Black man out of a vehicle, handcuffed him to a pole, and beat him. We were shocked and asked my mom if we should call the police, and she said, "Maybe that is the police." But she also told us to be careful not to judge every officer the same. You have to be aware of your surroundings, but there are good people and bad people in every walk of life.

She always taught us to treat people the way you want to be treated. Those are basic biblical principles, and they work. Another lesson came later in life. My mom used to honk and wave at people sitting outside nursing homes. I asked how she knew so many people, and she said, "Baby, I didn't know those people. You may be the only positive interaction that person will have all day." That stayed with me.

Q: You talk often about relationships. What is the difference between networking and real relationships?

Battle: I don't particularly like the word networking because it sounds like you're just meeting people to get



Battle

business. It's a long-term game. People buy from people they know, like, and trust.

You build relationships by being genuine. You're not trying to sell every time. You sell before you sell. It's like marriage. You don't try to close the deal on the first night. You build trust over time.

Q: What habits helped you remain respected in business for decades?

Battle: Credibility. Credibility takes a long time to build. Especially in Spokane, you have to understand you are building relationships and credibility 24 hours a day, seven days a week. You can spend years building credibility and lose it in 30 seconds. It's a lifestyle.

Q: What do aspiring entrepreneurs often misunderstand about business?

Battle: They look at someone successful and say, "I can do that," but they don't see the struggle, the sleepless nights, or wondering how they're going to make payroll. Mentorship is huge. You have to talk to people who have been there and done it.

You also need a plan. If three times as many people want your product, how will you scale? Most people don't think about that.

Q: How does someone earn credibility and leadership opportunities?

Battle: You earn credibility by doing what you say you're going to do. People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. Get involved in your community. Leadership opportunities come when people see your commitment.

Q: How has faith influenced your journey?

Battle: My faith is everything. Romans 8:28 says all things work together for good. When you look back at your life, things that seemed like failures helped put you where you are today. Everyone has a gift, and that gift is meant to help somebody else.

Q: What advice would you give young men of color who want to start a business?

Battle: First, find a mentor. You don't know what you don't know. Second, research everything. There's so much information available now.

Personally, I recommend starting your day with something positive. Read something uplifting before you walk out the door because the world will beat you up. Consistency matters.

Q: Final thoughts for readers?

Battle: You have to become one person. Be the same person before work, at work, and after work. Be consistent. Keep learning. Wanting more is okay, but consistency will take you a long way.

Allen Battle welcomes those interested in mentorship or entrepreneurship to reach out and continue the conversation, reflecting his lifelong commitment to helping others build opportunity through relationships, knowledge, and service.

PULSE ON DEMOCRACY

Advocacy Day at state Capitol highlights effects of homelessness

Black Lens staff reports

In February, local Spokane leaders traveled to the Washington State Capitol in Olympia for Advocacy Days, standing in the halls where policy becomes law to ensure that community voices were not absent from the conversation. They met with legislators to advocate for funding tied to essential community services and structures, including housing, education, and critical support systems that stabilize families.

Among those raising her voice was Jada Richardson, an Eastern Washington University student and member of the Spokane NAACP Youth Council. Her presence underscored the power of civic duty and youth engagement in democracy. Advocacy Days serve as a reminder that democracy is not passive – it requires participation. When community members step forward to speak directly to lawmakers, they affirm a fundamental truth: policy should reflect the lived realities of the people, and collective voices have the power to shape just outcomes. Read her words below:

Good afternoon, everyone.

First, I am going to start with a quote from Malcolm X: “Land is the basis of all independence. Land is the basis of freedom, justice, and equality.”

If land is the foundation of freedom, then housing is the foundation of dignity. So what does it say about us as a society when we have to beg our communities, our local governments, and our federal government to honor the humanity of people who are unhoused?

What does it say when our systems police poverty, penalize survival, and place blame on individuals instead of holding themselves accountable for ongoing structural failures – failures that leave our elders, our youth, and our neighbors without roofs over their heads? Failures that force people to sleep in unsafe and exposed spaces. Failures that abandon disabled people, survivors of violence, LGBTQ+ folks, Black and Brown communities, and people with mental health needs at disproportionately high rates.

Because homelessness does not exist in isolation. It sits at the intersection of race, class, disability, gender, age, and access to healthcare. It is shaped by anti-Blackness, by the criminalization of poverty, by broken foster care systems, by mass incarceration, and by the displacement of Indig-



Anabelle, Kyla and Jada represented the NAACP Youth Council in Olympia.



Jada Richardson speaks at a Housing Alliance pulpit on Advocacy Day in Olympia.

igenous people and the colonization of their land.

This country was built on stolen land, and that original act of violence set the foundation for today's housing crisis. Indigenous communities continue to face some of the highest rates of homelessness as a direct result of forced removal, broken treaties, and generations of systemic exclusion.

The crisis we are gathered to rally against is not just failed policy. It is a moral failure.

In 2024, the U.S. Supreme Court opened the door for cities to punish people for being unhoused, even when there is nowhere safe for them to go. Right here in Washington, cities are fining,

citing, and arresting people for doing nothing more than trying to survive outdoors.

Let me be clear. This is not justice. This is harm. This is state-sanctioned violence against the people. Homelessness is not a crime. Survival is not a crime. Being poor is not a crime.

As young people, we will continue to educate, organize, and build power. But real change requires courage from those in office.

So today, we call directly on Washington State lawmakers to fund House Bill 2266. Fund House Bill 2266 to expand permanent supportive housing, transitional housing, indoor emergency housing, and indoor emergency shelters.

Fund this bill to move resources toward care instead of cages.

Fund this bill to choose housing over handcuffs, dignity over displacement, and people over punishment.

Stop investing in criminalization. Start investing in our communities. Stop treating survival like a nuisance and start treating housing like a human right.

We cannot accept a society that punishes people for existing. We cannot allow our neighbors to be criminalized for trying to live.

The time for words is over. We demand action. We need justice. And we demand our leaders stop treating survival like a crime and start treating people like human beings.

Thank you.

From the classroom to the Capitol

Fighting to restore financial aid for Washington schools

By Vernon Glass
THE BLACK LENS

On Jan. 26, I woke up bright and early to catch a flight to Olympia, and the main purpose of this trip wasn't about attempting to speak to state legislators about restoring financial aid to not-for-profit universities across the state of Washington, but it was about speaking to these legislators on restoring a promise that was made to the students in these institutions.

In the 2025 Washington legislative session, cuts to the Washington College Grant and College Bound Scholarship were introduced and are bound to take effect in the 2026-27 academic school year, which would eliminate up to half of what a student receives in financial aid. The schools that are affected by these cuts are private not-for-profit schools such as Gonzaga, Pacific Lutheran, Seattle Pacific, Whitworth University, and six other schools across Washington state.

These cuts put severe pressure on students like us, where these cuts will be affecting two-thirds of students of color that attend these universities in Washington. For these two-thirds of students, this is removing the op-



Whitworth University student Vernon Glass, center, holds a Whitworth flag with university President Scott McQuilkin, left, and Washington state District 3 Sen. Marcus Riccelli, the majority floor leader.

portunities that our community has been waiting on for the many years that we have been pursuing our education for.

This year, Senate Bill 5828 was introduced to reverse these cuts and to restore the funds that were initially stripped from us as students. This bill was introduced by Senator T'wina Nobles of District 28, who has also graduated from a private institution in Washington, the University of Puget Sound.

I met with a total of eight state legislators to share about myself, and what I was destined to be. Not only am I a person of color experiencing these

cuts to my financial aid, but I come to these legislators as also a first-generation college student, a student leader within the student government organization at Whitworth, a student who is the Black Student Union President at Whitworth, a student that wants to teach in high schools one day, a student advocate that has spoken up against injustices since high school, and a student that wants to give back to a community that has given me everything. Being in front of people in power to listen to my journey and what I am expecting in my future seems nerve racking, however, motivates me because my story gives

them an idea of what this bill would mean to a lot of students across the state like me who would be affected by the cuts.

These funds wouldn't just help me and thousands of other students at these not-for-profit schools in the state pay for college, but these funds would help us with the opportunities to continue on the path toward our dreams. This experience is something I will never forget, and in the end I hope this is an experience I can look back on and admire if this bill is passed.

To all the legislators, thank you. To Whitworth University, S'go Bucs!

PULSE ON DEMOCRACY

POLICY IN PROGRESS

From Black Lens staff reports

HB 2389: Juvenile Justice System

HB 2389 proposes updates to the state's juvenile justice system by expanding alternatives to incarceration for individuals who committed offenses as minors. The bill emphasizes rehabilitation, fairness and long-term community safety, reflecting efforts statewide to align youth justice policies with developmental research and restoration.

HB 2688: Proposed Cuts to Early Childhood Intervention Services

HB 2688 has drawn opposition from early childhood advocates due to a proposed 17% reduction in funding for Early Support for Infants and Toddlers services. The program supports more than 21,300 Washington infants and toddlers with developmental delays and disabilities. Critics warn cuts could strain providers operating on limited margins, including Spokane's Joya Child & Family Development Center, and reduce access to critical early intervention services.

Working Families Tax Credit

Washington lawmakers are advancing a proposal aimed at reshaping the state's tax system to improve fairness and affordability for working families. Supporters of the High Earners Income Tax say the measure would modernize Washington's nearly century-old tax structure by requiring the state's highest-earning households to contribute more while providing relief for lower- and middle-income residents.

The legislation is projected to generate approximately \$3.7 billion annually, with funding directed toward K-12 education, health care, higher education, public defense and public services.

In addition to raising revenue, the proposal includes tax relief measures. These include expanding the Working Families Tax Credit to residents ages 18 and up, potentially benefiting an additional 120,000 Washingtonians; doubling the Small Business Tax Credit by eliminating Business and Occupation taxes for businesses earning under \$250,000, impacting roughly 150,000 small businesses; and removing sales tax on grooming and hygiene products. Proponents say the plan is designed to create a more equitable tax system while improving affordability and sustaining public investments.

RACISM

Continued from 2

ing our concerns.”

“We do not tolerate discrimination or harassment,” Passerini's statement says. “As a community, we can and must do better than this. Let us continue to be a place grounded in love, guided by justice, and united in care for one another.”

While the BSU appreciates the acknowledgement, Edwards said, “We were disappointed to see that it did not include clear accountability for the ongoing failures within the Gonzaga community.”

“These failures exist whether there is an anonymous app in use or not,” she said. “They exist in classrooms, community spaces, and residence halls. Through Fizz, the student body was exposed to expressions of Gonzaga campus culture that extend beyond what is formally communicated on campus tours or in promotional materials.

“For many students, including international, first generation, and other underrepresented populations, this reflected realities that are too often experienced but less often acknowledged.”

For Edwards, the events did not feel new. Instead, she described what she views as a pattern of racial incidents during her four years at Gonzaga.

“I remember being the only Black girl in my dorm, and they always tore my name off my door and left it in pieces multiple times,” she said.

Edwards recalled being perceived through racialized stereotypes by peers. She described the reaction as an example of fear shaped by racial bias, explaining that some classmates viewed her as aggressive or intimidating despite having little interaction with her.

She also referenced previous incidents involving hate speech written on a campus display wall and concerns about how campus security has interacted with cultural clubs.

Edwards said multiple bias reports have been filed following recent incidents.

Culture as Commodity

Edwards believes part of the problem lies in how Black culture is embraced publicly but insufficiently supported institutionally.

“Our culture shouldn't be something to commodify,” she said. “We should not just be some award you put on a wall.”

She noted that cultural organizations often must fundraise independently rather than receiving consistent institutional support.

She also described stereotypes tied to Gonzaga's national basketball identity.

“The first thing you think of when a Black person goes to Gonzaga is usually for sports,” Edwards said. “I actually had one White woman ask me what sport I played when I told her I went to Gonzaga.”

Calling for Accountability

Edwards' primary message is directed toward university leadership.

“You need to do better,” she said. “Don't be passive. Don't be naive. Listen to your students when they tell you something is going on.”

She emphasized the importance of allyship of other students.

“I told my white friends, ‘Your voices matter in this situation. Your voice will get heard better than mine will,’” Edwards said. “I would have to walk a thousand miles for you to walk only one. Please just walk that one mile for me.”

Edwards hopes students continue advocating through letter writing, peaceful protest, and public dialogue.

“No sweeping under the rug on this one,” she said.

A Message to Future Students

As Gonzaga recruits incoming students, Edwards wants prospective families to understand the realities she says Black students may face.

“Don't be deceived,” she said. Edwards cautioned prospective students not to rely solely on Gonzaga's public image, saying the university promotes a vision of cultural unity that, in her experience, does not always align with the realities faced by Black students. Gonzaga's mission statement emphasizes community, justice and respect for the dignity of every person, language that students say is frequently referenced in reactive statements issued by officials following incidents of bigotry.

Despite the challenges, she encouraged BSU members to remain steadfast.

“Keep your heads high,” Edwards said. “Don't let this make you waver.”

CULTURE / BUSINESS

WHEN THE BEAT CHANGES, THE GATEKEEPERS PANIC

By Edmond W. Davis
FOR THE BLACK LENS

It never fails.

When something culturally seismic happens in America—when the nation's stage reflects the actual nation—there is a predictable knee-jerk reaction from a particular demographic: older, wealthy white men who suddenly discover “standards,” “tradition” and “purity” as if culture has ever been static.

After the Super Bowl halftime show drew over 135 million viewers for Bad Bunny's electrifying performance, the backlash arrived right on cue. Not because the show failed. Not because it lacked artistry. But because it succeeded—globally, unapologetically, and in Spanish. And when culture melanates in real time, certain men panic.

Enter Gene Simmons and Kid Rock.

Kid Rock, fresh off a comparatively modest 6.1 million viewers for Turning Point USA's “alternative” halftime show, went on Fox News and suggested that Jay-Z—Shawn Carter—was essentially a DEI hire for his role overseeing NFL halftime programming through Roc Nation. Nothing against Jay-Z, he says. Just a “little bit of a DEI hire.”

Let's pause.

Jay-Z is not an entry-level corporate diversity placement. He is a global mogul. A billionaire. A cultural architect. The founder of Roc Nation. A man whose resume spans music, sports management, philanthropy, fashion, and social justice reform. If culture is a ship, Jay-Z

is a titan on the Titanic—with his own lifeboat, and probably ownership stake in the vessel. Kid Rock? He's on the ship. But not in first class.

You cannot compare Kid Rock's résumé to Shawn Carter's résumé in any measurable capacity—culturally, economically, or institutionally. That is not an insult; that is math.

And then there's Gene Simmons of KISS, who once again aimed at hip-hop's place in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. “So when do we put Led Zeppelin in the Hip-Hop Hall of Fame?” he scoffed, arguing that rap “doesn't speak his language” and doesn't belong.

That phrase—“It doesn't speak my language”—may be the most honest thing he said. Hip-hop does not speak his language because hip-hop speaks the language of urban America. It speaks of poverty, survival, aspiration, pain, pivot, joy, improvisation, rhythm born of scarcity, and genius forged in constraint. It speaks Bronx block parties and Southern basslines. It tells the story of the American ghetto—an interesting word for Simmons to reference casually.

Why invoke “the ghetto”? A term historically weaponized to describe Jewish communities in Europe during World War II—spaces of poverty, neglect, and systematic urban decay imposed by oppressive regimes. That history should not be lost on Simmons, a Jewish American whose own community endured forced segregation and extermination.

Yet here he is, dismissing music born from American neighborhoods that were sys-

tematically redlined, divested, and policed into despair.

The irony is breathtaking.

The Rock & Roll Hall of Fame was never purely about sound; it has always been about spirit. Rock and roll itself was born from Black blues musicians long before it was electrified for white stadium tours. Chuck Berry's riffs. Little Richard's flamboyance. Sister Rosetta Tharpe's guitar genius. To argue that hip-hop has no place in the Rock Hall is to forget that rock borrowed its spine from Black America in the first place.

Ice Cube reportedly told Simmons that the Hall honors the “spirit of rock and roll.” He's right. Rock and roll is rebellion. So is hip-hop. Rock is distortion. So is rap. Rock challenges the establishment. Hip-hop indicts it.

Psalms 82:3–4 commands: “Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed. Rescue the weak and the needy.” Hip-hop has done exactly that—amplifying voices from communities mainstream America preferred to ignore.

This backlash is not about genre. It is about demographic shift. It is about the melanation of the United States. It is about Spanish on the 50-yard line. It is about Jay-Z shaping the cultural pipeline of the NFL. It is about Bad Bunny drawing over 135 million viewers while an “alternative” show pulls a fraction of that audience.

When the numbers don't lie, critics pivot to ideology.

And then comes the political echo chamber. The suggestion

that funds should be removed from institutions that recognize hip-hop. The predictable alignment with anti-DEI rhetoric. The insinuation that success tied to Black leadership must somehow be artificially inflated.

