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on Black Health 22-42

West Virginia Values?
Legislators propose bill
deepening inequities
for minority automobile
dealership owners 4



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stories.

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women and
birthing
people

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- Between the ages of 18 to 45 years old
- Have lived in WV for five years
- Be a current resident of WV
- Currently a non user of substances
- Speak English
- Have access to the internet and email

You also need to be part of a larger group based on your social status:

- Non-white
- Hispanic or Latino heritage
- African American
- LGBTQIA+
- White and on state or federal benefits including Medicaid, Medicare, food programs like SNAP or WIC, or housing aid

Marshall IRB study #2056872-1

PARTICIPANTS WILL RECEIVE:

- A gift card (\$40) for their participation in the interview
- A list of local and national mental health resources
- A follow up conversation upon request

TO PARTICIPATE CONTACT JERICA OR LAURI
FOR MORE DETAILS.

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JUNETEENTH 2023

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VIRGINIAN

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COVER PHOTO:

From left, Tristin Phillips, Justin Phillips Sr., Jayli Phillips, Danny Adkins III, Danny Adkins II, Ellie Adkins.. Brother in laws with their children at the NAACP Juneteenth Event on Five Corners in Charleston 2022

IN THIS ISSUE: Reverend Jeff Allen, Katelyn Aluise, Heather Andolina, Appalachian Gold, Erin Beck, Anna Brugmann, Robin Caldwell, Linda Caudell-Feagan, Lekili Dean, Danni Dineen, DVSSROSS, Doris Fields, Crystal Good, Justice Hudson, Kabrea James, Jayli, Leeshia Lee, @Lyzsays, Jules Ogden, Adam Payne, Brenda Pinnell, Mark Peez, Betty Rivard, Terri Schlichenmeyer, Duncan Slade, Rodney Sorrell, Think Kids, Tikkun Olam Productions, Tyler West, West Virginia Council of Churches, Dorothy Wells, Donna Willis, Inni Ngijoi Yogo



BBG celebrates third Juneteenth issue

This issue marks the third consecutive year Black by God | THE WEST VIRGINIAN has published a Juneteenth print issue. The print issues are distributed across West Virginia.

BlackByGod.org



JUNETEENTH

A complex commemoration of emancipation and unfulfilled promises

By Dorothy Wells

(Editor's note: This is a reprint from 2022)

On June 15, 2021, the U. S. Senate voted unanimously to make Juneteenth a federal holiday. Following a 2020 in which our nation saw the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in the midst of a global pandemic, the Senate's 2021 vote responded to a need to create a holiday to acknowledge the emancipation of black persons on this soil.

But the choice of Juneteenth as the date to commemorate the emancipation of enslaved black persons seems to be a questionable one, and too many Americans who don't really know history seem to be under the false impression that Juneteenth marked the true end of slavery in this country.

That notion is not true. There were still slaves — legally-held slaves — after Juneteenth.

So why did our nation's lawmakers choose that date to recognize emancipation?

Let's start with a bit of history. Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, perhaps a questionable but certainly effective use of his wartime powers, declared freedom of enslaved persons in the rebelling (Confederate) states effective January 1, 1863. The Emancipation Proclamation was only effective in those rebelling states; slavery in Union states and four border states (Missouri, Kentucky, Delaware and Maryland) was not affected by the Proclamation. In one of the rebelling states — Texas — news of the emancipation of 250,000 slaves was apparently deliberately suppressed. Juneteenth marks the arrival of Union forces in Texas on June 19, 1865, bearing the news of emancipation — 2 ½ years after the Emancipation Proclamation, and two months after the end of the Civil War. The intentional suppression of the news of emancipation from enslaved persons in Texas may also explain why it appears from census

records that slaveholders from other states actually fled to Texas with their slaves after the Emancipation Proclamation was issued — to ensure that the enslaved persons would continue to be enslaved.

That slavery held an economic stronghold on this country which seemed to overcome any religious or moral sensibilities seems evident. Scholar David W. Blight, Professor of American History at Yale University, has been quoted by Ta-Nehisi Coates as stating that “by 1860, there were more millionaires (slaveholders all) living in the lower Mississippi Valley than anywhere else in the United States. In the same year, the nearly 4 million slaves on American soil were worth some \$3.5 billion, making them the largest single financial asset in the entire U.S. economy, worth more than all manufacturing and railroads combined.” That fact certainly might explain the suppression of the news of emancipation to enslaved persons in Texas for 2½ years. Perhaps the surprise is that there weren't even more states in which the truth of emancipation was suppressed.

While most non-rebelling states did act to end slavery after 1863, legal slavery continued until it was abolished by the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution on December 18, 1865. Delaware and Kentucky, having voted not to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment, were, of course, still subject to it after its ratification; enslaved persons in both states were free in December 1865. Neither state formally voted to ratify the Amendment until 1901 and 1976, respectively. But those two states were not the last to formally ratify the Thirteenth Amendment; that “honor” is held by the state with the largest population of slaves in 1860 — Mississippi. And Mississippi did not vote to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment until 1995 (though through some error, the vote to ratify was not communicated to the National Archives, and was not recorded until 2013.).

Continued on page 8



In this photo from the West Virginia State Archives, a group of young African-Americans dance at canteen on Chapline Street in Wheeling in 1947. Names include Thelma Savage, Georgia Cox, Roxanna Jackson, John Kent, Kenneth Parker, Roy Neal, Elaine Shan-non, and Corine Martin.

Spend Juneteenth reclaiming your family history with these free resources

By Robin Caldwell

Fresh & Fried Hard

West Virginia Black family history is everywhere. Why not use the long Juneteenth weekend to find it and research your family history?

Freedom and family embody the very essence of Juneteenth. Genealogist Angelis Robinson-Smith says, “Immediately after emancipation, many of our formerly enslaved kin used their newfound freedom to seek out family members who'd been sold or moved to other locations.” To capture the spirit of family reunification, BBG, with the assistance of Robinson-Smith, has curated some of the best (and free) genealogical resources found online.

Be sure to keep a notebook nearby to jot down questions you may have about your family as you explore.

Robinson-Smith says, “Your public library” may offer genealogical services right on their websites. Ancestry.com has a public library version that can be accessed on your library's site. She adds, “Even if your library doesn't have Ancestry available, there are many libraries that offer digital library

cards and services to non-residents.”

Other resources include free access to African American and West Virginia collections and records available at FamilySearch.org. If you suspect an ancestor held tribal membership in the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole tribes, then the National Archives has digitized The Dawes Rolls. And you can find the U.S. Census from 1790 to 1950 on their site. West Virginia was Virginia, so search Virginia records from 1790 to 1860.

Robinson-Smith has one important suggestion. “Keep it fun and simple as you search. Use this as a start to reclaim your family's story and search for your kin.”

With a little effort, you can uncover the rich history of your West Virginia family by using these resources that can help you potentially track their movement. So what are you waiting for? Start your journey today!



freshandfriedhard.com is a tribute to Black women and the power found in our kitchens. We will #citeblackwomen and honor history and empower Black women.

■ Ancestry.com

Has a public library version that can be accessed on your library's site.

■ FamilySearch.org

■ National Archives
www.archives.gov
www.archives.gov/research/genealogy

■ West Virginia Department of Arts, Culture & History, Research Finding Aids and Databases
wvculture.org

■ African American Genealogy — West Virginia
aagenw.blogspot.com

■ Wikipedia, List of West Virginia Plantations

■ Southern Appalachian Digital Collections, African American Oral Histories

■ Mapping the Freedmen's Bureau
mappingthefreedmensbureau.com
An interactive state-by-state guide to locating Freedmen's Bureau offices and documents

■ Freedom on the Move
a database of fugitives from American slavery
freedomonthemove.org

■ Last Seen: Finding Family after Slavery
A repository of newspaper ads by the formerly enslaved seeking family members
informationwanted.org

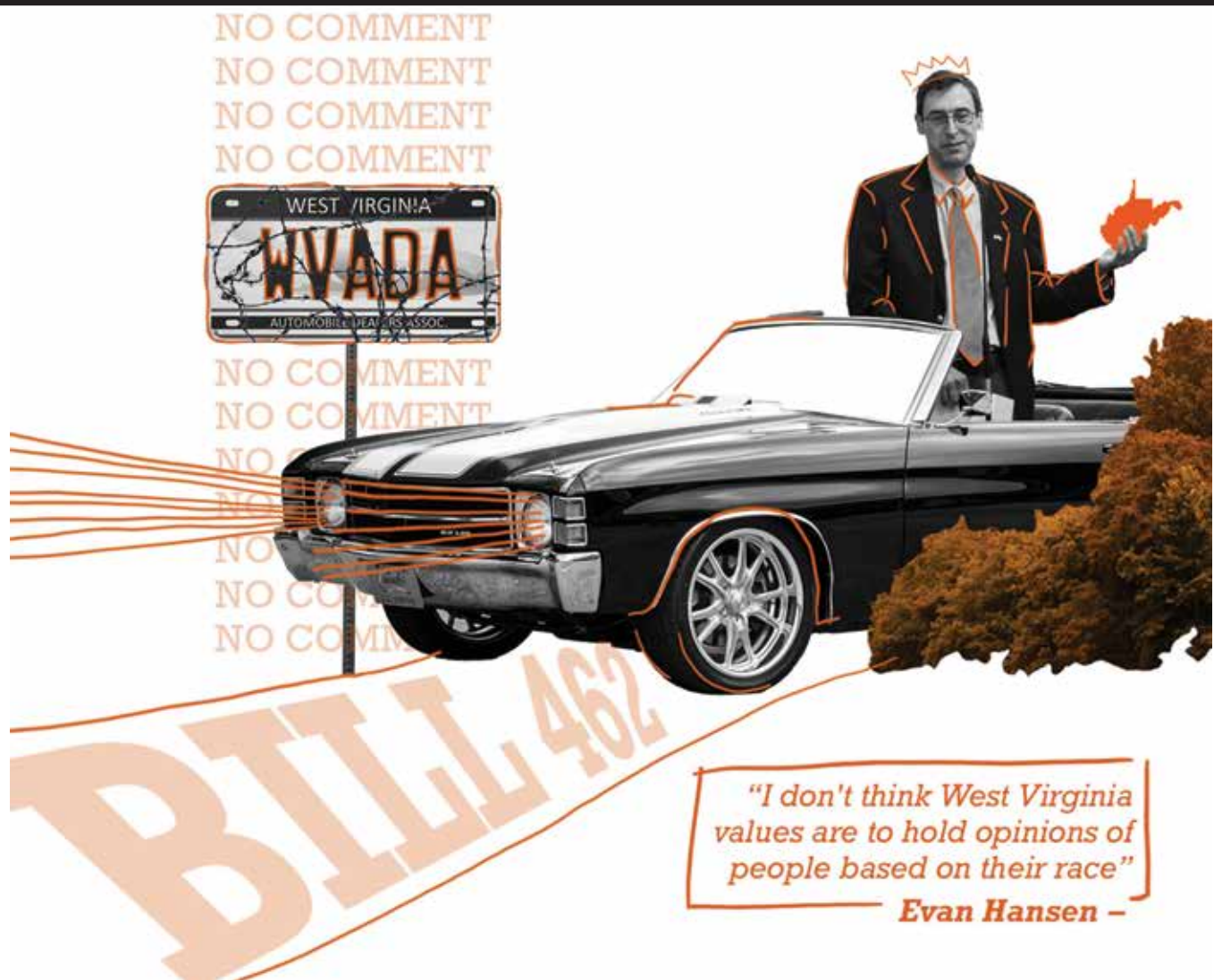


ILLUSTRATION BY KELSEY DOWLING

West Virginia Values?

Legislators propose bill deepening inequities for minority automobile dealership owners

Katelyn Aluise and Jules Ogden
BBG Intern Reporters

During the legislative session in March, West Virginia state senators proposed Senate Bill 462, which would, among other amendments, restrict automobile manufacturers’ and distributors’ right of first refusal.