But Scripture reminds us in Matthew 7:16: “By their fruits you will know them.” Look at the fruit. Roc Nation's partnership with the NFL since 2019 has produced some of the most watched, culturally resonant halftime shows in history. Bad Bunny's performance drew global acclaim. The viewership gap speaks louder than any cable news segment.

Proverbs 18:21 teaches: “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” Words like “DEI hire” are not neutral. They are coded dismissals. They attempt to reduce generational excellence to bureaucratic charity.

But excellence needs no apology.

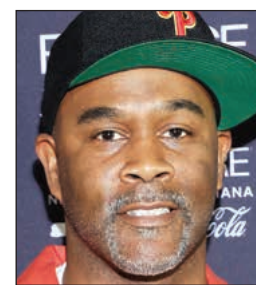
The Rock Hall debate exposes something deeper: a fear that cultural authority is shifting. That gatekeeping is dissolving. That the soundtrack of America no longer centers exclusively on guitar riffs from the 1970s.

Hip-hop is not an intruder in the Rock Hall. It is a descendant. It is rock's rebellious grandchild—armed with turntables instead of Telecasters.

And let's be honest: if Jay-Z's presence unsettles some, that discomfort may say more about the country's evolution than about music theory.

America has always changed its beat.

When jazz emerged, critics called it noise. When Elvis moved his hips, they called it



By Edmond W. Davis
THE BLACK LENS
CONTRIBUTOR



scandal. When rap arrived, they called it criminal. Yet here we are.

Culture expands. Gatekeepers resist. History records.

Eccl 3:1

declares: “To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven.” This is a season of cultural recalibration. A season where the halftime stage mirrors census data. A season where Spanish lyrics, hip-hop producers, and Black executives shape the largest sporting spectacle in the nation.

The question is not whether hip-hop belongs in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.

The question is whether some are prepared to accept that America's Hall now reflects America's reality.

When the beat changes, the gatekeepers panic.

But the music keeps playing.

Edmond W. Davis is a Social Historian, Speaker, Collegiate Professor, International Journalist, and former Director of the Derek Olivier Research Institute. He is an expert on various historical and emotional intelligence topics. He's globally recognized for his research on the Tuskegee Airmen and Airwomen. He's the Founder and Executive Director of America's first & only National HBCU Black Wall Street Career Fest. Justice Hampton is a native of Mississippi and a former research assistant at the Derek Olivier Research Institute (DORI) at Arkansas Baptist College.

LOCAL SPOTLIGHT

From grandma's kitchen to creative distillery chef

By Avant Grant
THE BLACK LENS

My journey into the kitchen didn't start with textbooks or fancy schools; it started with the magic I saw my grandmother create. Growing up, I watched her use a “little bit of this, a little bit of that” to turn simple ingredients into something incredible. That early exposure to the artistry of cooking is where I first learned that a kitchen is a place where you can make magic happen.

Before landing in Spokane, I spent time in Chicago, and those years were foundational for my style. I've always been drawn to flavor combinations that might not technically seem like they should work on paper, but when you get them right, they sing.

What eventually led me to Dry Fly Distilling was the opportunity to blend those regional tastes I've picked up with the unique spirits they're known for. In my role here, I focus on creating a menu that doesn't just sit alongside the spirits but actually incorporates them. A great example of this is our Peachy Pork flatbread—it uses a Dry Fly Bourbon BBQ sauce to pull together smoked pork, peaches, and pickled onions.

For me, being at Dry Fly is about taking everything I learned from my grandmother's kitchen and my years in the industry and using it to push the boundaries of what distillery food can be.

What I love most is that the kitchen is my stage for truth-telling. When I put on my whites, I'm not just a cook; I'm a historian, a storyteller using ingredients instead of words to honor where we've been and where we're going.

Here's how that creativity flows through my work:

My creativity comes from taking “scraps” or humble ingredients—the things our ancestors were forced to cook with—and turning them into magic. When I serve a perfectly braised oxtail or elevated grits, I'm telling a story of resilience and brilliance.

I grew up watching the women in my family cook by feel, not by a book. I love that I can take that “soul” and pair it with modern techniques. It's about that fusion of heritage and innovation, like using traditional African spices in a classic French reduction.

For me, being a chef is about making sure our culture isn't just a footnote in culinary history—it's the main course. When a guest tastes my food, I want them to feel the history, the struggle, and the absolute joy of our people.

There's three things I would tell young



COURTESY OF J. BARTHOLOMEW

Avant Grant is the chef at Dry Fly Distilling.

adults:

First, Season with Your Soul.

You've got to find what makes your blood pump, but keep your eyes on the whole kitchen. Don't ever mute your volume. Your heritage, your culture, and that unique rhythm in your step—that's your secret sauce. In a world of carbon copies, being “different” is how you become essential. If they can't find a seat for you at the table, you build a bigger table.

Second, The Recipe is Gonna Change.

Purpose isn't a straight line; it's a slow-braised journey. You might start out thinking you're a pastry chef only to realize you've got a genius for the grill. That's not a failure, that's a pivot. Don't get so locked into the “plan” that you miss the “calling.” True purpose lives where your joy meets the world's hunger.

Third, Protect Your Fire.

This world is a walk-in freezer—it'll try to chill your spirit if you let it. Whether you're in a kitchen, a boardroom, or a lab, you've got to guard your “why.” If you lose that spark, the work just becomes a shift you're trying to survive. Keep that fire in your belly roaring, and don't let anyone else touch your thermostat.

Choose the path that makes that 5 a.m. alarm feel like an invitation, not a chore. When you pour love into the work, you aren't just earning a paycheck—you're leaving a legacy.

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EDUCATION

HOW PARENTS CAN SUPPORT STUDENTS IN SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT AND ADVOCACY

Parents are a child's first and most enduring teachers, and the influence they have on learning begins long before formal education starts. From early childhood through high school graduation, families shape a child's curiosity, confidence, and sense of belonging. This influence continues well beyond the early years. When parents stay informed, connected, and engaged, students tend to be more motivated, achieve at higher levels, and feel supported both inside and outside the classroom. Understanding how to nurture school engagement and student advocacy across all grade levels is key to ensuring students thrive academically and socially.

One of the most impactful ways parents can support engagement begins in early childhood: sitting with young children and reading to them. This simple act builds far more than literacy skills. Shared reading time strengthens relationships, encourages imagination, expands vocabulary, and helps children develop an early love of learning. Whether reading picture books, discussing characters, or sounding out unfamiliar words, these moments lay an academic foundation that carries into kindergarten and beyond. As children grow, parents can continue supporting literacy by encouraging independent reading, discussing stories, and modeling a positive attitude toward



books. As school begins, forming strong partnerships with teachers, counselors, and school staff becomes essential. Communication should start early, before concerns arise. Introducing oneself during open house, asking teachers about classroom expectations, and learning their preferred communication methods all help establish trust. A brief email or a positive note of appreciation can open the door for ongoing dialogue. Guidance counselors also play a vital role as students navigate academic and

social transitions. They can provide insight into course pathways, support services, and enrichment opportunities, especially during key stages such as the transition from elementary to middle school or the planning for high school. Supporting learning at home is another powerful way parents contribute to student success. The environment families create influences what children feel capable of achieving. Establishing consistent homework routines, providing a quiet workspace, and setting clear expect-

tations help students develop strong study habits. These habits become increasingly important as academic demands grow. Parents do not need to be experts in every subject to be effective. Asking open-ended questions such as "What stood out to you today?" or "Which assignment feels challenging?" encourages reflection and deeper understanding. For older students, support may include breaking large tasks into manageable steps, organizing deadlines, or checking online grade portals together to stay



By Dr. Shantara Smith
THE BLACK LENS CONTRIBUTOR



informed about progress.

Another essential aspect of engagement is helping students develop self-advocacy skills. Advocacy begins with empowerment: teaching children to express their needs, ask questions, and seek help when something is unclear. In early elementary grades, advocacy may involve practicing how to talk to a teacher respectfully or explaining when they do not understand something. In middle school, students can take more ownership by emailing teachers, tracking assignments independently, or setting personal academic goals. By high school, strong self-advocacy skills become especially important as students prepare for college, technical programs, or careers. Learning to request help, plan ahead, manage time, and communicate with adults fosters confidence and independence.

Parents also play a significant role in modeling

effective problem-solving. When challenges arise—whether academic struggles, social conflicts, or organizational issues—families can talk through possible solutions. Helping a child think about what they want to say before speaking with a teacher or counselor builds communication skills and nurtures independence. Over time, students learn that challenges are not roadblocks but opportunities for growth and resilience.

Beyond academics, parent participation in school life strengthens a student's sense of community and belonging. Attending school events, joining parent organizations, volunteering when possible, or simply being present show children that their school experiences matter. Even small gestures—attending a concert, cheering at a game, viewing an art show, or joining a parent-teacher conference—send a message that students' efforts are noticed and valued. These moments help build a positive school climate supported by both educators and families.

When parents, teachers, and students work together, education becomes more meaningful and successful. By fostering communication, supporting learning at home, encouraging advocacy, staying involved in school communities, and celebrating growth, families help lay the foundation for lifelong learning and achievement.

Surrounded by STEM, a series *Physics and sports for youth*

What if every shot you take, every sprint you run, and every swing you make is actually a science experiment in motion?

Physics isn't stuck in a classroom—it's happening every time you step onto a court, field, track, pool, or golf course. In fact, the sports you love are powered by real scientific principles.

When you play basketball, you're using projectile motion every time you shoot. The angle, speed, and height of your shot determine whether it goes in. Gravity pulls the ball back down toward the hoop. When you dribble, elasticity and Newton's Third Law of Motion are at work—the floor pushes the ball back up after it hits the ground. Quick stops and crossovers depend on friction, which helps your shoes grip the court so you don't slide.

On the football field, a quarterback's spiral pass uses angular momentum, which keeps the ball stable in the air. Tackles and blocks demonstrate Newton's Laws of Motion—especially how force and mass affect movement. Players build up momentum (mass × velocity), which explains why speed and size matter. Field goals show projectile motion, while air resistance affects how far the ball travels.

In soccer, when a player bends a free kick around defenders, that curve happens because of the Magnus effect—spin creates differences in air pressure around the ball. Passing and shooting involve force and energy transfer from foot to ball. The way the ball rolls on grass depends on friction, and players



By Dr. Sarah Zaab
THE BLACK LENS CONTRIBUTOR



rely on balance and center of gravity to control their movements.

During a baseball game, pitchers use aerodynamics and spin to create fastballs, curveballs, and sliders. When a bat strikes the ball, kinetic energy transfers almost instantly. The ball's path through the air follows projectile motion, influenced by gravity and air resistance. Outfielders chasing fly balls are constantly adjusting based on angles and motion.

In track and field, sprinters push against the starting blocks, and thanks to Newton's Third Law, the ground pushes them forward. Long jumpers convert kinetic energy (speed) into potential energy (height). Hurdlers and high jumpers carefully manage their center of mass to clear obstacles efficiently.

When it comes to swimming, athletes work to reduce drag, or water resistance, by streamlining their bodies. They push water backward, and in response, the water pushes them forward—another example of action and

reaction. Speed in the pool depends on force, buoyancy, and minimizing resistance.

And in golf, when a player drives the ball, the club transfers kinetic energy to it. The loft of the club controls the launch angle, affecting projectile motion. Backspin creates lift through the Magnus effect, helping the ball travel farther. The dimples on a golf ball improve aerodynamics by reducing drag. On the green, friction determines how the ball rolls toward the hole.

The next time you play a sport, remember: you're not just competing—you're applying physics. Your body is solving problems involving force, motion, energy, and balance without even realizing it. Physics isn't just something you study. It's something you "do."

Recommended Books to Explore the Physics of Sports

—"The Physics of Basketball," by John J. Fontanella

—"The Secret Science of Sports," by Jennifer Swanson

—"The Science of Soccer," by John Wesson

—"The Physics of Baseball," by Robert K. Adair

—"The Flying Circus of Physics," by Jearl Walker

—"The Physics of Golf," by Theodore P. Jorgensen

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ARTS AND LEISURE

‘The Lion King,’ justice and restoring rightful order: An interview with performer Martina Sykes

By April Eberhardt
THE BLACK LENS

What does it mean to use your voice, your body, your presence, your craft, as a form of resistance?

The Black Lens was honored to be in conversation with Martina Sykes, the actress portraying Shenzi, one of the spotted hyenas in the Broadway production of “The Lion King,” which came to the First Interstate Center for the Arts in February, to explore art as activism, representation and the power of storytelling. Through Shenzi’s unapologetic presence, we discuss how performance holds the power not only to entertain, but to analyze, disrupt, teach and challenge.

In hard seasons, art becomes a language of resistance, a bridge between pain and possibility. Art activism is how artists carry messages of justice through story, sound, movement, and character, reaching people who may never read a policy brief or attend a speech. Artists, in this sense, are stewards of the times, using their gifts to reflect truth, lift burdens, and help communities imagine a more humane world. In doing so, the journey toward individual purpose and collective destiny becomes empowered.

Be inspired by the interview below.

Q: Martina, can you tell me a little bit about yourself? Who is Martina? When did you decide you wanted to go into theater? Where are you from? What inspires you?

Martina: Well, I’m originally from St. Petersburg, Florida. I’m a pastor’s kid, so I grew up in church singing and dancing. My

mom can sing. My dad can sing. They both play instruments. So we just grew up singing and dancing. Any local play that was going on in the community—whether it was the Black history pageant or The Chocolate Nutcracker—we were involved in.

It sparked my love for singing and dancing early, but it was always rooted in church or Black history-based and cultural settings, which I loved. I went to an arts program for elementary, middle, and high school. I’m one of four siblings, and my brother—who I’m closest to in age, about two and a half years apart, is also a Broadway actor. We grew up around a lot of music.

When I went to college, I actually studied public relations. But in my last month of college, my brother called me and said, “I think you’re sitting on your gift. I feel like God has something else for you. I want you to come to New York and audition for Broadway.”

I told him, “No, I’m not doing that. I don’t have enough money to be in New York just gallivanting in the streets.” He said, “No, no, no. I’ll show you how everything works. Just come for six months.” He called me every day until my graduation.

So when I graduated, I thought, “Okay, let me see.” He said, “If it doesn’t work out in six months, you can go back home.” I went, and within the first two weeks, I booked a Broadway workshop. After that, things came in slowly, regional gigs, a theme park, a cruise ship. My first big job was Motown: The Musical on the national tour, then on Broadway. The following year, in 2017, I booked The Lion King, and I’ve been with it ever since.

Q: When you think of the phrase “art as activism,” what does that mean to you as a Broadway performer?

Martina: As a Broadway performer, I think of it as using art as a form of resistance. Music and art are universal languages. When I think about the Civil Rights Movement, I think about the music of that time.

When my brother did Ain’t Too Proud, he met Congressman John Lewis. He talked about how the movement then had a soundtrack that made it global. Today, we have social media amplifying movements like Black Lives Matter, but back then, they had music—songs like “What’s Going On,” “Ball of Confusion,” “War,” and “A Change Is Gonna Come.”

Artists were meeting with President Kennedy and Robert Kennedy, advocating for change in real time. Lena Horne, James Baldwin, Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier, Aretha Franklin—the list goes on. These were people who stood for their rights and the rights of Black people through their art.

Artivism—where activism meets art—reaches people differently. Sometimes people can digest a song or a dance more easily than a speech. When you use your gifts to speak about what matters to your community, or to humanity as a whole, the message travels further.

Q: Let’s talk about Shenzi. Many audiences see her as a villain, but also as a figure of survival and resistance. How do you interpret her role?

Martina: I’ve never seen her as a villain. There was no original plot to do wrong. When the kids

come into the elephant graveyard, we’re animals. Spotted hyenas live on the outskirts. We’re not part of Pride Land or the food chain. Sometimes we go two or three weeks without eating.

We didn’t plot to steal anyone’s kids. These were free meals walking around. If you haven’t eaten in weeks, what do you think is going to happen?

We join Scar for survival. He promises food: “Stick with me, you’ll never go hungry again.” That’s all we’re thinking about—where the next meal comes from. When we realize the promise won’t be fulfilled and that we’re being blamed, we take care of the problem.

I personally think we helped restore the Pride Lands to its rightful order. Simba couldn’t kill his uncle on that rock. We took care of that.

Shenzi herself reflects nature. Female spotted hyenas are the strongest. She’s a strong woman—fierce, funny, protective. She has her own objectives and circumstances. One of the powerful things about The Lion King is that the female characters are strong and drive the story.

Q: You mentioned “restoring rightful order.” What does justice mean to you?

Martina: I think of restorative justice—righting wrongs, restoring humanity and dignity. Not just punishment, but restoration.

Justice might mean a conviction, but restorative justice asks: What does healing look like for those harmed? You don’t skim past history and say, “Slavery happened, let it go.” You address it. You tell the truth. You apologize.