In automobile dealing, the right of first refusal refers to an automobile manufacturer’s right to refuse the sale of any of its dealerships from one owner to another. Instead, the manufacturer may purchase the property back from the original dealer and sell it to their preferred dealer.

The purpose of restricting this right, as provided in testimony by West Virginia Automobile Dealers Association President Jared Wyrick during a House

Judiciary committee meeting in March, was to prevent automobile manufacturers, like Ford and Toyota, from purchasing dealerships back from West Virginia dealers and selling them to any qualified buyer.

“This just gives the ability of the dealer to sell it to who they want to sell their dealership to,” Wyrick said during the session.

The bill, sponsored by state Senators Rupie Phillips, Mike Woefel, Jack Woodrum and Jason Barrett, was

introduced because, according to Wyrick’s testimony, dealers feel manufacturers are not always selling dealerships to the most “qualified” buyer. Instead, Wyrick said he believes that manufacturers are buying back their dealerships to sell to more “diverse” dealers that “check off the right boxes,” regardless of their experience.

“What we’re seeing is a lot of efforts to move more into a diverse group, and so you were having manufacturers buying the dealer from the local dealerships, exercise right of first refusal and then selling that to a minority group because it checks the right boxes, as opposed to necessarily the qualified individual,” he said during a committee meeting.

In fact, although the exact number of minority-owned dealerships in West Virginia is unclear, only two are listed as members of the National Association of Minority Auto Dealers in their directory.

This is out of at least 974 new and used car dealerships in West Virginia, according to data from the North American Industry Classification System.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Black or African American citizens made up only 10.4% of automobile dealers in the country last year.

Still, Wyrick said he believes that minority dealers are receiving preferential treatment when being considered for purchasing a dealership.

“You have several manufacturers that will exercise the right of first refusal in an effort to increase the number of minorities that they have currently that own dealerships,” Wyrick said.

“We do, we have three or four minority dealers in the state of West Virginia. This, just, this doesn’t stop “Dealer Y” from selling it to a minority. This just gives the ability of the dealer to sell it who they want to sell their dealership to. The manufacturer still has the right to decline that, they just don’t no longer have the right to purchase it and then to sell it to whomever they want to.”

Black By God made multiple attempts to reach out to WVADA and the bill’s sponsors, but all have since declined to comment.

In hearing this testimony, only one delegate spoke up.



Del. Evan Hansen
D-Monongalia County

Feels it’s important, now more than ever, to stop pushing legislation that shows that West Virginia is anything less than welcoming to all.

are just the kindest, most helpful, most welcoming people that I’ve met anywhere,” he said in an interview with Black By God.

Johnnie Brown, who serves as an outside general counsel for WVADA, outlined the protections in the

“My ears perked up ... The testimony was provided that this removal of the right of first refusal portion of the bill was to essentially prevent minorities from joining in ownership for West Virginia dealers ... And so, I just have to say that I don’t think that’s West Virginia values. I don’t think West Virginia values are to hold opinions of people based on their race. And for that reason, I can’t support this bill,” Delegate Evan Hansen said during the committee meeting.

To Hansen, West Virginia values mean both inclusivity and resiliency.

“I find that West Virginians in general

proposed bill that would now allow dealers to sell to whomever they want to without the interference of a manufacturer’s right of first refusal.

“There’s also protection so that if a dealer is selling to a person who they believe will kind of continue their culture, protect their employees, their West Virginia values, that they should be able to sell to them and they can’t just unilaterally refuse that,” Brown said during the meeting.

Brown then said that there’s nothing in the bill that directly excludes minorities, although he felt the bill would stop manufacturers from selling West Virginia-owned dealerships to dealers out-of-state who do not have “West Virginia values.” He used two cases of dealerships being sold to Tennessee and Cleveland as examples.

“People who don’t know have West Virginia values, that’s what we’re trying to protect,” Brown said. “When an individual has spent their whole life spending millions of dollars to build a dealership or want to sell it to someone who’s going to watch after their employees and protect their West Virginia investment. They should be able to sell that person. Now that person has to be qualified and meet all the standards, but if they do, the manufacturer shouldn’t be able to take that dealership from an owner, and then give it to out-of-state individuals.”

Hansen believes that by saying that those states that engage in the right of first refusal do not share West Virginia values, it was like saying minorities in those states, who are seen as receiving preferential treatment for “checking off the right boxes,” do not share West Virginia values.

He also said that bills like SB 462 reinforce negative stereotypes about the state.

“This right of first refusal that’s in the state code for auto dealers is not common. And that’s a heavily

SB 462 WV House of Delegates Judiciary Committee
Black By God

1 day ago

News & Politics

Listen to the debate about SB 462

Start at time stamp 25:35.
Audio courtesy of the West Virginia House of Delegates.

West Virginia Values? Legislators Propose Bill Deepening Inequities For Minority Automobile Dealership Owners.
By Katelyn Aluise and Jules Ogden

DEALERSHIP from page 7

regulated industry. But I would say as a legislature, I would like to see us pass bills that signal to the world what our values are. And because West Virginia, unfortunately, has a bad reputation outside of the state ...” he said.

“We need to reinvent ourselves in ways that communicate how welcome we are.”

Sim Fryson, the second Black Mercedes-Benz dealer and former president and CEO of Sim Fryson Motor Company, was born and raised in Charleston, West Virginia.

Each of his dealerships was located just across the West Virginia border in Ashland, Kentucky, where he said he was able to make a difference in the community and encourage young children of color to pursue their dreams.

Fryson said he was even part of a diverse learning program at General Motors and later joined a dealer diversity initiative at Mercedes-Benz because he feels “inclusion makes a difference.”

He said removing the manufacturer’s right of first refusal would lessen their current inclusion efforts and stifle opportunities for diversity in dealership owners.

He said diversity matters because it is important for young people to see people that look like themselves making a difference.

“I got a letter from one gentleman that said, ‘Mr. Fryson, if it hadn’t been for you, I never would’ve gotten a college degree;... I think the diversity made a difference there,” he said.

Fryson moved back to Charleston after 11 years in Ashland, in hopes of making the same difference in his home state and town, but he said he was unable to due to stigma.

“I wanted to come back to West Virginia to make a difference here. But here in West Virginia, as much as I heralded it, I’m beginning to see now things that are subliminal that makes me almost on the same line with how people look at us.”

Similar to Hansen, Fryson said that legislation like



Sim Fryson
CEO of Sim Fryson Motor Company

SB 462 reinforces the state’s negative stigma and public perception of being uneducated “hillbillies.”

“What I’m seeing now is different than when I grew up in. I think growing up, things were a little bit better, I think because we had people that were from this area that we grew up with, different people from all walks of life, as we had our issues, but not to the degree that we’re having them right now,” he said when discussing other current political debates involving race, like critical race theory policies.

Hansen said it’s important, now more than ever, to stop pushing legislation that shows that West Virginia is anything less than welcoming to all.

“West Virginia is still losing population,” Fryson said. ”So we need to do whatever we can not just to keep people from moving out of West Virginia, but to convince people to move into West Virginia.”

“And if we want to convince people to move into West Virginia, we need to be welcoming of the diversity. That is America. And that includes all types of diversity, racial diversity, but other types of diversity as well.”

The bill has been moved to the inactive calendar following the 2022-23 legislative session’s ending in March; however, Hansen said that he anticipates the bill to be reintroduced in next year’s session.



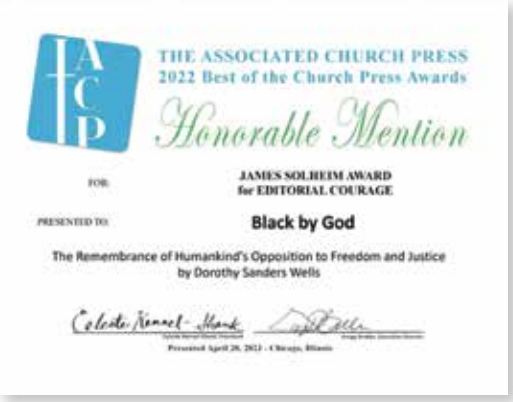
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE JOURNAL

Tiffany Wright, founder of Black Owned in Berkeley County, poses for a photo during the launch of another non-profit she founded, Beyond Measure.

JUNETEENTH from page 4

It is important to note that for two territories that sought statehood in the midst of the Civil War — West Virginia and Nevada — statehood was conditioned on emancipation. The state of West Virginia was the first state to be entered into the United States as a state in which there would be no slavery; Nevada became the second. And, both new states voted promptly to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment — West Virginia, on February 3, 1865, and Nevada, on February 16, 1865.

For whatever reasons we choose to commemorate Juneteenth, it should be abundantly clear that we are not commemorating the end of slavery. But Juneteenth is a date that is significant in our history: It speaks not only to the intentional suppression of the truth of emancipation to enslaved persons in Texas, but to all of the unfulfilled promises of Reconstruction, when Black people believed that emancipation would have meaning. Instead, the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution that abolished slavery, granted citizenship, afforded due process, and guaranteed the right to vote to African persons on this soil gave way instead to a legacy of



Congratulations to BBG and Dorothy Wells for an award in the Best of 2022 Associated Church Press Best of the Church Press Awards.

segregation and Jim Crow laws that mandated separation — separate schools and learning, separate neighborhoods, separate entrances into public buildings, separate seating on public transportation, separate public accommodations. Race massacres — from Memphis, in 1866 to Tulsa, in 1921 — saw the destruction of Black-owned homes, businesses, schools

and houses of worship. After the election of the first Black Senator and Congressmen — all from the South, during Reconstruction — voting rights were suppressed, and many brave and faithful persons gave their lives just in order for Black persons to be able to cast their votes in public elections, a right that was given in the Fifteenth Amendment. Those who would empower themselves to be judge, jury and executioner lynched Black persons with impunity during the 19th and 20th centuries — at what were too often spectator events. Whatever we may have hoped of emancipation, emancipation was not freedom.

Juneteenth was not freedom.

Indeed, for all who still live in the shadows, the margins and underserved communities, for all who continue to be discriminated against, for all who continue to be profiled and unjustly accused, for Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, for nine persons whose lives were taken in Charleston’s Emanuel A.M.E. Church, for ten persons whose lives were taken in a Buffalo grocery store, Juneteenth becomes a day of remembrance of and mourning for all of the ways in which humankind has stood in opposition to freedom and justice.

By Justice Hudson
Fresh & Fried Hard

When Tiffany Wright moved to Martinsburg, West Virginia, it wasn’t necessarily out of want, but out of need.

Raised on the Jersey shore, Wright took a job in Loudoun County, Virginia, but discovered the cost of living in the area was too much for her, a mother of four. As she searched for social services for her kids, one of whom has autism, she was taken aback by the lack of options in her new home.

Connecting in Eastern Panhandle

Black Owned in Berkeley County offers Black and minority businesses the opportunity to meet and support one another

“I felt really bad going to Loudoun County to provide services, where the resources are abundant, while my children would not be receiving services in Berkeley County,” Wright said.

This led her to create Beyond Measure: a nonprofit day program offering people with intellectual and developmental disabilities care, resources, support and advocacy.

In the process of founding Beyond Measure, Wright began attending chamber of commerce events to network where she would only see one or two other minority-owned businesses.

That’s when Wright identified the need for Black and minority businesses to have the opportunity to meet, connect and offer support to one another.

Wright organized a meeting in May 2022, with five Black-owned businesses for many reasons. She realized her experiences growing up Black in New Jersey were different from those who grew up Black in West Virginia.