What does restoration



COURTESY

Adell Whitehead poses with her mother, center; Martina Sykes, left, who plays Shenzi in “The Lion King” and one of Sykes’ co-stars, right, at the Feb. 12 Lion King nonprofit reception.

look like? Is it reparations? Is it restoring places like Tulsa and supporting survivors and their descendants so they can rebuild? Justice has to include healing.

Q: If Shenzi could speak directly to today’s world, what would she say?

Martina: When it was time for the lions to fight, the hyenas let them fight. Minorities have been fighting for generations. Now it’s time for others to fight too, because everyone’s rights are being infringed upon.

Those who have been asleep—it’s time to wake up. Not everyone has to be on the front lines. Some people make the calls, secure lawyers, organize resources. Roles need to be reimaged, but everyone has a role.

Take your rest if needed, but stay active—through education, bridging gaps, or organizing. And for those who’ve been silent, it’s time.

Q: What is the power of representation in the arts? Is it just entertainment?

Martina: Representation is everything. Someone is always watching, wondering if they can do what you’re doing. My first Broadway show was Sarafina! Seeing Black excellence on stage mattered.

It’s also important to see us behind the scenes—in sound, hair, makeup, stage management, company management. People don’t know those jobs exist. Representation expands possibility.

Being Black and doing what we love on this level carries responsibility. We reflect excellence, but we also give back. My brother and I started the Sykes Kids Scholarship for seniors at our high school because our community poured into us. When you do it, you reach back.

Q: Is there anything you want to leave us with?

Martina: The responsibility of an artist is to reflect the times and be a beacon during turmoil. You may not know the impact in real time.

I met someone who went through 11 rounds of chemo just to live long enough to see The Lion King. Someone told me they watched “Circle of Life,” looked at their daughter, and said, “I can go now.” They entered hospice and passed a week later.

People skip bills to bring their kids. For some, you are their escape. Your job is to lift the weight off their shoulders—even if only for a few hours. That is the responsibility.

BECOMING WHAT YOU NEED

All about Spokane Arts Program Director Devonte Pearson

By April Eberhardt
THE BLACK LENS

The Black Lens: Let’s start with your connection to Spokane. Did you grow up here, or did you move here?

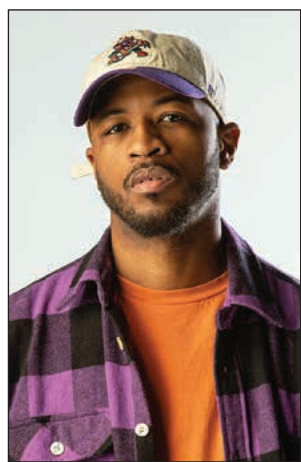
Devonte Pearson: I moved to Spokane by way of Moses Lake around 2014. My wife and I both moved here for school. I attended Spokane Falls Community College for their audio engineering program and also finished my business management degree. I graduated with two degrees and have been navigating the art scene, primarily the music scene, since then.

Q: Are you a musician as well? What’s your skill set as an artist?

A: Yes, I’m a hip-hop artist and an audio engineer by trade. I’ve opened multiple recording spaces to provide services mainly for vocalists and some solo instrumentalists. The most recent space was Panoramic Dreams Recording. We had multiple rooms utilized by different artists for different parts of production including beat production, film production, vocal production, and even a meeting space. We hosted listening parties and ran an internship program connected to the studio for up-and-coming audio engineers.

Q: What is your role with Spokane Arts?

A: I’m the Program Director. I handle logistics and coordinate programming. We recently launched a Youth Poet Laureate program in partnership with Avista Foundation, Leadership Spokane, Spark Central, and our current Poet Laureate. I create the call, design the posters, send out press releases, and coordi-



COURTESY

Spokane Arts Program Director Devonte Pearson

nate everyone involved. I’m engaged in every facet of programming.

Q: How long have you been with Spokane Arts?

A: I joined in spring of 2024 as Operations Manager. Since October 2025, I’ve been the Program Director.

Q: A lot of young people want to be entertainers, but there are so many roles within the entertainment industry that they might not know about. Can you talk about audio engineering as a career option?

A: Absolutely. Audio engineers are usually the people you see behind the board operating sound for live venues or recording studios. They work with software like Pro Tools or Logic Pro to record vocals and instruments. I went down the path of audio engineering because I needed to record myself as an artist. I’m a big advocate of becoming what you need. If you don’t have access to engineers, beat makers, or filmmakers, learn those skills yourself.

School, especially

community college, was a great way for me to do that. I didn’t know anybody when I moved here. I knew one person. I met the community through school projects and started doing shows. The first place I promoted myself as an artist was at the college, hanging posters there. For anyone wanting to thrive in the industry, look at the roles that need to be filled and see if you can fill them starting out. You can learn almost anything now through YouTube, online forums, Google, or AI. I still engineer my own music and direct my own visuals when needed.

Q: Let’s pivot to arts and identity. Why are the arts so significant, especially in a place like Spokane?

A: You can’t quantify art. You can teach technical skills, but art is culture. You can tell someone about culture, but to experience it is different. We get to know different cultures through music and fashion.

In a space like Spokane, where I don’t always see myself reflected, it’s easy to get lost and conform to the dominant culture, losing connection to family and ancestors. That harms the next generation because we lose our ability to speak across generations.

Art allows expression in multiple mediums such as drums, film, and poetry. Poetry isn’t boxed in by tempo or production. It’s just voice. Seeing ourselves on the big screen drives hope, resilience, and ambition. Words can only do so much, but art provides blueprints for how to carry yourself, how to dress, and how to navigate a room. It’s not a mathematical equation. It’s expression, and

expression is infinite.

Q: Let’s talk about conformity. What role does it play in shaping identity and how we navigate society?

A: I’m a Black man in Spokane, often the only one in certain rooms. Conformity can set unattainable standards. Growing up, speakers would come dressed in suits and expensive shoes. On one hand, it was aspirational. On the other hand, it felt inaccessible.

When my business partner and I enter rooms, we carry ourselves confidently and authentically. Young brothers once told us they appreciated that because it gave them confidence to enter more spaces. Conformity can create barriers by suggesting you can come in only if you meet certain expectations. It sets standards without showing the steps to get there. Show us level one before expecting level ten.

We care about how we present ourselves, but we don’t use a filter from people who can’t relate to us as a barometer for how we dress or carry ourselves. Authentic expression is key.

Q: What legacy do you want to leave for young people coming behind you?

A: Integrity. Learn yourself before trying to learn the world. Understand how you operate. Have standards. Put yourself first because you cannot please the world. It’s impossible. Everything starts with self-care. Knowledge, morality, and how you carry yourself all follow.

Legacy is huge for me. If I leave anything, I hope it’s a blueprint rooted in integrity, passion, and authenticity.

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YOUTH CONNECTION

BREAKING STEREOTYPES IN EVERYDAY LIFE

A Black experience with racism

Breaking stereotypes as a Black person is not a single act. It is a daily, exhausting negotiation with a world that often sees you before it knows you. Racism does not always announce itself loudly. More often, it lives quietly in assumptions, sideways glances, lowered expectations, and the stories people believe before you ever open your mouth.

In everyday life, stereotypes follow Black people into classrooms, workplaces, stores, and even social spaces, shaping how we are treated and how we are expected to behave. From a young age, many Black people learn that they must work twice as hard to be seen as half as capable.



By Stori Taylor
THE BLACK LENS
CONTRIBUTOR



Intelligence is questioned, ambition is doubted, and success is treated as an exception rather than a norm.

Speaking confidently can be labeled as “aggressive.” Being reserved can be seen as “unfriendly.” There is a constant pressure to balance visibility and safety, to

stand out enough to be recognized but not so much that it invites scrutiny or punishment. Breaking stereotypes often means performing respectability just to be treated with basic dignity.

Racism in everyday life is deeply connected to these stereotypes. It thrives on oversimplified narratives: that Black people are dangerous, lazy, loud, or uneducated. These ideas did not appear by accident. They were created and reinforced over generations to justify inequality. Even today, they influence hiring decisions, policing, education, and healthcare. But beyond systems, they affect ordinary moments like being followed in a store, having achievements questioned, or being assumed to fit a narrative that was never yours.

Breaking stereotypes can look like excellence, but it should not have to. A Black

person should not need to overachieve simply to be respected. Yet many do, not out of pride alone, but out of survival. Education, professionalism, kindness, and self-control are often weaponized expectations, used to prove humanity in spaces where it should already be assumed. This constant self-monitoring is a quiet burden that racism places on Black lives.

The N-word: let's talk about it for a second. A lot of non-Black people like using the N-word either because they are considered a person of color, so they think they have a right to say it, or because they have Black friends, so they think they have “the pass.” But the question that presses this issue: Who has the right to say, and define, this word?

Let's dive deeper. Historically, white racists used the word to feel powerful over us, so we

stole that word back for a sense of power over what was meant to destroy. The “N-word” isn't just the “N-word.” Some things aren't taught in history, but they were never invisible or unheard. White racists used this word as a tool of dehumanization, meant to strip Black people of identity, dignity, and power. Over time, some took that same word to try to transform the harm into a form of shared cultural expression, like taking power back.

Breaking stereotypes also means rejecting the idea that Blackness must fit into a narrow definition to be valid. There is no single way to be Black. Black people are artists, scientists, introverts, leaders, dreamers, and everything in between. Embracing individuality is itself an act of resistance. It challenges a system that benefits from flattening complex identi-

ties into something easier to control.

Racism does not only harm through hatred. It harms through limitation. Stereotypes limit how Black people are seen and how they are allowed to exist. Breaking them requires more than individual effort. It requires collective responsibility. It asks society to listen instead of assume, to question inherited beliefs, and to recognize Black humanity without conditions.

In everyday life, breaking stereotypes is both powerful and painful. It is the courage to exist authentically in a world that often misunderstands you. And while the burden should not fall solely on Black shoulders, each act of truth, visibility, and resistance pushes back against racism, slowly reshaping the narrative into one that finally reflects reality.

The land we stand on

Broad strokes of marginalization of America

On the land that we stand on, in 1492 Christopher Columbus sailed the ocean blue and from then on Native American tribes including my own, the Nez Perce (Nimii-puu) tribe, suffered from colonization, murder, war, slavery, disease, and genocide. Once the colonists had exhausted the lives of my ancestors they moved on to exhausting more of my ancestors. African people who they stole and traded for hundreds of years resulting in another genocide. All while colonists began their fight for their American dream.

On the land that we stand on still, Tribes and Black communities have had to continuously fight for their rights and recognition within this country that was built on the backs of those who never reaped the benefits of their own work. Our “American Dream” comes with sorrow, blood and being stepped on.

Now on the land that we stand on, immigrants from every corner of the earth who have taken immeasurable risks to gain their “American dream” are being wrongfully punished and persecuted by law enforcement without proper following of policies of human and constitutional rights.

Currently on the land that we stand on and according to the U.S. law and Department of justice, BEING UNDOCUMENTED IS NOT A CRIME. It is a civil offense. It is a fact and truthfully stated from the American Civil Liberties Union that, “Undocumented presence in the United States is only criminally punishable if it occurs after an individual was previously formally removed from the United States and then returned without permission.” This is clearly stated through 8 U.S. Code 1325 and 1326. While U.S. policies clearly state behavior and rules to properly follow to handle immigration situations, the current events and actions of “leaders” within this country show the opposite. In other words, human rights have continuously been violated and multiple human lives have been taken due to unjust treatment of human beings.

Our country is no stranger to mistreatment of individuals of color and those who



By Donald Brantley
THE BLACK LENS
CONTRIBUTOR



are deemed different or “aliens.” We are no stranger to violations of human rights. On the land that we stand on, acts of senseless crime have been harming this country since before it even started. War and fights to get to the top of both social and economic hills have created immeasurable damage that cannot be erased. Time and time again, we the people have been fighting to fix these issues. Not alone. But together. For example, it is a crucial reminder for us to remember the multiple minority and migrant justice movements that have had success within the U.S. such as the civil rights movement of the 1960's. At the forefront, Black communities fought for human rights, destruction of racial barriers and poor living conditions. Along their side and simultaneously fighting was the Latin x community fighting for the Chicano Movement and many other minority groups aiming to create change for the better. At the center of all these movements is the connection and allyship between different socioeconomic, culture and political groups thus leading to change in society which supports human rights.

Strength in numbers continues to be crucial to creating these changes even 60 years later. Even if we analyze the success of colonists in the creation of the U.S. in 1776, they utilized allyship to win the war against the British when they were once immigrants to the U.S.

Current protests within large and small communities which include both people of color, white citizens, noncitizens, poor, and rich, not only create imagery of connection but begin movements of social justice. On land that was stolen, it is no one's right

to prevent people from coming here and making their own American dream, just as colonists did hundreds of years ago.

Allyship has been crucial to the success of change. During these times of disconnect we need to have the urge for unity and connection to provide uplifting support to see real change within our broken societies. As we continue to watch this country fall from people in power who aim only to step on the backs of the working class, people of color and minorities, we must remember the times we have come together before to make change. We simply must do it again.

With the understanding of facts that the act of being in the U.S. without papers and authorization is not a crime; it is a violation of the immigration and naturalization act of the U.S. (8 U.S.C 1325 & 1326), we must uphold people to proper standards of U.S. constitutional and human rights and at the bare minimum treat people like people. While people of immigration status are not excluded from doing crime, the U.S. has dug themselves into a hole of mistreating immigrants and improperly handling cases through double punishment, deporting people to unsafe locations that are not of their origins, separating families, murder and other forms of injustices. Unjust treatment needs to be met with just consequences. While we aim to remind those in power of the proper policy and procedures to follow, may we follow each other with love, support and kindness.

Only the light can drive out the darkness so therefore we must not fight fire with fire. May we remember the times of unity between indigenous and Black communities to survive during the initial years of this country. Now on the land that we stand on it is crucial that we continue this alliance and expand it to protect our immigrant brothers and sisters who are wrongfully being targeted and punished by hatred. As our “leaders” aim to tear families and friends apart, we must fight to stay together. An unjust action towards one person is an unjust action towards all of society. Migrant justice is human justice.

Spokane NAACP Youth Council President showcases advocacy and care of local youth

POWERFUL VOICES

By Kenji M Linane-Booey
THE BLACK LENS

If you've attended a community event recently, there is a good chance the Spokane NAACP Youth Council was present. Over the last few years, thanks to a lot of hard work and dedication of Priya Mhlophe and a group of dedicated students, the Spokane NAACP Youth Council became the first in Spokane to be officially recognized by the National NAACP.

I had the opportunity to talk with the Youth Council President, Kyliya, who spoke to the collaborative and inspiring environment the Youth Council fosters. She attributed a lot of that to the Youth Council Advisor, Priya. Who has taught the students the importance of the three Cs: Civil Discourse, Civic Engagement, and Community Building. These are at the center of all of the work the Youth Council does.

Priya, the Youth Council Advisor, was given the 2025 NAACP President's award for their organizing work and leadership with the Youth Council.

One of the goals for the Youth Council right now is to continue growing. Kyliya says they are open to everyone, “It doesn't matter how you identify; we have people from all different cultural identities and experiences. All that matters is the work we are doing, and we want everyone to feel included and feel that they belong with us because they do.”

The Council is all about getting students under the age of 25 involved in advocacy in the community and understanding what it means to be a good neighbor and civically en-

gaged. About half of the students are currently in college and the other half are high school students. Kyliya summed it up by saying, “It doesn't matter where you come from or what you look like. All that matters is that you care.”

For Kyliya, one of the highlights of being involved in this group is that everything is truly student driven. The advocacy they engage in and the work they do in the community all comes from the students on the council. It doesn't matter if it's advocating for tenants' rights at our state capitol or standing up for the importance of cultural events at a city council meeting; all the work is student driven.

Those of us who live in the education world know how important this form of student-driven advocacy is. The most powerful voice in education should always be the student's voice, and as a community, we should celebrate the exciting milestones the Spokane NAACP Youth Council has achieved and support them as they grow.

At the end of our conversation I asked Kyliya if there was anything else she wanted to share about the Youth Council, she said, “that we are a group of young people that do care and that you will definitely be seeing more of us and we are going to make our impact on Spokane. Anyone who is young come join us so we can make the change we want to see.”

To stay up to date with everything the youth council is doing follow them on their Instagram page @spokanenaacp-yc and if you are under the age of 25 and want to get involved with the Spokane NAACP Youth Council they meet on the second Sunday of every month and you should email Kyliya at kyliya.harris@yahoo.com for more information about how to get involved.

Gun violence and what it does to a society

Gun violence is not just about guns or laws, it is about people, pain, and the lasting damage done to a society's heart. Every time a gun is fired, it leaves behind more than a victim. It leaves fear in the streets, grief in homes, and trauma that quietly follows people for years. A society affected by gun violence does not simply mourn once; it mourns over and over again.

When someone is killed by a gun, the loss is immediate and irreversible. Families are shattered in seconds. Parents lose children, children lose parents, and loved ones are forced to learn how to live with absence. The pain does not fade when the news coverage ends. It lingers in empty bedrooms, missed phone calls, and anniversaries that will never feel the same. Gun violence turns private grief into a shared community wound.

The recent ICE related shooting highlights how deeply this violence cuts. When deadly force is used by those in power, fear grows even stronger. People begin to question whether they are safe in their own neighborhoods. Trust in institutions weakens, especially in communities that already feel targeted or unheard. This kind of violence sends a message whether intentional or not that some lives are more protected than others. That message is devastating.

Gun violence changes how people live. Children grow up practicing lockdown drills instead of feeling carefree. Parents worry when their loved ones leave the house. Communities become tense, guarded and emotionally exhausted. Over time, fear becomes normal, and that is one of the most dangerous consequences of all. A society that accepts fear as normal loses its sense of peace. Emotionally, the trauma spreads far



By Daniella Musesambili
THE BLACK LENS
CONTRIBUTOR



beyond the direct victims. Witnesses carry guilt. Survivors relive moments they wish they could forget. Entire neighborhoods become known for tragedy instead of strength. Gun violence reshapes identity, teaching people to expect loss instead of safety, sirens instead of silence.

The ICE situation also reveals how gun violence fuels anger and division. Protests rise not just

from outrage, but from exhaustion from repeated loss, delayed justice, and unanswered questions. People are tired of being told to move on when healing has never truly begun. They want accountability, transparency, and assurance that human life is valued.

I believe gun violence forces us to ask who we are as a society. Are we willing to let fear define us? Are we willing to look away when lives are lost? Are we brave enough to demand change, even when it is uncomfortable? Addressing gun violence requires more than statistics; it requires empathy, responsibility and the courage to protect human life.

Gun violence steals trust, safety, and hope. But it also leaves us with a choice: continue accepting loss, or choose humanity. I refuse to believe this pain is inevitable. A society that values life can be built if we decide that every life truly matters.

BLACK VOICES SYMPOSIUM

Black students from the Spokane area presented their artwork and writings to a full and supportive crowd at the Black Voices Symposium on Feb. 3.



PHOTOS BY COLIN MULVANY/THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

Black Lens board member and contributor Michael Bethely talks with Anesu Whacha about her poem "The Art of the Everyday" during the Spokane Black Voices Symposium event, a collaboration with The Black Lens on Feb. 3 at the Montvale Event Center.

Mazvita Whacha talks about her poem "My Destiny Found."

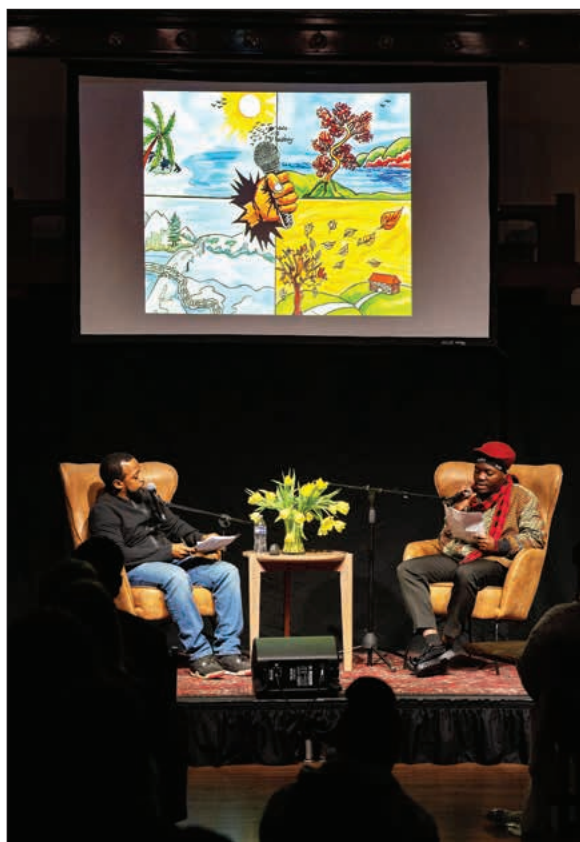


Black Lens editor and educator April Eberhardt talks about the student voices selected for the symposium.



This year's Spokane Black Voices Symposium contributors pose for a photo before The Black Lens sponsored event in which Black students from the Spokane area presented their artwork and writings on Feb. 3 at the Montvale Event Center. Left to right, front row: Jordyn Bower (Shadle), Addison Spangler (Shadle), Back row, left to right: Mazvita Whacha (Shadle), Asha Alston (Salk), Jospin Imona (Shadle), Nikita Habimana (Shadle) and Anesu Whacha (Shadle).

Black Lens board member and contributor Michael Bethely talks with Nikita Habimana about her poem "Shoes" during the Spokane Black Voices Symposium.



Black Lens board member and contributor Michael Bethely talks with Jospin Imona about his "Breaking the Season" event. Black students from the Spokane area presented their artwork and writings to a supportive crowd.

HAPPENING AROUND TOWN



Dr. Jeanne Aston Baynes, left, will be recognized March 6 for the Lifetime Achievement Award with the YWCA. Here she stands at Leadership Spokane's Lights the Way Gala with Black Lens editor April Eberhardt, Mable Dunbar and Sherry Merritt, all of whom are represented on the frontpage of this Women's History Month edition.

Luminary Award

Leadership Spokane has created the King Cole Luminary award to recognize exceptional servant leadership that "lights the way" in the community. The late Rev. Percy "Happy" Watkins Jr. was posthumously awarded the King Cole Luminary Award at the Leadership Lights the Way Gala on Feb. 7 at Northern Quest Resort & Casino.

NAACP Spokane's Building Restorative Communities (BRC)

MARCH 1, 8, 15, 22 & 29: Book Conversation on "The Power of Bridging," by John A. Powell. Engage in this restorative material for 5 online sessions. Learn how to bridge divisions and heal fragmentation in order to "belong without othering." Open our world to a shared future by expanding our "we." Five Mondays in March from 6:30-7:45 pm. Email BRCspokane@gmail.com to register to receive information about joining the online sessions. Free and open to the public.

Shademakers

ShadeMakers is a youth-led movement committed to planting purpose, nurturing voice and building environments. ShadeMakers will be hosting its first Student Leadership conference on March 14 at Gonzaga University.

No Kings March

Indivisible, Spokane NAACP, The Black Lens, I Did the Time, the Spokane City Human Rights Commission and more are joining No King 3 on March 28. There will be music, food trucks, art, speaks, solidarity, unity and hope from 1-4:30 p.m. at B.A. Clark Park, 3922 N. Normandie St., in Spokane.

FROM THE FRONT PAGE

MERRITT

Continued from 1

history, dignity, and community remain essential no matter where a person is positioned.

She was honored for her service on Feb. 26.

Q: Can you talk about the program you support at Airway Heights Corrections Center? What is it called, and how did you get involved?

Sherry Merritt: I've been involved for the past 25 years, beginning in 2001. It's the African American Literature Program.

It came about during the time I was in another program through our church ministry called Christian Alliance. I was in the chapel, and the men had come to church that day. Several of them approached me and asked if I would be a volunteer for their African American Literature Program. I told them I would think about it and to give me more information.

They drafted a proposal and presented it to the higher-ups at Airway Heights, and it was approved. I said I would be a part of it. The institution decided they also needed someone from Eastern Washington University, which was Nancy Nelson. She was one of the professors at Eastern Washington University in Africana Studies.

She was the sponsor volunteer, which means she was responsible for running the program, and I was like her sidekick. We were faithful in going out there together until she got sick and could not go anymore. Other professors came out as well, including Tony Anthony from Eastern.

When they all left, I was the lone ranger still standing. I said I needed someone else to come out, so I asked Dr. Bob Bartlett, a professor in Africana Studies at Eastern, if he would volunteer. He agreed and helped create a roadmap to bring the literature program forward using Ujima, one of the principles of Kwanzaa, as our focus.

Later, I recruited Bernice Buchanan to walk alongside me, and also Dr. Scott Fannie, who was able to come several times but later could not continue due to his schedule.

When I first started, it was a large group, and it would fluctuate because they had no control of them being what they call a call-out, being put on a list to go to the meeting or whatever. Sometimes they would be put on the list. Other times they wouldn't. They would be flip-flopping back and forth.

Q: Did the Black Prisoners Caucus exist at that time, or did that develop later?

Sherry Merritt: The BPC is separate from any program out there at Airway Heights. It's their own little entity, separate from the AALP. I didn't know there was a Black Prisoners Caucus until later. Kurtis Robinson asked me if I would be a volunteer so that the men could continue their Black Prisoners Caucus program. I told him, sure.

This (AALP) started because the men wanted something that pertained to our culture. They wanted to learn more about us as a people, to develop their strengths and know more

about themselves and their history.

Dr. Nelson brought documentaries, and Eastern Washington University donated books to the program. We still have some of those, although after COVID we lost many books that were never returned.

Q: So the focus was learning Black history and identity rather than literacy alone?

Sherry Merritt: Yes, learning Black history and learning about themselves.

Q: What is one of the most memorable experiences you've had over the last 25 years in the program?

Sherry Merritt: During the first beginnings of it, the men were so caring and so happy to have someone from the community come in and assist with their program.

We had Juneteenth celebrations out there. We were able to celebrate Kwanzaa, even though it was only for one day. They showed their kindness toward me. They made lamps and gave them as gifts, which was permitted by the higher-ups at Airway Heights. I still have those lamps.

I felt inspired to continue to assist all these years, not just because of what they offered but because they were hungry for knowledge about themselves and about us as a people. They were willing to learn more and share with others. Their term was "reach one, teach one."

Q: Why is Black history important in developing community, even while incarcerated?

Sherry Merritt: Some of the men had Black teachers, but the majority did not know their Black history. They benefited from learning it, even though some parts were sad. Some did not want to hear the bad parts and only wanted the good, but we have to learn the bad first in order to change our mindset.

Being able to relate and know where we came from is important. I only had one Black teacher, Mr. Fletcher at Lewis and Clark High School. I was born in Meridian, Mississippi, but I've been raised here in Spokane since 1955. I came here when I was six years old.

Q: Is there a need for materials? Can books be donated?

Sherry Merritt: Yes, and yes, they can be donated. I purchase books for our program because we do book reports. The men select or we select books, and they read a certain number of chapters. At the next meeting, they report on what they've learned and how it affects them.

If I can find a documentary that goes hand in hand with the book, I order that and bring it in. Everything has to be approved by the higher-ups before it comes in. We have a cabinet with all our materials in it.

Q: How many students are typically in your group?

Sherry Merritt: It fluctuates. The highest we've had recently was 24.

We're allowed up to 45 men at one time only if there are two volunteers. If there is only one volunteer, no more than 20.

Q: How do you obtain books for the program?

Sherry Merritt: I order books on Amazon. Some-

See MERRITT, 15

HALLMAN

Continued from 1

In this conversation with the editor of The Black Lens, Hallman reflects on rebuilding her life after incarceration, the barriers women face upon reentry, the healing power of authentic community, and why creating spaces for Black women to be heard remains essential.

Question: What is your connection to Spokane? Have you been here your whole life?

Gaye Hallman: I moved here in Spokane in 1997.

Question: What brought you here?

Hallman: Well, I had family here. I still have family here. My brother owned a janitorial company here. My mother was here, and I have two brothers here. My mother passed in 2015, but she was here at the time when I came, and I wanted to change my life. At the time I was married, so my husband and I and our two small children came here to Spokane by train.

Question: Where is home originally?

Hallman: I'm originally from Chicago, Illinois. (Southside)

Hallman's desire to change her life was shaped long before Spokane. Trauma entered early, shaping how she understood safety, belonging, and her own voice. Her childhood included periods of ridicule tied to family circumstances, conflicts that at times escalated into physical altercations with peers and moments of deep embarrassment.

Hallman: Growing up as a young Black girl and now a Black woman, trauma was very devastating for me. As a teenager, I was abused. You don't tell anyone because you believe it's your fault. I didn't have many friends. Writing became my safety. Words were my friend. Being the youngest in my family, I felt like I had no voice because no one really listened to me.

We also had race riots when I was in high school in Chicago. We had to fight just to get to our classes. Safety was my writing.

A Woman's Worth Gala

The fourth annual A Woman's Worth Gala will take place 6-8:30 p.m. April 24 at the DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel Spokane City Center. For ticket information, contact Gaye Hallman at (509) 385-7074 or ghallman@aww.community.

That was my safety.

Her early experiences created layers of trauma that would later shape both her struggles and her calling.

Hallman: When I came into Spokane in 1997, I had just been released from incarceration, a halfway house in 1996. I'd been trying to build my life from that, and it was very difficult. My brother had been trying to get me to come for a long time, but I wasn't ready. When I was ready, I called him and told him I was ready to change my life and see what's on the other side of fear.

He sent for me and my family, and I worked for him until I could spread my wings and find my way. During that time, it was very hard. I worked with my brother for over twenty-something years until I branched out into the Spokane community.

Hallman: In 1997, I joined a church called Jesus Is The Answer (JITA). Being under Pastor Shon Davis really made me who I am today. He created that foundation for me and allowed me to do the things that were in my heart, which were to help women.

Through JITA, Hallman began developing programs that would eventually evolve into her nonprofit work.

Hallman: One program was Poetry Praise. It grew from about 150 people to close to 600 people annually. We had dancers, singers, poets, writers—people ministering their gifts to the community. I did that for ten years.

She shares that God later instructed her to create a space simply called "Open House."

Hallman: God told me to do an open house for women. We dedicated the entire day to the Lord. Whoever came through the door, we prayed for them before they left. We did that once a month for ten years. Women's lives

were transformed. It was amazing.

Despite her growing leadership, systemic barriers followed her as she tried to reestablish herself in society.

Hallman: Employment was the hardest thing. When it was time to find a job, they asked if you had been incarcerated. I would get jobs that lasted three to six months, and then my background check would come back and they would let me go.

It's very hard to get a job with a criminal background. No one really wants you to work for them.

One interviewer told me it didn't matter if it had been forty years—she still wouldn't hire me. My heart sunk. I thought, what's the use? But I knew in my heart I was meant to do more than what my life already showed me.

That moment became a vow.

Hallman: I told myself I had to do something. If it was this hard for me, imagine what other women were going through. I vowed I would do everything I needed to do to help other women, and helping them would also help myself.

Her understanding of purpose grew from lived experience.

Hallman: I believe everything happens for a reason. I didn't want incarceration, but I believe it was the path for me—not for me, but for other women who may not have been as strong. I went from jail to women's boot camp to recovery to a halfway house. That was five years.

People told me I would never amount to anything, and you begin to believe it. But I knew in my heart I was not born to live that type of life.

Although I gave up sometimes, the dream inside of me didn't. I had to keep going even when I got tired. It took me over twenty years to get

A Woman's Worth established, but I knew it was needed.

A Woman's Worth officially became a nonprofit in 2022, though the work had been unfolding for decades through ministry, mentorship, and community care.

Hallman: Women who are incarcerated want to live too. They want to see their kids. They want a life. They can build themselves up and see that they are who God says they are, not who people say they are. My past doesn't define who I am.

I wrote a poem called My Past Didn't See Me. Although my past was dark and dreary, my past didn't see me today. But God could.

I tell women they can make it. I just need them to believe they are capable. I am living proof that it is possible.

For Hallman, healing begins with relationship and trust—especially for Black women carrying layered trauma.

Hallman: It's very hard for Black women to trust. You have to spend time. You have to be authentic, transparent, and vulnerable. Healing can't happen without relationship. We just need to be heard.

When asked what she wants the world to understand about trauma, Black women, and incarceration, her answer is simple but profound.

Hallman: Because Black women have been through trauma and incarceration and their lives went down a different path than they wanted, that doesn't mean their future can't be brighter or impactful. We have to have a changed mindset. Once we know we are capable of doing better, it creates a domino effect that helps other women too.

Today, Hallman stands as both witness and guide—a bridge between survival and restoration, between silence and voice, between past harm and future healing. Through A Woman's Worth, she continues to create spaces where women are reminded that redemption is possible, healing is communal, and no life is finished simply because it took a difficult path.

DUNBAR

Continued from 1

was a lot of response to the presentation, about a year later my husband got a call to pastor in Spokane, and I was asked to run a program similar to what I was doing in Michigan dealing with victims of abuse. This year makes 26 years.

Q: Why is this work so important to you?

Dunbar: Our first connection with domestic violence was one of our church members who came to our door one morning bleeding and crying because her husband had beaten her. I was not really exposed to that kind of physical abuse before, but it opened my eyes because she was a church member.

When I continued my education and became a counselor, the issue came back to me. During my master's program, I did my internship at a domestic violence shelter, and that is where I came in contact with a lot of women who had been abused. I was shocked that many had a religious background, and they stayed because of religion.

Q: What do you want people to understand about religious abuse?