Wright said she took for granted those differences and wanted to better understand the culture of Berkeley County. She also wanted to know if the

ONLINE RESOURCES



Black Owned in Berkeley County
bobcwv.org



blackownedberkeleyco_wv



Jefferson County WV Chapter NAACP
jcwnaACP.org

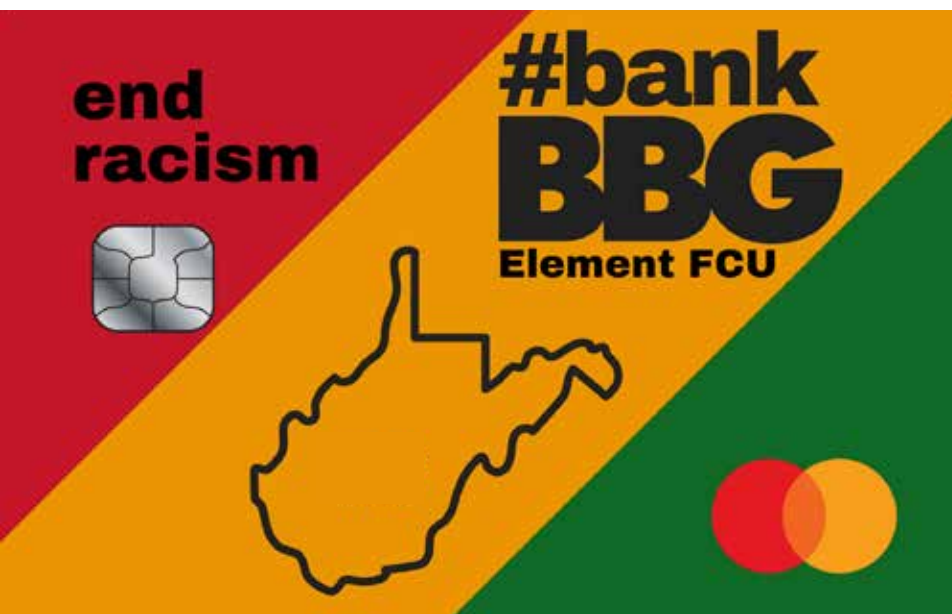


Black Women Business Owners of West Virginia



Black Community Shoppe —WV
www.blackcommunityshoppe.com/west-virginia

Black Owned Business Directory Sponsored by Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. Gamma Chi Omega Chapter



#BankBBG

Element
FEDERAL CREDIT UNION

BLACK OWNED from page 9

group should exist at all, and if the other businesses were committed.

Wright asked the group, “Could we support one another? Do we keep these meetings going?”

To her surprise the answer was a resounding “Yes.”

This meeting ultimately led to the founding of Black Owned in Berkeley County, a group dedicated to supporting the economic growth and development of Black and minority businesses. The goal is to promote, share and advocate.

“My goal is to support others,” Wright said.

She spoke of other Black entrepreneurs who she said had made it already, who went through higher education and who have nice cars but forget about the next person.

“I don’t think that’s right,” Wright said. “I’m always going to reach back. I will never forget my experiences.”

The group offers people a place where they can see someone like them and not feel bad asking questions.

“We’re not always in comfortable spaces,” Wright said, adding that if you don’t know the terminology or procedure in applying for loans or organizing your business it can lead to failure.

Black Owned in Berkeley County offers educational resources and support, and has partnered with BCBank to provide financial literacy and workshops.

One of the biggest reasons Wright founded Black Owned in Berkeley County was to disrupt what she calls the “good old girls and good old boys club.” Speaking about networking opportunities, she says it is a challenge for folks to get ahead when they don’t, “go to that church or know that family.”

For newcomers, knowing how to properly answer the questions asked or what paperwork is required.

“I have a lot of elders who say they wish they had this when they were coming up,” Wright said, also recognizing groups like the NAACP have done

similar work.

There are other challenges facing Black business owners, Wright said. She said it’s hard to find what resources are available.

She noticed that some people don’t take advantage of social media as a marketing tool, either.

“You can’t always go to your family to buy your product,” Wright said. “You need to get out of your comfort zone, do your research and know your area.”

That is why the education and support aspects of Black Owned in Berkeley County are so important, she said.

“We want people to come to our network wherever they are in the process,” Wright said.

Currently, the group consists of 41 members who range from entrepreneurs to hobbyists to CEOs, from start-ups to established, decades-old businesses.

“At this point we are supporting one another,” Wright said. “We always support others, but don’t always get that same support. We need to start pulling our resources together and having our own spaces.”

If you want to get involved with Black Owned in Berkeley County, follow their Instagram, which Wright says has been one of the biggest reasons for the group’s success, or check out their website.

The group charges \$150 per year for membership in exchange for education, marketing assistance, support, networking and discounts to other member’s businesses. The group recently celebrated their one-year anniversary.

As for other organizations that connect Black-owned businesses in West Virginia, Black Women Business Owners of West Virginia out of Charleston are the only other group. Some organizations have directories of Black and minority-owned businesses, including Black Owned in Berkeley County, West Virginia University’s Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority and Black Community Shoppe.

The Jefferson County NAACP is also seeking applicants to join their Eastern Panhandle Minority Business Directory.



Appalachian Gold’s inaugural brand product is Mama’s Meat Sauce.

Company’s inaugural brand product is a family’s legacy

By Appalachian Gold

Appalachian Gold is a brand that speaks to the people of Appalachia, recapturing the rich tradition and heritage of a people who once thrived using tried and tested practices. A return to our roots is necessary as we build education and awareness around the gold mine that is Appalachia, all while being friendly to the environment, to the community and to the producer.

Appalachian Gold showcases products that show how prosperous our region can be. Appalachian Gold is a majority Black-owned brand and a celebration of the rich contribution African Americans made to building our region.

Our family came from Alabama as part of the 1900s migration of coal miners to West Virginia. The matriarch, Ms. Alberta crafted the first batch of Mama’s Meat Sauce as a matter of resourcefulness and in a streak of Black brilliance. Ms. Alberta worked as a cook in the boarding house, carrying guns in her apron for protection. Everyone loved the foods she would cook, and Mama’s Meat Sauce gained notoriety in the community.