Dunbar: My passion has always been to let people understand the danger of religious abuse because that is something a lot of people do not want to touch. When you talk about religion, people think you are trying to get them to join your church.

The Bible has been used in many ways to keep individuals trapped in abusive relationships. For me, the

worst form of abuse is religious abuse because it is bound up with a person's life here and also their future. There are lots of women, and men too, who stay in abusive relationships because they do not want to be condemned by God or incur His wrath. They stay because it is bound up with their salvation.

That is a distortion, twisted scriptures. My goal is to untwist the scriptures.

Q: What programs do you operate to support the community?

Dunbar: We have a food pantry called Cleone's Closet Food Pantry and Cleone's Closet clothing bank, and everything we do is free. We operate Hope Center, where we collaborate with the police department and victim advocacy, and we have a warehouse where donations are stored and distributed to the community.

We also run Men of Compassion, which helps abusive men understand their role in ending domestic violence and helps them get healing because many of those men have been abused also.

We have YADA, Youth Against Dating and Domestic Abuse, where we collaborate with schools, assist students going into college with scholarships, and educate youth about preventing domestic violence in the community.

Q: How do we break the idea that abuse is "not our business"?

Dunbar: We have to continue community education and keep speaking out. This situation is intergenerational. If we do not do something, the impact continues from generation to generation. It affects the entire family.

It is important to let men know we hear them because men are victims too. This is not a male issue or a female issue. It is a sin issue. Until we stop blaming and shaming each other, we are not going to get anywhere.

Q: What does safety truly mean for a survivor?

Dunbar: Safety is when everyone recognizes they have a right to be here, a right to be themselves, who God created them to be. We have a right to think and to feel and to act. When we have the freedom to exercise those rights, that is safety.

Q: How are trauma and mental health connected to abuse?

Dunbar: Anyone who has been abused has dealt with trauma. Trauma affects us mentally, physically, and spiritually. Sometimes people have pain and do not know where it is coming from. There can be memory loss, disassociation, panic attacks, fibromyalgia, and many physical ailments because of trauma.

When people recognize trauma, they often isolate, and that is the worst thing to do. Abuse occurs in isolation. People learn to hide

it, but it impacts their work and relationships.

Q: What role does shame play?

Dunbar: Shame gets at the core of our value and our worth. When people have been told many times that they are no good, they begin to believe they do not deserve anything better. Shame prevents people from recognizing their worth and pursuing something better.

Q: What message of hope would you share with someone experiencing abuse?

Dunbar: Hope looks like people understanding that they are valuable, that they are worthy, and that they do not deserve to be abused. There is help out there, and they need to reach out for help.

If we see something, we should say something. Not invasively, just ask, "Are you OK? Is there anything I can do?" We have to genuinely care, not only by words but also by deeds.

For Dr. Mable Dunbar, the work of ending domestic violence is ultimately about restoring dignity to those society often overlooks. She grounds her mission in Luke 4:18, reminding communities that the calling is "to heal the brokenhearted, to set at liberty those who are bruised." In caring for the least of these, she believes communities do more than help survivors heal. They reflect the compassion and responsibility required to heal one another.

See FLOWERS, 15

FLOWERS

Continued from 1

labor of teaching, counseling, and caretaking, while decision-making authority has often remained elsewhere. At Spokane International Academy, Principal Morgen Flowers quietly and consistently disrupts that tradition—not through spectacle, but through presence, systems, and trust.

"I think my presence matters in a lot of ways because it expands what feels possible for students and families," Flowers says. "In many ways it's sort of a quiet challenge to why narratives are limited about who leads and who gets

to decide what happens and whose voice carries weight in educational spaces."

Flowers' leadership is deeply rooted in Spokane. She first arrived in 1998 to attend Gonzaga University, later returning for graduate school and building a career that spans teaching, counseling, and administration. She holds degrees in English literature, school counseling, teaching, and educational administration—not, she explains, as an academic flex, but because each credential was necessary to do the work she felt called to do.

"It wasn't that I set out to do that," she says of earning

WELLNESS

FROM THE WATER'S EDGE

Climate change is real!

It's hard to accept how much the climate has changed in Minnesota. In October 2025, members of the Ubuntu Fly Anglers Network met in the Twin Cities. Thanks to GPS we easily traveled back and forth throughout the region enjoying the beautiful scenery. It's not just the place of two neighboring towns, St. Paul and Minneapolis, it's also the place of twin rivers: the mighty Mississippi and the Minnesota. And, a place of rich Indigenous history.



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



We took walks in quiet neighborhoods, shopped for groceries in a place similar to our Huckleberries and just delighted in being there. For three days we enjoyed their early Fall weather, had some great local soul food and floated and fly fished the Mississippi River. New and old guide friends shared their river wisdom and their favorite fly and the river produced some really nice resident smallmouth bass.

On one afternoon we hung out with mostly Black and Brown kids and a few parents at Hidden Falls Regional Park in St. Paul. We learned that the park is part of a broader sacred, spiritual landscape for both the Lakota and Ojibwe tribes. Folks from "Brown Folks Fishing" and "Outdoor Afro" brought their children to the park. Our friend Tammy, herself of Lakota descent and a native of St. Paul, was our

lead coordinator. After a few brief introductions we had young people casting lines of yarn attached to practice fly rods.

My Godmother Karen, who lives in Minneapolis, delivered boxes of pizza and we enjoyed a picnic when the casting was done. After a group photo everyone headed for home. The people we encountered were all smiles and happy to have us there. The park and the two cities were relatively peaceful places back then. There were no signs of the impending "climate change."

Minnesota is known for its harsh winters but Minnesotans know how to have fun in the freezing cold. They cross-country ski to work or school, go sledding in the parks, play hockey on frozen ponds

and drag little shacks onto one of their many frozen lakes and fish through the ice. They embrace the cold. However, it's not just the harsh winter weather that came a few months after our visit to the Twin Cities. By December an army of armed federal agents descended on them and launched Operation Metro Surge. Hmm--the word "surge" is strikingly similar to the word "purge."

Once quiet streets turned quickly into crime scenes. Black and brown people were being hunted by masked agents wearing body armor and carrying weapons designed for combat. They began patrolling the streets on foot and in unmarked cars. Their proclaimed objective: to end corruption and fraud, to rid the city of dangerous illegal immigrants (particularly the So-malis), to find, arrest and deport those they deemed not worthy of living the American dream. Four Lakota men were racially profiled, picked up and detained--is there anyone more worthy of being here than our indigenous neighbors?

Once quiet neighborhoods now smell of tear gas and pepper spray and blood stains their frozen streets. The sounds of chanting crowds of protesters, the warning sounds of blaring whistles, honking horns and even



Ubuntu Fly Anglers pose outside Minneapolis Hidden Falls Park.

COURTESY

gun shots fill their winter air. Agents now go door to door randomly stopping and assaulting anyone who appears to be nonwhite--non-American--the enemy. One of my friends who was there when George Floyd was killed said in disbelief, "Damn bro, they're even shooting white people!"

It's hard to imagine what has happened there. The amount of violence and trauma that has been inflicted may never heal. It is painful to hear from our new friends who live there just how much their world has changed. Some of them are afraid to leave their homes or to let their children play outside or go for a walk on their once quiet treelined streets.

The scene of a young child used as bait by armed agents, cars blocked by unmarked ICE vehicles and people being dragged from their homes will forever haunt us and them, especially their chil-

dren. As will the scenes of Renee Good and Alex Pretti being shot multiple times in broad daylight by those who later showed no remorse or face severe consequences for their actions. Good and Pretti were perceived to be their enemy and a threat to their personal safety.

It is blatantly obvious to some that what started in December in Minnesota and continues to happen is not about the stated mission of the Department of Homeland Security. Turning once quiet neighborhoods, parks and streets into war zones, and terrorizing the area's citizens including their children, reeks of something else, an extreme abuse of power! It's not a coincidence that this is happening in Minnesota, a blue State. But, is the kind of retaliation that could turn on any one of us--people of color wherever we are found.

Wreckless acts of violence are happening across our country and in plain sight. What happened at the Capital on Jan. 6, 2021, now pales in comparison to what's happening now.

Thank you, Minnesotans, for showing us what real courage looks like in the face of "climate change"--for continuing to stand up and show up by the thousands to protect your neighbors and those most at risk. Thank you for showing the rest of us how to turn homes, schools and churches into food and basic needs pantries and distribution centers. Thank you for putting your lives at risk for others. Thank you for showing the rest of us, in real time, what, "It takes a village" looks like. We see you!

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

Celebrating Women's History Month with unsung 'shero' Claudette Colvin

BLACK GENEALOGY

We lost a little-known civil rights pioneer on Jan. 13. Claudette Colvin, born on Sept. 5, 1939, in Birmingham, Alabama, died in Texas of natural causes.

Before Rosa Parks, there was Claudette Colvin, an African American teenager who knew her constitutional rights and refused to give up her bus seat to a white woman. Claudette had been studying Black History at Booker T. Washington High School for nearly the entire month of February. Washington High School in Montgomery, Alabama, was segregated, as many schools in the South were at the time.

On March 2, 1955, Claudette was heading home on a segregated Highland Garden bus. She boarded with three friends and took a window seat on the left side, behind the white section, placing her books on her lap. One friend sat next to Claudette, and the other two sat across the aisle on the right.

There were ten "white" seats at the front of the bus, and when they were occupied, African Americans were expected to give up their seats and move to the back. Soon,

all ten seats were filled, and a white woman was standing. The bus driver ordered Claudette to move back. Inspired by Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, Claudette refused to move. That day, she described her feelings: "I felt like Sojourner Truth was pushing down on one shoulder and Harriet Tubman pushing on the other -- saying, 'Sit down, girl. I was glued to my seat.'"

Claudette's friends got up, leaving three empty seats in that row, but the white woman continued to stand, apparently because Claudette was sitting there. Claudette was dragged off the bus and handcuffed by the police when she refused to get up. "It's my constitutional right to sit here as much as that lady. I paid my fare. It's my constitutional right," she cried. She was charged with four counts but convicted of one -- assaulting a policeman. She was happy and proud to have challenged the law.

However, not all were happy. Claudette was shunned by her friends when she returned to school and was not in-

cluded from social events. Some people thought she was crazy, and parents did not want their children to associate with her. She was marked as a juvenile delinquent and now has a criminal record.

Claudette loved school, especially Miss Geraldine Nesbitt's class. It was supposed to be an English Literature class, but Ms. Nesbitt used literature to teach life. Claudette studied Black History and much more. "She taught us the world through literature," Claudette reminisced. She learned about the civil rights movement in school and was a member of the NAACP Youth Council.

Nine months later, on Dec. 2, 1955, Rosa Parks was arrested and jailed for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger. Her situation was similar to Claudette's, but Mrs. Parks was treated differently. The driver called the police, who asked Parks to stand and then escorted her off the bus. She was arrested, fingerprinted, and allowed to make a phone call. The next morning, Mrs. Parks pleaded not guilty and paid a \$10 fine and court costs. When she left the jail, she was warmly greeted by several hundred supporters and embraced by the community. Mrs. Parks' arrest was the catalyst for the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Leaders of the civil rights movement considered Claudette the catalyst for the boycott, but they were concerned about how she would be perceived. Given her age, working class background, and pregnancy, they decided to feature Rosa Parks, a civil rights activist, as the face of the movement. Mrs. Parks was older, married, and engaged in civil rights.

Claudette was one of four plaintiffs in the lawsuit challenging Alabama's segregation statutes. Browder v. Gayle was filed in June 1956, and three federal judges ruled that Montgomery's bus segregation violated the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment. The ruling was appealed, but

the U.S. Supreme Court upheld it, forcing the city to end its segregation

policies. Claudette's record was expunged in 2021, and she

lived long enough to experience the 70th Anniversary of the Bus Boycott.

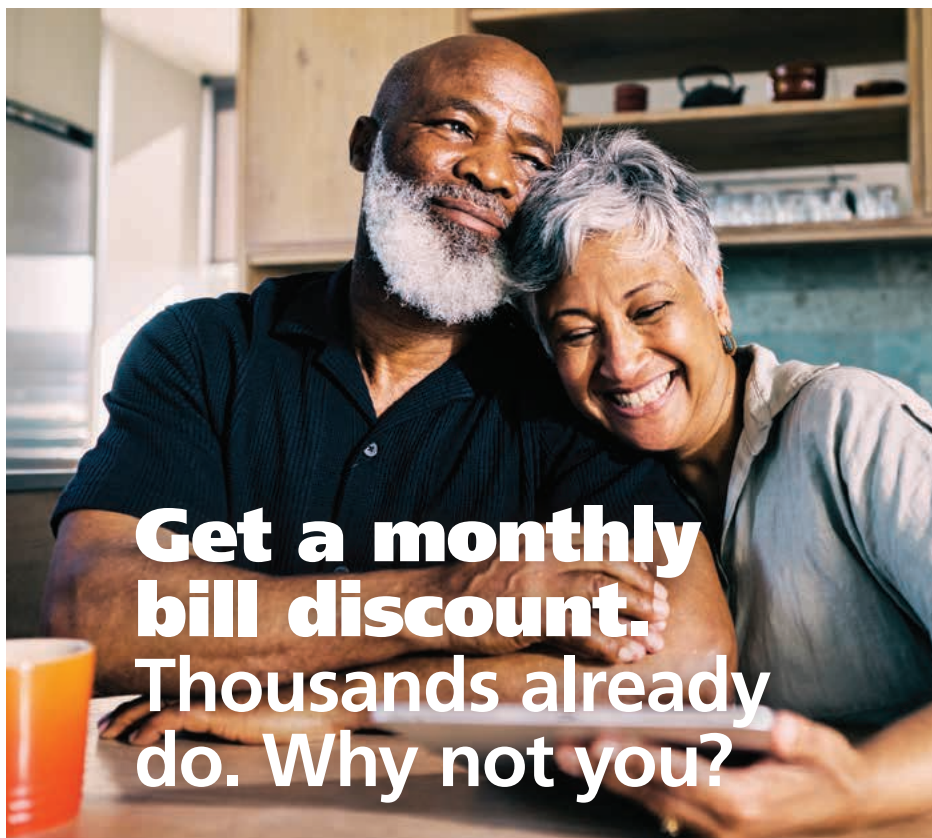


By Patricia Bayonne-Johnson
THE BLACK LENS
CONTRIBUTOR



Claudette Colvin is pictured at Booker T. Washington Magnet High School in Montgomery, Alabama, on Feb. 3, 2005.

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SHADES OF MOTHERHOOD NETWORK

WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH: HONORING MOTHERHOOD AND THE SACRED STRENGTH OF WOMEN OF COLOR

DEEP ROOTS, STRONG WOMEN

There is a saying that “This is a man’s world, but it wouldn’t be nothing without a woman or a girl.” During the month of March, as we celebrate Women’s History Month, the Shades of Motherhood Network stands in that truth with deep reverence and gratitude. Women’s History Month is more than a moment of recognition—it is a sacred opportunity to honor the lived experiences, strength, and leadership of women, especially women of color whose stories have often been overlooked yet have always been foundational.

At the heart of women’s history is motherhood—a sacred calling shaped by resilience, faith, wisdom, and an unyielding commitment to future generations. To honor Women’s History Month is to honor the mothers—biological, spiritual, and communal—who have carried families and communities through centuries of challenge while planting seeds of hope.

At the Shades of Motherhood Network, we recognize that motherhood for women of color has never existed in a vacuum. It has been shaped by systems, struggles, and societal expectations, yet strengthened by culture, spirituality, and an ancestral legacy of survival. From enslaved women

who nurtured children in conditions meant to strip away humanity, to modern-day mothers advocating for equitable healthcare, education, and safety, the role of motherhood has always been both personal and political.

Historically, Black mothers were forced to mother under unimaginable circumstances. Enslaved women gave birth without autonomy over their own bodies, often raising children who could be taken away at any moment. Yet even in bondage, Black women created traditions, passed down stories, whispered prayers, and instilled dignity and identity in their children. Motherhood became an act of resistance—a declaration that love would survive oppression. Today, the Shades of Motherhood Network continues that legacy by standing beside mothers as they navigate their own journeys with dignity, support, and advocacy.

After emancipation, Black mothers built families and communities amid segregation, racial violence, and economic exclusion. They became the backbone of churches, schools, and neighborhoods—stretching limited resources, turning kitchens into centers of nourishment, and raising leaders, thinkers, artists,



By Stephy Nobles-Beans
THE BLACK LENS
CONTRIBUTOR



and activists. Their motherhood was not only about survival—it was about vision. At Shades of Motherhood Network, we carry that vision forward by equipping mothers with resources, peer support, and a community that sees and values them.

For women of color today, motherhood still carries layers of complexity. Black and Brown mothers are more likely to face disparities in maternal health, childbirth outcomes, and access to quality care. They often navigate motherhood while combating stereotypes that question their competence, strength, and worth. Yet despite these realities, women of color continue to mother with grace, determination, and fierce love. Through advocacy, education, and compassionate care, the

Shades of Motherhood Network works to ensure that every mother is supported, heard, and empowered in her journey.