This sauce has a reputation. Community members asked if the sauce would be made for events. Family members requested large quantities to travel home with them. Others have tried to replicate the magic.

In the late 1960s, Mama raised our Mama, Ronnie Marie, to make Mama’s Meat Sauce with no measuring or cooking utensils, but with the purpose of taking care of her family. Ronnie Marie lovingly shared the recipe with her daughter and granddaughters.

Mama’s Meat Sauce is born out of struggle, but shows the resilience of our family. This sauce is our family legacy.



appalachiangold.com



THE **NAACP**

Morgantown/Kingwood Branch

CELEBRATES

Juneteenth by

highlighting our work over the past year.

Founded in 1909, the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) is the country’s largest and most pre-eminent civil rights organization. Our mission is to secure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights in order to eliminate race-based discrimination and ensure the health and well-being of all persons.

The Morgantown branch organized in 1935 and expanded to include Preston County in the 1970s.

- NAACP members are on Morgantown’s new Civilian Police Review and Advisory Board
- have monthly “Readings on Race and Rights”
- Members participated in • Dismantling Racism Together
- the West Virginia Coalition for Truth in History
- Community Coalition for Social Justice’s (CCSJ) Martin Luther King, Jr. Day event
- We participated in Black Policy Day at the Capitol
- the 2022 Juneteenth Celebration in Fairmont
- WVU’s Health Sciences Center Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Fair
- CCSJ’s Social and Environmental Justice Fair
- the Morgantown/Monongalia County League of Women Voters candidates’ forum
- WVU’s Council on Gender Equity Family Field Day. With funding from the Partnership of African American Churches, we sponsored
- “Know Your Rights”: Rules for Interacting with Police
- blood drives in cooperation with the Red Cross
- “Being Your Own Patient Advocate” program
- a Community Day to network with local organizations that share our goals
- We partnered with West Virginia Women Vote to get out the vote for the Fall 2022 election. **We meet the third Tuesday of each month at 5:30pm over Zoom. Contact us at www.morgantownnaACP.org/, on Facebook at www.facebook.com/naACP3241, or email at 3241naACP@gmail.com.**

PRIDE!

LEKILI DEAN SHARES

Sasha Colby, ‘RuPaul’s Drag Race’ winner and Hawaiian-born former Miss West Virginia Continental 2009, celebrates her victory

Honey, let me tell you something. There ain’t nothin’ like a West Virginian with some Hawaiian spirit, and that’s just what Sasha Colby brought to the stage in 2009 in this state and now to the world.

Sasha Kekauoha, more known to us all as Sasha Colby, our star, and now the nation’s drag superstar and winner of RuPaul’s Drag Race, was born in Hawaii, but her road to success was polished in the mountains of West Virginia.

In 2009, she took West Virginia by storm, winning Miss Continental West Virginia, her first big leap into the spotlight of the greater pageant circuit.

And, as a proud LGBTQ+ West Virginian myself, with a



Watch Sasha Colby get crowned Miss Continental West Virginia in 2009

Polynesian heart beating in my chest, I’m overflowing with joy as I spill this fabulous news to you.

Sasha Colby has just claimed her crown on “RuPaul’s Drag Race,” season 15!

Sasha, who now resides in Los Angeles, was born in Waimānalo, Hawaii, as the youngest of seven children, raised in the faith of Jehovah’s Witnesses. Embracing her true self, she came out as a trans woman and hasn’t looked back since.

Sasha is no stranger to adversity, and she’s never been shy about sharing her story. She wore her scars like sequins, showcasing her experiences with childhood trauma and her rich ethnic heritage to shine brighter than any star in the night sky.

She has become a beacon of hope and courage amidst the attacks on LGBTQ+ rights, specifically those targeting trans folks and drag queens. She has shown the world what it means to stand proud.

She’s paid homage to her Hawaiian heritage throughout her career, talking about how she’s building a legacy for her home state and her journey as Māhū. (Māhū means “in the middle,” which symbolizes those radiant individuals who embody both male and female spirits in Native Hawaiian culture.)

With her victory, she’s become a symbol of hope for us all, from West Virginia to the world.

With Sasha’s win, we’re on the map of Hawaii and West Virginia.

So, here’s to Sasha Colby, a leading light, a proud Māhū, and a beacon of hope and pride for us all.

Keeping In the Hawaiian Spirit, Aloha!
Lekili Kini Dean

Author Lekili Dean is Polynesian by nature and West Virginian by nurture.



TO READ ON BBG:
West Virginia Black Pride Foundation seeks to create a safe space for Black LGBTQ+

CALL FOR STORIES:

Black By God seeks stories, information, and personal experiences exploring the often overlooked LGBTQI+ Black history in West Virginia. Share your narratives, insights, and relevant materials in any format (written, audio, visual) to uncover and celebrate this vital part of our heritage. Submit your contributions to infp@blackbygod.org, respecting your privacy and preferences. Let’s illuminate the lives of LGBTQI+ Black life are honored and remembered in West Virginia’s history. To discourage and suppress our vote to

COMMENTARY

Building a diverse presence

Reflections on the second annual Black Policy Day in West Virginia

By Betty Rivard

The Second Annual Black Policy Day that was held during the recent regular session was one of the most significant events that I have seen in my over-30 years of being around our state legislature. It felt really right to me to see such a diverse presence at the Culture Center and the Capitol with everyone focused on the best interests of our state and our people.

I also saw what may be the strongest contingent of Black staff working during the regular legislative session. The proportional representation felt truer to our population than it did during the time between 2008 and 2014 that I worked at the Capitol as per diem staff.

During that earlier time, we were blessed, as we are now, with Black legislators who had an extraordinary insight into the mechanisms of power, even when they have not been able to wield a lot of it themselves. This may have been due to watching it all closely and taking it all in through the lens of their personal and cultural history and experience without getting as caught up in the day-to-day game aspects of things. Then, through mechanisms like leading the opening prayer or making a floor speech, as well as their involvement in committees, they shared the benefits of their seriousness.

The very presence of Black citizens defies the approach of those elected representatives and their supporters who are dedicated to establishing that it is “my way or the highway.” To erase the rich diversity of our state’s history. To discourage and suppress our vote to

improve their chances to win despite their policies that work against us.

We cannot let this happen. The health and very survival of our democracy and all of us in it depend on the involvement of each of us in addressing tough issues: inequality, in all of its manifestations; global warming; the structure and rules of our democracy itself. There are no easy answers. Playbooks being imposed from other states are especially dysfunctional for the uniqueness of who we are.

All of our stories are important to considering how to achieve the best results on the full spectrum of issues. We and those who represent us all need to be at the table to share our insights and views.

In the face of the status quo, building a diverse presence can be a long slow process. There are days when it feels like walking through molasses. We may wonder if our work can ever make a difference or if there is any value in even trying to be involved.

As I write this piece on Mother’s Day, the words that come to mind are from the 1961 Shirelles’ song I remember from high school. The song is about romance but it also seems to apply here: “Mama said there’ll be days like this/ There’ll be days like this, mama said.”

Progress can seem like a slog, two steps forward and one back, especially during this time right now in our state.

More than ever, we are called to keep building on what is already being done. We are seeing extraordinary leadership come forward from across our state to make the changes we need. We also know that lots of forces are working and spending big bucks to try to keep us

down and drive us away.

Our strength is in joining together within our communities, wherever we are, to help each other to get through these times. Seek out and share good information. Do what it takes to keep up our spirits and continue to reach out. Exercise our rights as citizens to run for office. Support candidates with a proven track record of addressing our needs and concerns. Be sure to vote.

Showing up at the Capitol and local meetings of our elected boards, councils and commissions can only help, in a win-win. We see what is happening first hand and we show others that we care and are following their actions. We can also testify about what we see back in our schools, churches, workplaces, sports events, clubs and other places where we gather.

Figure out what policies best address our citizens’ real needs and join with others to promote and support them. Ask hard questions wherever we can about where our candidates and elected officials stand on the things that we care most about.

This is already happening. Look to and join in with those who are most involved to help show us the way.

Whatever our religion, or no religion, the biblical text can apply here: “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible to you.” (NIV)

Above all, keep the faith. As we all know, there is always lots more work to do.

Betty Rivard is an independent volunteer citizens’ advocate.



**CELEBRATING
JUNETEENTH**

**GROUNDWORK
PROJECT**

We show up in West Virginia. We show up in the real battlegrounds.



What do you know about your health?

In a state like ours, where most of the population is white, most of the health-related data that are collected and shared are focused on the majority population—on white people. Marginalized populations have historically been described as “statistically insignificant” and data affecting their specific healthcare needs are often not collected, shared, or used to improve the way we report information or improve systems to keep everyone healthy.

The way our state collects and reports health data — and the way they use that data — affects our health, for better or worse.

The “When All Are Counted” project is studying how this “majority rule” type of health data collection affects three specific

populations: the Black, LGBTQIA+, and disability populations in West Virginia. The project is funded under Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Community Research for Health Equity program, managed by AcademyHealth, and directed by Think Kids, a nonprofit located in South Charleston.

The goal is to create a more inclusive health surveillance system where everyone counts, and everyone is counted. That’s a heavy lift, and we’ll need your help.

Follow the QR code to sign up for the project email list to learn about upcoming focus groups, surveys, blog posts, and details on our project convening in 2024.

Together, we’ll build a health data surveillance system in West Virginia that serves all of us.



Sign up for the “When All Are Counted” project email list to learn about upcoming focus groups, surveys, blog posts, and details on our project convening in 2024.



‘WHEN ALL ARE COUNTED’ Stories to read from our project blog

The “When All Are Counted” Project seeks to elevate community voices and make the priorities of communities the primary goal of local health system transformation efforts.

Unique to the project is a creative communications component. Look for the tag line “writing for the ‘When All Are Counted’ project” on our blog and social media.

These stories are from the blog and can be found here:



Birthing justice: My journey to becoming a doula and the importance of Black doulas in West Virginia

By Crystal Good
Writing for the “When All Are Counted” project

When I gave birth to my first child at 20 years old, it was a challenging experience. The episiotomy, epidural, and creepy OBGYN made me feel uncomfortable, and I gave birth in a hospital under harsh fluorescent lights. However, the birth of my healthy 9lb-10 oz baby boy made it all worth it.

The burden of racism in healthcare: Confronting hypocrisy in progressive nonprofits

By Crystal Good
Writing for the “When All Are Counted” project

Sometimes, you have to call a thing what it is. As a Black woman in West Virginia’s policy community, I’ve had a front-row seat to progressive, white-led organizations whose leaders dedicate time and resources to supporting Black issues. Still, they hurry off the stage when confronted with real moments to be more than performative.



While they face more hurdles in health care, nonbinary people can endure

By Erin Beck
Writing for the “When All Are Counted” project

When moving from Washington, D.C. to the mountains of West Virginia, Lyz Frey expected to find people who were “beautifully eccentric.” But in interviews over several weeks, nonbinary young adults in the state have said West Virginia is often an unwelcoming place.

“For so many of us, hope is the only thing that nourishes us,” Lyz, 37, said. “When there is a famine of compassion, it is that hope of a better future that keeps us fed. But we can’t sustain on hope alone.”



Legislative meetings lack focus on all kids

By Erin Beck
Writing for the “When All Are Counted” project

Last week, I was sitting in a meeting of West Virginia lawmakers who were talking about a survey of how prepared schools are for school shooters, and I thought about kids with disabilities.

At the West Virginia Legislature’s interim meeting, held at the Cacapon Resort in Berkeley Springs, representatives of the state Department of Education assured lawmakers that the survey was comprehensive.



“Like any other kid.” Representation matters in health care

By Erin Beck
Writing for the “When All Are Counted” project

There is power in numbers. But even though there are kids throughout West Virginia who look like JaQue Galloway’s kids and kids who have the same disabilities, her family often fend for themselves.