Women’s History Month reminds us that motherhood itself is leadership. Women of color lead by teaching their children how to navigate a world that may not always affirm them. They lead by modeling resilience, self-respect, faith, and cultural pride. They lead by advocating—for their children in schools, in medical spaces, and in society at large. At the Shades of Motherhood Network, we see mothers as leaders and champions in their families and communities.

Motherhood in communities of color is deeply communal. The phrase “it takes a village” is not symbolic—it is lived truth. Aunties, grandmothers, godmothers, mentors, and church mothers have long stepped in to nurture, guide, and protect. This collective approach to motherhood is the very foundation of the Shades of Motherhood Network, where peer support and sisterhood create a circle of care that surrounds every family.

Women’s History Month also calls us to honor the emotional labor of motherhood. Women of color often carry the weight of generational trauma while striving to raise emotionally healthy children. They teach joy

alongside vigilance, hope alongside caution, and dreams alongside wisdom. This sacred work requires deep emotional strength and spiritual grounding. Through prayer, peer support, mental health resources, and compassionate connection, the Shades of Motherhood Network walks alongside mothers in this journey.

Faith has long been a cornerstone of motherhood for many women of color. Prayer, scripture, and spiritual traditions have provided comfort and direction in uncertain times. Mothers have prayed their children through danger, disappointment, and destiny. Their faith has been a quiet yet powerful force shaping generations—and it remains at the heart of the care and encouragement offered through the Shades of Motherhood Network.

As we celebrate Women’s History Month in March, we uplift the stories of mothers—past and present—who may never make history books but whose influence is undeniable. The mother who worked multiple jobs yet never missed a school event. The grandmother who raised grandchildren when sacrifice was required. The single mother who built stability from struggle. The spiritual mother who poured into children not her own. These are the women we

honor and serve through the Shades of Motherhood Network.

Honoring motherhood during Women’s History Month also means committing to action. It means advocating for policies that protect maternal health, supporting mental and emotional wellness, and creating safe spaces where women of color are seen, heard, and valued. At the Shades of Motherhood Network, we believe celebration must be accompanied by support, and reflection must lead to impact.

Ultimately, Women’s History Month reminds us that motherhood is legacy work. Every lesson taught, every prayer whispered, every sacrifice made contributes to the unfolding story of women’s history. Women of color are not only raising children—they are shaping the future.

To honor mothers is to honor strength wrapped in tenderness, wisdom rooted in experience, and love that refuses to quit. Their motherhood is history in motion—powerful, purposeful, and worthy of celebration not just in March, but every single day.

For more information regarding the Shades of Motherhood Network, please visit theshadesofmotherhoodnetwork.org.

With love and honor,
Shades of Motherhood Network

ROOTS AND WINGS

WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

In the intricate tapestry of parenting, love serves as the vibrant thread that weaves together the bond between parent and child. This love is not merely an emotion; it is the foundation upon which a child’s character and sense of self are built. Just like a seed planted in fertile soil, love nurtures a child’s growth, helping them flourish in a world that often demands resilience and courage.

From the earliest moments of life, a child thrives on love. This foundational affection acts as water, quenching their thirst for connection and security. When a parent holds their child close, kisses their forehead, or whispers words of affirmation, it is akin to the sun shining down on a budding plant, providing warmth and light essential for growth. These small acts of love prepare children to face the world with confidence and a sense of belonging.

As children grow, they soak up the love and support around them, allowing their emotional and social capabilities to blossom. Love fosters an environment where children feel safe to express themselves, explore, and take risks. They learn empathy and compassion, not just from words, but through the actions and love they receive from their parents. When children experience unconditional love, they develop a strong sense of self-worth and an understanding that they are valued and capable. This affirmation plays a crucial role in shaping their views



By Leola Rouse
THE BLACK LENS
CONTRIBUTOR



toward themselves and others, forming the backbone of their future relationships.

Moreover, love within the parent-child relationship is integral to emotional intelligence. Children who receive love are more likely to develop healthy coping mechanisms and strong interpersonal skills. They learn to navigate their feelings and understand the emotions of others, which contributes to their ability to form meaningful connections throughout life. Celebrating their achievements, comforting them in failure, and acknowledging their feelings are all manifestations of love that reinforce their ability to relate to the world around them.

However, the absence of love tells a different story. When love is withheld, the consequences can be profound and damaging. A child who grows up without affection may feel neglected, leading to feelings of insecurity and unworthiness. Just like a seed deprived of water and sunlight, these children

struggle to thrive. They may develop emotional walls, fear of rejection, or become overly cautious in relationships. Without the nurturing presence of love, they often grapple with anxiety and fear, which can inhibit their ability to engage with others and explore their surroundings.

The damage inflicted by a loveless environment can extend into adulthood, affecting personal relationships, mental health, and self-esteem. Children who don’t receive the love they need often find it challenging to express love themselves or trust others, perpetuating a cycle of emotional distance that can last for generations. They may carry wounds from their childhood that manifest in various ways, including difficulty forming attachments, struggles with intimacy, or challenges in maintaining friendships and partnerships.

Research has shown that love and positive interactions in early childhood can lead to healthier brain development. Conversely, children exposed to neglect or emotional unavailability are more likely to face cognitive challenges, and implement maladaptive behaviors in their relationships. The lack of love can create a void that fills their hearts with doubt and fear, affecting their ability to connect with others and engage with the world.

In nurturing our children, it’s essential to remember that love is not simply an abstract concept; it is an

active, ongoing practice. It requires intention, consistency, and vulnerability. As parents, we must strive to create a nurturing environment where our children can grow, not just physically but emotionally and socially. Practicing active listening, spending quality time, and showing appreciation are all fundamental components of love that need to be expressed regularly.

So, what has love got to do with it? Everything. It is the lifeblood of healthy relationships and emotional well-being. As we plant the seeds of love in our children’s lives, we arm them with the tools they need to flourish in the world. It is our responsibility to ensure that love flows freely, nurturing their growth, shaping their identities, and setting the stage for their futures.

Let us remember that every hug, every word of encouragement, and every moment spent together is a vital part of this loving cultivation process. Our children deserve to know that they are deeply, unconditionally loved, for that is the foundation upon which they will build their lives. In a world that can sometimes feel harsh and unforgiving, let love be the compass that guides both us and our children, reminding us all of the profound impact of affection, empathy, and connection. Through love, we can create a nurturing environment that allows our children to flourish, thrive, and carry forward the legacy of love to the next generation, ensuring that they too

ANYLA'S TAKE

When girlhood is shortened – Black girls roots of women’s history

Women’s History Month often honors women after they have achieved something measurable. Yet many women’s histories, particularly Black women’s, begin much earlier, in girlhoods that required resilience long before recognition.

Research from the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality found Black girls are perceived as older, less innocent, and more responsible for their actions than their peers, starting as young as age 5. This phenomenon, known as adultification bias, has shaped how Black girls are disciplined in schools, protected from harm, and believed when abuse occurs.

In Washington state classrooms, Black girls are disproportionately disciplined and pushed out, according to OSPI data. A girl in South Seattle recalls being suspended repeatedly for “attitude,” while a white peer exhibiting the same behavior was labeled “emotional.” These early experiences often teach Black girls that safety is conditional.

This bias is especially dangerous when it intersects with grooming. Black girls are more likely to be targeted by older men who exploit gaps in protection, emotional neglect or financial need. A 2022 National Black Women’s Justice Institute report highlights Black girls experience higher rates of sexual exploitation, yet are less likely to see perpetrators prosecuted.

One girl in Tacoma was 13 when a man nearly twice her age began offering rides home, food and attention. When the relationship became sexual, adults whispered she was “fast.” Years later, she learned the word for what happened:



By Anyla McDonald
THE BLACK LENS
CONTRIBUTOR



grooming. Her story never made news, but she broke the cycle by naming it and seeking healing.

Teen pregnancy is discussed without this context. Washington State Department of Health data shows Black teens experience higher pregnancy rates than peers, reflecting gaps in protection, health care advocacy and accountability. Many of these girls stayed in school anyway, balancing motherhood and coursework with little institutional support.

Poet and educator Nikkita Oliver (Seattle) has spoken publicly about how Black girls are forced into adulthood prematurely, yet are expected to perform excellence without error. Their survival, she argues, is political.

Women’s history must include these beginnings, the girls who endured quietly and became women anyway.

To Black women reading this: Your resilience did not start with success. It started with survival. And that strength is not invisible, it is foundational.

Washington state resources

- Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs (WCSAP)
- REST (Seattle) – Survivors of exploitation
- YWCA Tri-Cities
- OSPI Equity & Civil Rights Office

IN MEMORIAM

REST IN POWER

in Memoriam



WOODIE KING, JR.
(JAN. 29, 2026)

Woodie King Jr., who insisted that Black life, in all its beauty and complexity, belonged on America's stages, died Thursday, Jan. 29. He was 88. For nearly six decades, King coaxed brilliance from artists. His New Federal Theatre, founded in 1970, became a sanctuary for long-ignored voices. The company produced works that would become cornerstones of Black theatrical history and productions featuring actors who would later become household names.



JOHN FORTÉ
(JAN. 12, 2025)

John Forté started his career off as a record producer where he connected with the Fugees, inspiring him to start recording music. Forté's own albums failed to make a splash, leading him to look for more money to continue recording. He agreed to be a middleman in a plot to transport \$1.4 million of cocaine, but instead walked into a sting. Following his pardon by President George W. Bush, Forté continued his career in music.



TRACY SCROGGINS
(FEB. 9, 2026)

Tracy Scroggins spent his decadelong NFL career with the Detroit Lions, becoming the team's third-ranked player for all-time sacks. Scroggins didn't let his legacy end there; he was a critic of the league's disregard for chronic traumatic encephalopathy, a degenerative brain disease resulting from repeated head impacts. He filed a lawsuit against the NFL before its 2015 settlement.



NORMAN C. FRANCIS
(FEB. 18, 2026)

Norman C. Francis was an academic who served as president of Xavier University of Louisiana from 1968 to 2015. He was the first Black president of the school, and the second African American to serve as president of a Catholic university in the U.S. Francis served as chairman of the state agency in charge of recovery planning after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. He received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from George W. Bush in 2006.



DON BRYANT
(DEC. 26, 2025)

Don Bryant began his career in music making covers of '60s hits with Hi Records. At a venue he was to perform at, a girl and her brother insisted she be able to sing with the band. "She tore the house down," Bryant said. The girl, Ann Peebles, caught the attention of Hi Records, and Bryant would soon become a songwriter for her, and eventually marry her. His most famous song, "I Can't Stand the Rain," came to be after Peebles lamented a sudden downpour ruining a concert.



SHIRLEY RAINES
(JAN. 27, 2026)

Known better to her TikTok followers as "Beauty 2 The Streetz," Shirley Raines will be remembered for her work advocating for and helping homeless people under her nonprofit of the same name. The organization provides showers, hair coloring and beauty services to people experiencing homelessness. Raines was recognized as CNN's "Hero of the Year" in 2021 for her work.

SANFORD ASCENDS: A TV SON REMEMBERED, THE PASTOR DEMOND WILSON NOT FORGOTTEN

By Edmond W. Davis
THE BLACK LENS

The passing of Demond Wilson, on Jan. 30, forever known to generations as Lamont Sanford, marks more than the loss of a beloved actor. It represents the closing of a chapter in American cultural history—one that blended laughter with truth, faith with fortitude, and Black family life with entrepreneurial dignity at a time when such portrayals were both rare and courageous. Wilson was 79 years old. His son confirmed that he passed peacefully at home in Palm Springs following complications from cancer. Demond was ordained as a minister, founded Restoration House of God, and spent years preaching, teaching, and doing ministry work—often focusing on spiritual renewal, personal responsibility and redemption. He wrote Christian books and spoke openly about how his faith reshaped his identity beyond television fame.

From 1972 to 1977, Sanford and Son was nothing short of pioneering. At its center was the complicated, loving, and often combustible relationship between Lamont Sanford and his father Fred, portrayed by the legendary Redd Foxx. Where Fred Sanford was theatrical chaos, Lamont was calm and showed resolve. Where the insults flew, Lamont's silences spoke volumes. He was the moral compass, the thinker, the son trying to love a difficult father without losing himself in the process.

That balance mirrored Wilson's real life. Far from the "Big Dummy" Fred Sanford jokingly labeled him, Wilson was thoughtful, disciplined, and spiritually curious. In later interviews, Wilson revealed a sobering truth of early 1970s television: both he and Foxx sometimes carried pis-



American actors Red Foxx (1922-91), left, and the recently deceased Demond Wilson in a still from the television series, "Sanford and Son," in 1974. Wilson died Jan. 30.

tols on set during live tapings. This was not bravado—it was survival. In a racially tense America, two outspoken Black men headlining a national hit sitcom understood that visibility could also invite danger. The laughter America enjoyed each week was layered over real fear, courage, and awareness.

What made Sanford and Son revolutionary was not just its humor, but its premise. It portrayed a single African American father and son as entrepreneurs, junk dealers running a family business. Over 50 years ago, American television showed Black men working together, disagreeing, reconciling, and building something of their own. Ironically, when the show first aired, Black Americans had one of the highest marriage rates in the nation. Today, Black families rank among the lowest in marriage statistics—yet there has been no reboot, no modern equivalent centering a Black father and son running a business together. That absence is telling. Perhaps it is also a call.

In the recent heightened fall-

out of debaucherous Hollywood tales of sexual abuse and other improprieties among several celebrities, we have watched giants fall. Probably most poignant aspect of Wilson's entertainment legacy may be how he recognized Hollywood's underbelly and carefully avoided it. Wilson shared in recent years how he evaded scandal by refusing to place himself in environments that would compromise his integrity and reputation, exhibiting a keen discernment of just how exploitative the entertainment industry was, is, and has always been, and how he was able to uphold his integrity and ethics. His restraint stands as a true testament to fortitude and temperance, a bold and unapologetic strength that protected not only his career but his character.

As we reflect on Wilson's passing, perhaps the most fitting tribute is to ask what he might ask of us now: Why have we stopped telling stories that uplift Black fatherhood, Black enterprise, and Black family continuity? And if we once did it—boldly, successfully, and truthfully—why not again?

JACKSON

Continued from 3

forward.

In 1971, he founded Operation PUSH, later expanding it into the Rainbow PUSH Coalition. PUSH blended protest with policy, urging corporations to hire Black executives, contract with minority-owned businesses, and invest in underserved communities. Jackson believed that civil rights without economic rights left freedom incomplete.

His message echoed the words of Micah 6:8: "He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" Justice, mercy, humility, these themes defined his preaching and activism.

By the 1980s, Jackson stepped onto the national political stage. In 1984 and 1988, he ran for President of the United States, becoming the first African American candidate to build a viable campaign within a major political party. His "Rainbow Coalition" united African Americans, working-class whites, Latinos, Native Americans, labor unions, and farmers under a shared vision of opportunity and equity. His rallying cry, "Keep Hope Alive," became one of the most enduring phrases in American political culture, paving the way for future leaders and expanding the nation's democratic imagination.

Beyond domestic politics, Jackson became a global humanitarian. He negotiated the release of American prisoners in Syria and Cuba during the 1980s and advocated for the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa. He entered rooms others could not and spoke where diplomacy had stalled.

Yet his life was not without imperfection. In the early 2000s, he publicly acknowledged an extramarital affair that resulted in the birth of a daughter. The rev-



Jackson in 2025

elation wounded his public image. Still, he addressed the matter openly and returned to public service, continuing his advocacy through

Rainbow PUSH and mentoring younger activists. His response reflected the truth of Romans 3:23, "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." Accountability and continued service marked that chapter of his journey.

Jackson's legacy is defined not merely by speeches but by presence. He stood with the Jena Six in Louisiana when racial tensions reignited national attention. He crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, honoring the legacy of Bloody Sunday. Even as Parkinson's disease slowed his body, he remained spiritually steadfast, appearing as recently as 2022 to inspire new generations to continue the work.

Through decades of change, Jackson registered millions of voters, challenged corporations toward accountability, pressed for educational access, and demanded economic justice. He moved comfortably between church sanctuaries and convention halls, protest lines and diplomatic missions. He remained, at heart, a preacher shaped by the Black church tradition: rhythmic, passionate, and uncompromising in hope.

Reverend Jesse Louis Jackson, Sr., moved people toward courage. He moved systems toward justice. He moved nations toward dialogue. He was not perfect, but he was present. Not flawless, but faithful.

Today, America reflects on a life that helped bend the arc of history. His message still echoes across generations, rooted in faith and fueled by perseverance.

"Keep hope alive."

BLACK BUSINESS DIRECTORY

3 Performance Institute –

Sports performance and physical therapy by Louis Hurd III. (509) 869-2344 or Louis@spokane3pi.com. 211 W. Second Ave., Spokane, 99205. Online at spokane3pi.com.

4AM Vintage –

Vintage clothing store owned by Christian Jones. (832) 652-4580 or coojones4am@gmail.com. 1009 N. Washington St., Suite A, Spokane, 99201. Instagram: 4am.spokane.

A Do Good Cleaning Service LLC –

Janitorial service by Daryl Givens Jr. (509) 714-8113 or dgiz-zle21@gmail.com.

A Man & A Truck –

Junk removal by Demetrius Bell. (509) 319-8860, (509) 319-7126 or amanandatruckspokane@gmail.com.

A Truly Reliable Cleaning Services LLC –

Janitorial service by Tatiana Ross. (678) 974-6907 or trulyreliablecleaning@gmail.com.

A Woman's Worth –

Woman Empowerment Group by Gaye Hallman. (509) 290-7687, (509) 385-7074 or ghallman@aww.community. 59 E. Queen Ave., Suite 210, Spokane, 99206.

Allie & Austin Accounting Services –

Bookkeeping by Dorothy Hood. (509) 242-3324 or dhood@allieaustin.com. P.O. Box 142207 Spokane Valley, 99214.

Allowing Change, LLC. –

Pre-Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, Certified Life & Relationship Coach Britney Richards (she/her). (509) 795-0376 or allowingchangelc@gmail.com. 9 S. Washington St., Suite 420, Spokane, 99201.

Andrews Care –

Assisted Living Facility for Adults with Disabilities owned by Ashley Andrews. (509) 939-7218 or ashandrews@comcast.net. P.O. Box 1629, Veradale, Wash., 99037.

BrewCity Flash Photography –

Photography services. (509) 862-9057 or email alexanderlockett@icloud.com. On Instagram @BrewCityFlash33 and Facebook as Leon Lockett.

Spokane Beard Papa's –

Cream puff bakery owned by Marc Bryant. (509) 290-5128 or spokanebeardpapas@gmail.com. 480 E. Sprague Ave., Suite 204, Spokane Valley, 99212.

Beauchamp and Chase –

Luxury Soaps and Comfort Wear by Genesis Veronon. (509) 608-1511 or beauchampandchase@gmail.com.

Bethely Entertainment Group –

Owned by Michael Bethely. (509) 710-1338 or mbethely@be2become.com. P.O. Box 28931, Spokane, 99228.

Betty Jean's BBQ –

Restaurant owned by Omar Jones. (509) 828-5931 or bettyjeansbbq@yahoo.com. 2926 E. 29th Ave., Spokane, 99223. Online at www.bettyjeansbbq.com, Instagram: Betty_jeans_bbq and Facebook: Bettyjeansbbq.

Black London's –

Barbershop. 1618 W. Second Ave., 99201, and 904 E. Wellesley Ave., 99207. (509) 537-1188 and (509) 309-7155. On Facebook as Black London's.

Brendan Blocker Realty Services –

Real Estate Agent Brendan Blocker. (509) 290-9645 or brendan.blocker@gmail.com. 4407 N. Division St., Suite 200, Spokane, 99207. Online at brendan.spokanearearealestate.com or Facebook: Blocker Real Estate.

Brittany Trambitas Hair Design –

Natural hair stylist Brittany Trambitas. (509) 768-3925 or btrambitas1228@gmail.com. 802 E. 29th Ave., Suite 14, Spokane, 99203.

Bummy Boss Clips & Beauty Supply –

NorthTown mall hair care. (509) 315-8963 or visit bummybossclips.appointedd.com.

B & B Pro Video –

Video Production by DeShawn Bedford and Michael Bethely. (509) 818-0864 or admin@bbpvideo.com. 1011 W. Railroad Alley, Suite 100, Spokane, 99201. Online at bbpvideo.com.

Cascadia Public House –

Restaurant owned by Jordan Smith. (509) 321-7051 or info@cascadiapublichouse.com. 6314 N. Ash St., Spokane, 99208.

Chicken-N-More –

Restaurant owned by Bob and Teresa Hemphill. (509) 838-5071 or manysmiles@comcast.net. 414½ W. Sprague Ave., Spokane, 99201.

Clear View –

Window cleaning by Limmie Smith. (509) 319-7526 or fresh00274@icloud.com. 3011 E. Columbia Ave., Apt 3, Spokane, 99208.

Compassionate Catering LLC –

Catering services. (509) 934-1106 or compassionatecatering2023@gmail.com. 1014 N. Pines Road, #120, Spokane Valley, 99216.

Dennis Mitchell Empowerment Seminars –

Education services by Dennis Mitchell. (509) 981-0646 or dennisspeaks@gmail.com. 9116 E. Sprague Ave., Suite 66, Spokane Valley, 99206.

DM & Owl –

Vending service by Deandre Meighan. (702) 954-2562 or dm.owl247@gmail.com.

Discovery Counseling Group LLC –

Mental/Behavioral Health Counseling by Melissa Mace. (509) 413-1193 or info@discovery-counseling.org. 1008 N. Washington St., Spokane, 99201.

Ebony Hair Salon –

Salon owned by Pam Thornton. (509) 325-4089 or ebhair3@yahoo.com. 3125 N. Division St., Spokane, 99207.

Ethan Mendoza-Pena Insurance Agency, LLC –

Insurance Agency owned by Ethan Mendoza-Pena, M.A. (509) 590-4726 or emendoza@farmersagent.com. 2010 N. Ruby St., Spokane, 99207.

Exclusive Barber Shop –

Barber shop owned by Ken Branch. (509) 862-4723 or branchingoutbiz@gmail.com. 1423 N. Argonne Road, Spokane Valley, 99212.

Fantasy Kleaning LLC –

Commercial Janitorial Service by Nathaniel Harris. (509) 890-0819 or fantasykleaning@gmail.com.

Fresh Soul –

Restaurant owned by Michael Brown. (509) 242-3377 or spokanereunion@gmail.com. 3029 E. Fifth Ave., Spokane, 99202. Online at freshsoulrestaurant.com.

Generations Barbershop –

Hair services. (509) 505-8745. 3140 N Division St Spokane, WA 99207. Online at generationsbarbershop.com.

Gorilla Park Music –

Music production by Brandon Batts. (256) 642-6463 or gorillapark2@gmail.com.

I Hear You Sis LLC –

Nutrition/health coaching by Prosparetti Coleman. (509) 995-7044 or ihearyousis1@gmail.com. Online at www.ihearyousis.com, TikTok: [tiktok.com/@ihearyousis](https://www.tiktok.com/@ihearyousis).

Inter-Tribal Beauty –

Master esthetician, Reiki practitioner and TV/film makeup artist Octavia Lewis. (509) 201-8664 or octavia@intertribalbeauty.co. 59 E. Queen Ave., Spokane, 99207. Online at www.intertribalbeauty.com, Instagram: [instagram.com/inter_tribal_beauty/](https://www.instagram.com/inter_tribal_beauty/).

Jewel of the North –

Gastro-pub co-owned by Brooks Thomas and AJ Hansen. 1924 W. Pacific Ave., (509) 862-4620.

JSandoval Real Estate –

Real Estate Broker Jacquelynne Sandoval. (509) 460-8197 or JSandoval@windermere.com. 1620 E. Indiana Ave., Suite 1250, Spokane Valley, 99216. Instagram: [instagram.com/therealestateauntie/](https://www.instagram.com/therealestateauntie/).

Koala Koi Massage –

Massage therapy by Joy Robinson. (509) 900-8968 or koalakoimassage@gmail.com. 1008 N. Washington St., Spokane, 99201.

Lacquered and Luxe –

Nail salon owned by Lisa-Mae Brown. (509) 993-7938 or brownlisa-mae@yahoo.com. 33 E. Lincoln Road, Suite 205, Spokane.

Larry's Barber & Styling –

Barbershop owned by Larry Roseman Sr. and operated with Master Barber QC. (509) 869-3773 or ljbarberman@aol.com. 3017 E. Fifth Ave., Spokane, 99202.

League of Women for Community Action, Non-profit, dba Southeast Day Care Center –

Nonprofit Child Care Center owned by League of Women for Community Action and Sug Villella, day care director. (509) 535-4794 or lwca@gmail.com. 2227 E. Hartson Ave., Spokane, 99202. Online at www.southeastdaycare.org.

Lilac City Legends Inc. –

Professional sports team owned by Michael Bethely. (509) 774-4704, info@lilacitylegends.com or michael@lilacitylegends.com. 631 S. Richard Allen Court, Suite 205, Spokane, 99202. Also at P.O. Box 28931, Spokane, 99228.

Mary Kay –

Beauty Consultant Nicole Mills. (509) 666-4929, (252) 365-4971 or MKwithNicole@gmail.com. Online at mkwithnicole.wordpress.com, Facebook: facebook.com/MKwithNicoleM.

Maxey Law Office –

Lawyer Bevan Maxey. (509) 326-0338 or info@maxeylaw.com. 1835 W. Broadway Ave., Spokane, 99201.

Mo-Nu Hair City –

Wig retailer Jackie Douglas. (509) 443-3193 or jazzyjackie9@yahoo.com. 4750 N. Division St., Spokane, 99207.

Moore's Boarding Home –

Residential care by Betsy Wilkerson. (509) 747-1745 or betsy@mooreassistedliving.com. 1803 W. Pacific Ave., Spokane, 99201.

MoVin Properties –

Property management by Latrice Williams. (509) 565-0325 or movinproperties@gmail.com. 5723 N. Division St., Spokane.

Natasha L. Hill, P.S. –

Lawyer Natasha Hill. (509) 350-2817, (509) 357-1757 or natasha@nlhlawoffices.com. Patsy Clark Mansion, 2208 W. Second Ave., Spokane, 99201.

New Beginnings Hair & Beauty Salon –

Hair styling and braiding salon owned by Stephanie Tullos-Brady. (509) 475-3556 or tullos_stephanie@yahoo.com. 3019 E. Fifth Ave., Spokane, 99202.

New Developed Nations –

Level 1 & 2 Substance Use and Mental Health Outpatient Facility owned by Rickey "Deekon" Jones. (509) 964-1747 or info@newdevelopednations.com. 3026 E. Fifth Ave. Spokane, 99202.

Nina Cherie Couture –

Bridal boutique owned by Nina Nichols. (509) 240-1782 or info@ninacherie.com. 827 W. First Ave., Suite 109, Spokane, 99201.

Northwest Seed & Pet –

Pet feed and care store. Two locations: 2422 E. Sprague Ave. at (509) 534-0694 and 7302 N. Division St. at (509) 484-7387

NW Martial Arts Club –

Call (509) 599-4760 or email tsdmasterj@yahoo.com. 3508 N. Nevada St., Spokane, 99205.

Operation Healthy Family –

Dental and youth programs by Tommy Williams. (509) 720-4645 or tommy@ohfspokane.org. Good News Dental is located at 3009 S. Mount Vernon St. at (509) 443-4409. Emmanuel Fitness is located at 631 S. Richard Allen Court at (509) 822-7058.

Parkview Early Learning Center –

Early Learning Center owned by Luc Jasmin. (509) 326-5610 or parkviewelc@gmail.com. 5122 N. Division St. Spokane, 99207.

Pro Mobile Auto Detail LLC –

Auto detailer Antonio Holder. (509) 995-9950 or antonio@spokaneautomobile.com.

Providential Solutions –

Counseling and coaching by Charina Carothers, LICSW. (509) 795-0150 or info@psumotalone.com. Richard Allen Court, Spokane, 99202.

Quality Blacktop & Striping –

Residential and commercial blacktop by Barrington Young Jr. (509) 251-6019 or young.barrington@gmail.com. 5759 E. Broadway Ave., Spokane, 99212.

Queen of Sheba –

Restaurant owned by Almaz Ainuu. (509) 328-3958 or info@queenofsheba.com. 2621 W. Mallon Ave., Suite 426, Spokane, 99201.

Quick and Classy Auto Customs –

Mechanic Jamar Dickerson. (509) 315-5090, (509) 795-6065 or 2gn2ythoon@gmail.com. 3627 E. Broadway Ave., Spokane.

Raging Success Holistic Financial Solutions –

Rhonda Leonard-Horwith, in partnership with World Financial Group. Contact (818) 399-6295 or rhonda@ragingsuccess.consulting. 2818 N. Sullivan Rd, Suite 100, Spokane Valley, 99216.

Raze Early Learning and Development Center –

Culturally centered pre-K programming by founder Kerra Bower. (509) 587-3490. 6519 N. Lidgerwood St., Spokane, WA 99208.

RJ's So Southern BBQ & Catering –

Food business owned by Reggie Perkins. Contact rjs.sosouthern@gmail.com or (615) 715-4310.

Share Farm Inc. –

Online farmers market and supply chain logistics company owned by Vincent Peak. (509) 995-8451 or vince@sharefarm.

Smooov Cutz Barber Shop –

Barber shop owned by Jason "Smooov" Watson. (509) 703-7949 or jsmooov923@gmail.com. Two locations at 13817 E. Sprague Ave., Spokane Valley, 99216, and 14700 E. Indiana Ave., Spokane Valley, 99216.

Spacehub Production –

Photography Studio owned by event photographer Eugene Muzinga. (509) 216-1072 or spacehub@gmail.com. 1023 W. Sixth Ave., Building 1, Spokane, 99204.

Vision Properties –

Real estate firm owned by Latrice Williams. (509) 431-0773 or transactions.thevision@gmail.com. 5723 N. Division St., Spokane.

The Way to Justice –

Community law firm led and created by women of color. The Way to Justice is a tax-exempt nonprofit organization located in Eastern Washington. (509) 822-7514.

WrightWay Beauty Supply –

(509) 703-7772 (call/text), wrightwaybeautysupply@outlook.com or visit www.wrightwaybeautysupply.com. 2103 N. Division St., Spokane, 99207.

Are you a Black business owner and you don't see your name or business in this directory?

Contact info@blacklensnews.com with your name, business, contact information, address or website, if available. Put "Black Business Directory entry" in the subject line. This listing was made with the help of the Black Business and Professional Alliance and the Carl Maxey Center.

AREA BLACK CHURCHES AND MINISTRIES

Holy Temple Church of God in Christ –

Pastor Wayne B. Washington. 806 W. Indiana Ave., Spokane, 99205. Sunday School is 9:45 a.m. Worship Service is 11 a.m.

Bethel African Methodist Episcopal –

The Rev. Benjamin D. Watson, Sr. 645 S. Richard Allen Court, Spokane, 99202. Sunday School is 9:30 a.m. Sunday Service is 11 a.m.

Calvary Baptist –

Interim Rev. Amos Atkinson. 203 E. Third Ave., Spokane, 99202. Sunday School is 9 a.m. Sunday Service is 10 a.m.

Jasmin Ministries –

Church owned by Luc Fils Jasmin. Contact (509) 389-4539 or eem.maranatha@gmail.com. 631 S. Richard Allen Court, Suite 211, Spokane, 99202.

Morning Star Baptist –

The Rev. Walter Kendricks. 3909 W. Rowan Ave., Spokane, 99205. Sunday School is 9:30 a.m. Sunday Service is 10:45 a.m.

New Hope Baptist –

The Rev. James Watkins. 9021 E. Boone Ave., Spokane Valley, 99212. Sunday Service is 10:45 a.m.

Saving Grace Ministries –

The Rev. Earon Davis Jr. 3151 E. 27th Ave., Spokane, 99223. Sunday Service is 10 a.m.

Word of Faith Christian Center –

The Rev. Otis Manning. 9212 E. Montgomery Ave., Suite 202, Spokane Valley, 99206. Sunday Service is 10 a.m. Info: wordoffaith13@aol.com or (509) 785-7796.

Jesus is the Answer –

Pastor Shon L. Davis. 1803 E. Desmet St. Spokane, 99202. Sunday Service is 10 a.m.

Mount Zion Holiness Church –

Pastor Tommy Whitman. 2627 E. Fifth Ave., Spokane, 99202. Sunday Service is at 10 a.m.

Mt. Olive Baptist Church –

The Rev. Patrick Hamm. 2026 E. Fourth Ave., Spokane, 99202. Sunday Service is 11 a.m. Wednesday Bible Study is 6 p.m.

Refreshing Spring Church of God In Christ –

The Rev. Elder Timothy B. Buchanan. 1206 E. Broad St., Spokane, 99207. Info: (509) 482-7408.

The Spokane Area Ministers Wives and Ministers Widows Fellowship –

Meets at 10:30 a.m. every first Saturday of the month (except June, July, August) at the Emmanuel Family Life Center, 631 S. Richard Allen Court. Questions? Contact President Faith Washington at spokanemwmw@gmail.com.

NAACP MEETINGS

To join, visit naacpspokane.com/contact.

GENERAL COMMITTEE MEETINGS: Third Wednesday at 6:30 p.m.

HEALTHCARE COMMITTEE: Second Monday of each month at 5:15 p.m.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE COMMITTEE: First Wednesday via Google Meet at 6:30 p.m.

EDUCATION COMMITTEE: Fourth Tuesday at 6:30 p.m.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT COMMITTEE: First Tuesday at 5 p.m.

Black Lens pickup and distribution: Get on our list!

For newspaper pickup and distribution, please contact info@blacklensnews.org. Pickup is at Carl Maxey or Schoenberg at Gonzaga on Fridays before Sunday publication. The Black Lens is published the first Sunday each month.

Blue Doors & Dragons</

LEISURE / FROM THE FRONT PAGE

CURTIS • BY RAY BILLINGSLEY

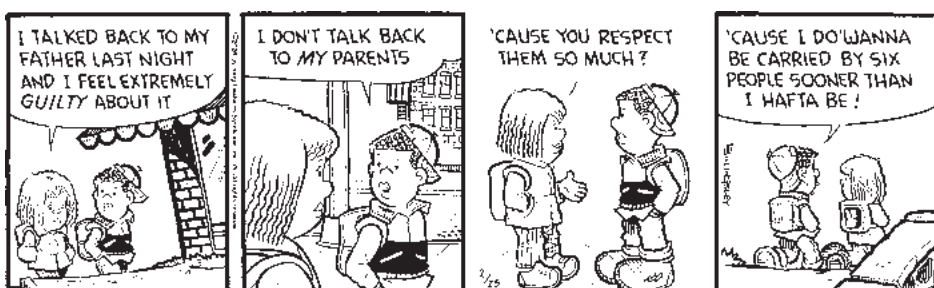
FEB. 23



FEB. 24



FEB. 25



FEB. 26

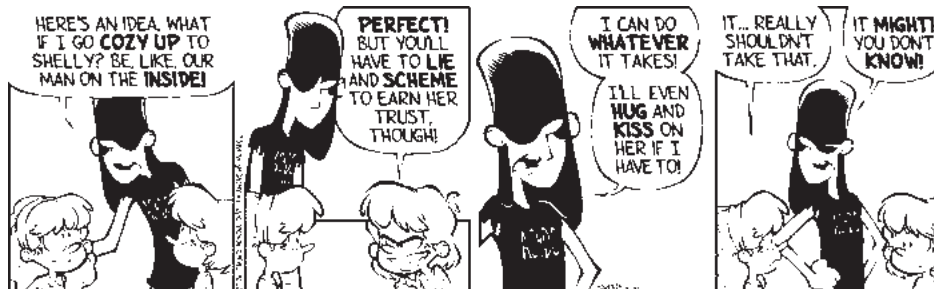


CRABGRASS • BY TAUHID BONDIA

FEB. 23



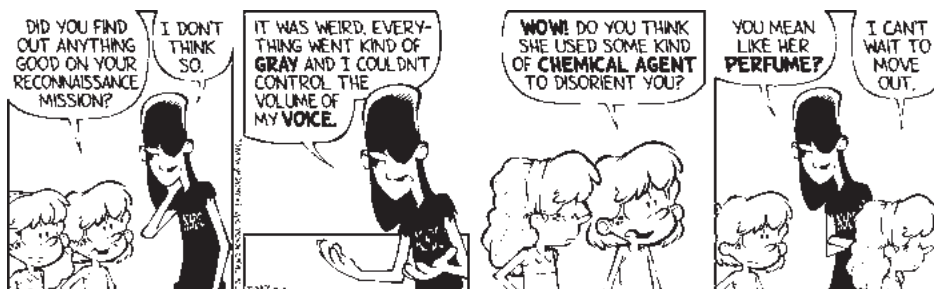
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FEB. 26



MERRITT

Continued from 10

times volunteers purchase their own copies. I may order one or two at a time because if someone's property is taken and the book is in it, we lose that book. I buy many of the books out of pocket.

Q: Why is building bridges beyond judgment important?

Sherry Merritt: When I first went out there, people would ask if I was afraid. I said no. The men respect me and have ever since I've been going out there.

I know when to set my boundaries, and I remind them of the rules when needed. They tell me, "If anything was to go down here, we got you, Sister Sherry." I believe that because of how much they care and how much I care about them. They are like my children because I am older than many of them.

Q: Why is community care so important?

Sherry Merritt: It is important because of the trauma we have seen and gone through. Many of the men talk about growing up without guidance or someone correcting them. Some came in angry, but the more they come to the program, they mellow out.

You have to show that you care. Me coming out every Monday encourages them. They know I'm going to be there. I'm there to encourage them to

make the best of their time and better themselves.

Q: If you could speak to the men ten years from now, what would you want them to remember?

Sherry Merritt: To remember that they are valued. Even if they don't feel valued, there is someone who does value them, and they must value themselves.

What you've done in the past is in the past. You're taking your punishment now, but when you get out, stay out. I tell them I don't want to see them back in prison. I'm there to encourage and uplift them.

Q: What have you learned from them?

Sherry Merritt: I have learned so much. I've learned their characters, their behaviors, their good side and their bad side. They appreciate people coming in and sharing what's happening on the outside.

They wait for me to bring The Black Lens. One elder always asks if I brought the papers. He reads constantly and knows so much. I learn from them because they have knowledge and talent, especially in spoken word. They have so much to give but were misguided and misdirected.

Q: Is there anything else you would like readers to understand about your experience?

Sherry Merritt: I love

going out there. I really do.

When I first started, it hurt my heart seeing how some of the men were treated. I was embarrassed for them. It troubled me to see our men being treated with disrespect.

Things have improved, but you still hear stories about write-ups over little things. One time our program was shut down for about three months because of an accusation that wasn't true. They investigated and eventually allowed us back, but it showed how easily things could be taken away.

Q: Why is dignity so important?

Sherry Merritt: Dignity helps build you. When you give respect, you should receive respect in return.

When a man is respected, he will act better and put forth his best effort. If he is disrespected, he may respond the same way. I tell them when others go low, you go high. Maintain your integrity no matter what, because they expect you to act up. Don't give them that.

Sherry Merritt's 25 years of service reflect a simple but powerful belief: education, history, and human dignity remain transformative forces, even behind prison walls. Through consistency, compassion, and cultural grounding, she continues to remind the men she serves of one enduring truth.

They are valued.

Quote OF THE MONTH

BECAUSE WHEN YOU SEE INJUSTICE COMMITTED AGAINST ANYONE IN THE WHOLE RAINBOW OF HUMANITY AND YOU FEEL LIKE YOU CANNOT DO ANYTHING, GO PICK UP THAT ROCK AND TAKE FROM IT THE STRENGTH OF THE ORDINARY PEOPLE WHO STOOD ON THAT SAME ROCK AND MADE HISTORY THAT NOT ONLY CHANGED THE SOUTH, BUT THIS ENTIRE NATION.

JoAnne Bland, 1953-2026

JOANNE BLAND (JULY 29, 1953-FEB. 19, 2026)

JoAnne Blackmon Bland was U.S. civil rights activist. She was the co-founder and former director of the National Voting Rights Museum in Selma, Alabama. Bland was an active participant in the Civil Rights movement, and was the youngest person to have been jailed during any civil rights demonstration during that period.

Bland grew up in segregated Selma, Alabama, where she was only allowed to



go in the library and movie theater on days labeled "colored."

Bland lost her mother, who died in a "white" hospital waiting for a transfusion of "Black blood." Her

grandmother encouraged Bland to march. Bland became active in the movement at age 8, when she attended a meeting with the Dallas County Voters League with her grandmother, the beginning of an era.

FLOWERS

Continued from 10

four degrees. "I needed each of the degrees to do the job that I wanted to do, so I had to keep going."

As a Black woman leading a public charter school, Flowers understands representation not as symbolism, but as lived experience—especially for students who rarely see authority embodied in someone who looks like them.

"For students, especially students of color, it can affirm leadership. It can affirm intellect and compassion, and what authority can look like for them," she explains. "But for families, a lot of times it just builds trust that their lived experiences are understood."

That trust shows up in unexpected ways. Each year during Principal Appreciation Day, students draw pictures of their school leader.

"When they draw a principal, they draw a Black lady," Flowers says with a laugh. "They don't know any other way to be a principal, because that's all many of them have known since kindergarten."

That normalization matters—not only for Black students, but for everyone in the building. Flowers is clear that representation is not a niche concern.

"It's important for Black students, but it's important for every other student as well," she says. "To have that perspective."

Spokane International Academy serves students from 13 ZIP codes across the region, reflecting a mix of racial, economic, linguistic, and learning needs. Flowers is direct about the reality of barriers.

barrier looks like, providing you have a team that's savvy enough and cares enough about the community to problem-solve a response."

At SIA, that response is rooted in relationships, data, and listening. The school pairs high expectations with intensive support, a philosophy Flowers frames as a matter of justice.

"High expectations are a social justice issue for me," she says. "We don't lower the bar for students because of their circumstance, their background, or perceived limitations. We're going to raise our level of support."

Charter schools often sit at the center of national debate, but Flowers resists false binaries that pit public systems against one another.

"This is not a competition," she says. "It's a shared responsibility. We're a public school, and we should all be working toward the same goal—preparing students for meaningful futures."

She is equally candid about misconceptions.

"One myth is that charter schools are selecting the students that we want, and that's just simply untrue," Flowers explains. "We're enrollment-driven. We take who we receive, and we do our best to serve them with the resources that we have."

Her commitment to school choice is personal as well as professional. As a parent, Flowers has made different schooling decisions for her own children based on fit, representation, and readiness—not ideology.

"Parents and kids should be able to choose what makes sense for their learning," she says. "The goal is meeting kids where they are and understanding that learning is multifaceted for every child."

When asked about her legacy, Flowers pauses. Like many women leaders, she is deeply embedded in the work, rarely afforded the distance to measure her im-

pact in real time. Still, she is clear about what she wants future Black women educators to see.

"I want to model what it looks like to take up space unapologetically and to trust your voice and lead in authentic rather than performative ways," she says.

She understands part of the challenge is structural. Decision-makers often default to what feels familiar.

"They want the sure thing," Flowers explains. "That other thing—they'd have to take a chance on that. And people don't always want to gamble."

She continues to lead with integrity, transparency, and a deep belief in community.

"I try to ask, what is in the best interest of kids, and how do we move there responsibly?" she says. "Accountability matters because the public is trusting us with their children and their resources."

For Flowers, leadership is not about occupying power, but about clearing barriers so others can thrive—particularly teachers.

"I actually became a school leader for teachers," she says. "If I can hear their voices clearly, and they're speaking on behalf of students, then if I help them, the students will get exactly what they need."

During Women's History Month, Morgen Flowers' leadership offers a living reminder that history is not only something we commemorate—it is something we are actively shaping. In classrooms, hallways and decision-making spaces where Black women have too often been absent or overlooked, her presence quietly expands the future.

And for the students who draw a Black woman when asked to picture a principal, that future feels possible.

Want to learn more about enrolling at SIA? Visit spokaneintlacademy.org/enrollment.

BLACK POETS SOCIETY

'WHO'S JENNIFER?'

By Zahara Tadesse
THE BLACK LENS

What's good everybody, i'm Z how are y'all doin today...

oh-no, im so sorry

Hello everyone, my names Jennifer thats what i was supposed to say

cause jennifer masks the puppet whos string you pull everyday

the one you yank left and right and she'll do whatever you say

she even softens my voice, so they can't take my words in an aggressive way

(but you still do)

she's the way you seem to prefer

because you act like you own her

and treat her as you please

cause you're on top of the world-

and i'm beneath

But who's Jennifer really?

Jennifer is the one who leaves MY bag at the front counter when asked

because i just wanted a bag hot fries

I was gonna steal I promise I just got out of class

but she fears the situation so she complies

but me? the one underneath im tired of complying

Now Who's Jennifer really?

the one who still listens to your demands who still listens to your commands

to avoid the escalation and where your hands might land

She's the one who didn't let me cry

who dodged your spit

the one who let it slide

but me? the one underneath im tired of letting it slide

Jennifers a facade i cant escape

she thinks she gains respect but see thats her mistake

cause see Jennifer just ignores all the white noise

because no matter how white she tries to make her voice

the truth is me? the one on the outside i really dont have a choice

Jennifers who society TRIED to shape me to be

Jennifers who the white man TRIED to tell how to speak

Jennifers another tool they use to prevent us from being free

another version of what they've been doing for centuries

but still-

she makes me smile through your belittlement

she'll widen my eyes so i look a little more innocent

she'll ignore your words because the pain is infinite

but me? the one on the outside, the one behind the mask, the puppet with your hand down her throat-

choking out a bright ball of light, because beyond a flock of vultures we'll always take flight

i see better with dark chocolate as my iris, it's quite the sight

cause dark chocolate feels safer than the blue ocean of power conquering all good bite by bite

now-my real eyes realize your real lies

cause' the truth is they were not that hard to find

i see-...

you clutch your pearls, because you're afraid

because!-black joy sparks lighter than the sun on its brightest day

because!-black joy ignites a fire that threatens you tourists

because!- let's not forget this was never your forest...?

to begin with.

and Jennifer i burn you in that fire too

because all she does is shelter my brain from the truth

because im done playin your sick game designed for me to lose

because no matter what it's always somethin new

you'll find safety in my danger

you'll find comfort in my

discomfort

you'll find rage in my calm

you'll find hate in my smile

you find volume in my mute

Cause Jennifer's a survival tactic I've learned to use

but i want to do more than just exist within the limits you allow me to

i said i want to do more than just survive

But not js yet can we live our lives

cause its all on us to fix ur corrupt system right...

so what is good everybody, my name is Z

im the one whos she doesnt allow to get angry

So goodbye Jennifer, dont let door hit ya when you leave

cause you are only a product of the poison they've been feeding me

oh no im so sorry, something came over me clearly

cause how dare you call someone like Jennifer anything other than so so pretty.

3 stickers 

By AJ the Wordsmith
The Black Lens

3 difficult stickers that won't come off, I never thought that would be my cost, as if that significant emotional event was something so easily forgotten that even with meditation some people refuse to let their hate soften.

I look at this situation in different regards. 3 stickers that obscure my view, as if I am not the one who pays their dues.

City code says 5 away, so anything past that means we're allowed to feel a type of way.

We have stickers of hate and ignorance placed on our driver side windows. And then we get lectured about not respecting other people's property. 3 stickers that talk about how The Drive way between you and the idiot

On the other side kept someone's ford truck from getting back into their own home.

As if it was necessary for you, to place 3 old crappy stickers on someone else's property. Be the person who lives in a 3 story house, with a metal fence, chicken wire enclosure, and two security dogs to protect your home, and yet you feel the need to call the cops because you don't feel safe.

Why are your eyes filled with so much hate?

I write what I feel, and speak what I think,

I'm tired of living in a town filled with nothing but hate.

Dedication to Sister Sandy

GOT BARS? A VERSE
ITCHING TO GET OUT?

Say it loud, with your whole chest. Welcome to the Black Poet's Society, a segment in The Black Lens. Carved out for truth-tellers and creatives. This is your page.

Let the power of poetry lead you.

Graphic by Jā Corbett-Sparks



OUR HOUSE IS ON FIRE

By Aliyah Johnson
THE BLACK LENS

(This is inspired by Greta Thunberg's speeches)

You say,
"We owe it to the young to give them hope."
But I don't want your hope.
I want your panic.
I want you to feel
the fear I feel every day.
I want you to act
as you would in a crisis.
Because
our house is on fire.
And you,
with your fairy tales
of eternal growth,
with your profit margins,
your oil-slicked prayers-
you dare to ask us for forgiveness
before you've even tried to change.
You have stolen
my dreams
and my childhood
with your empty words.
But I am one of the lucky ones.
People are suffering.
People are dying.
ecosystems are collapsing.
You say

"We hear you."
But if you really understood
and still chose silence-
then you would be cruel.
You are failing us.
But we
are waking up.
And whether you like it
or not,
change is coming.
This isn't about bunny hugs.
It's not about photo ops or feel-good slogans.
This is about people,
real lives,
real homes swallowed by fires
real streets drowned in floods.
This is about a future
that's slipping through our fingers.
There is no Planet B.
No backup world.
No Planet blah
And we're done with waiting.
The world doesn't need more quiet girls
who raise their hands
and wait to be called on.
The world needs
angry young women -
the kind who speak
before they're spoken to,
who don't ask for permission
to raise hell

Something My Past Didn't See

By Gaye Hallman
THE BLACK LENS

Looking into the future,
Something my past didn't see

The outcome of my experience,

has allowed God to transform me.

Longing to be alive, for within I was dead

Darkness was my company
and each day I dread.

Walking with a lost soul,
understanding nothing at hand

I once had a goal, my dreams
turned to sand.

Seeking the face of comfort; to
captivate my distressed mind,

Can't give up on life; Hope, I
must find

Thank God I found hope in the
midst of the dark,

Pursuing to find some light
until it penetrates in my heart.

Now that I'm blessed with life

and has allowed God to
transform me.

I'm excited about the future,

Something My Past Didn't See.