Galloway’s 7-year-old son Kannon has Down syndrome, autism, heart defects, and vision and hearing impairments. Her 3-year-old son Knox has global developmental delay.

COMMENTARY

THE KIDS ARE ALRIGHT

By Inni Ngijoi Yogo

Adulthood sucks. How do you expect me to be the greatest version of myself when I barely know how to be an adult, or of much grandeur, and how to survive? In the year 2020, I was in debt. Like, serious debt. I had -\$32 in my account. I know, I was a disgrace. My family and friends couldn't look at me in the face. This led to an additional overdraft fee I couldn't afford. All of this was influenced and worsened by the pandemic when gas, food, and merchandise became more expensive.

Yet, I still had to pay for textbooks, school fees, cell phone bills, subscriptions, etc. Long story short, I got a peek into what real life is like as I ended up getting kicked off of subscriptions one-by-one, suffering in hunger when I couldn't buy snacks and becoming the subject for my own personal spammer, aka my debt collector. (I'm not joking, she'd spam my email, like everyday.) Can you believe it? All because I couldn't afford \$32 in my bank account.

And when I got sick, the medical bill didn't help. Eventually, after finally finding a job six months later (let me remind you this was when everything was closed), I was on the road to financial freedom. Talk about humiliating.

That was exactly three years ago.

Flash forward now, and you're telling me to go out into the world and be this inundated superhero in this uncanny and nebulous adventure we call adulthood. How do you stack a pancake of responsibilities and finances when I was literally broke with only minor obligations the same amount of years ago, the age most toddlers are right now.

I am a toddler in this pool of maturity. As an antithesis of the Chloe/Halle song, the kids are not alright.

Not only do I not know how to walk or paddle, many young people my age would agree: We can barely float.

I also heard 2020 was the year of the break up. Everybody was breaking up. Boyfriends and girlfriends. Friendships. Even boss/manager relationships with employees.

I saw it play out like an overly dramatic soap opera.

Just imagine the contentious scenery being at a work office, where Kevin Hart is shouting at his boss, "You

can't fire me. I'm firing myself."

The world was and is meaner. Can we really navigate that? Let's ask George Floyd. Or Tyre Nichols.

Emotionally, as a society, we're not there.

Surveys showed that spiritual health, along with mental health, significantly declined, too. Fitness levels declined. And now that we're trying to readjust to post-pandemic life and play catch-up from all these years we've been behind, how do we find the work-life balance to fit physical activity into our already bustling schedules? Believe me, home-gym equipment is not a "me" thing or a feasible space option either.

Let's be real, it's not like young adults are really given guidelines on how to be great post-pandemic. There are numerous self-help books, podcasts, and influencers out there, but which one speaks true to our individual experiences, to manifest strength in overcoming debt, dealing with grief, building self-confidence, maintaining our health/state of mind, racism (in my case) and shaky relationships, while also remembering to do homework and waking up for our 8 a.m. classes?

In this stone age of hearts we live in, what guidelines are there on how to be a breaker of ceilings and revolutionary, especially as a young, Black woman? Or another woman? Or men? What do young people get? We haven't seen it yet.

I don't believe that adults invest in our youth enough. Ageism is real in the workforce. Seniority matters. You've heard stories of how resident doctors get bullied around by the attending physician until they're officially out of residency. Happens all the time in the medical field. Oftentimes we see Boomers complain about generation X, Y, Z and how we have it "easy."

Although I'll be honest, I don't remember what alphabet we're on now, that's why I listed all three. I don't even know when they started counting generations. Is there a "W" generation, an "A" generation? A for Abe Lincoln or Adam and Eve? And if we're the Z generation, does that mean we're the last ones? If anything, we should be getting special treatment.

But to be more precise, the Boomers looked down at the Millennials. And now, the Millennials and Boomers are criticizing us. They call us a mess when we mess up. Or on a national scale, the backlash that's been received for loan forgiveness. This would provide a major relief to those with a plethora of college debt and allow youth with smaller loans to reach financial

freedom much quicker.

Millions of Americans are now choosing to avoid college education because of how crazy college debt is. Yet, when they're denied higher salaries or job mobility, there's no grace in understanding why they stopped at a high school diploma. Let's not forget how all these entry level job applications ask for said amount of years of this and that experience, but that entry position is what we needed to propel and elevate to apply for that job.

It's a never ending loop. Confusing too.

Shall we consider the incarceration of urban crack users in the '80s rather than providing them with the necessary education, guidance and resources needed as were provided for opioids? Do we hate our youth?

To the Boomers in the room, remember how it was when you were first learning how to drive.

We all have dreams. Regardless of age, it's there.

Most of us want to be the greatest version of ourselves and to succeed. Rather than being individualists about it, why not be communal? Two hands are better than one and assist in achieving our goals even faster. Many of us even have the same goals, too.

Let's dig deeper from the soil of pettiness and title, to the root of solace and love. We need to start investing in our young people, for they are the leaders of tomorrow. Provide them with the necessary training, resources and time to become themselves.

When rapper Lil Wayne shot himself, he said multiple officers ran into his home looking for drugs, but only one looked at the 12-year-old and stopped to administer the CPR that saved his life.

Please be patient when we screw up. Provide us with the necessary things that we need and be patient with us as we straddle our own pride or arrogance.

Young people, let us dig deep through the root of our struggles and experiences, and let that be our motivator to keep going through difficult times and the grace we use to support others.

The Notorious B.I.G. once said, "Sky's the limit, and you just keep pressing on. You can have what you want and be what you want."

Let's do that. This way, our parents and grandparents will be able to shout out loud and proudly that maybe we're not too bad, and maybe, "The kids are alright."

Inni Ngijoi Yogo is a Master of Public Health student at WVU

JAYLI

2023 Black Policy Day recap

(& Fashion Buzz)

Hello WV! During Black History Month, I got to go to the 2023 West Virginia Black Policy Day at the state Capitol.

As a 10 year old, I'm glad I got the chance to talk with so many people that helped me understand what this day was all about. I asked everyone that I talked to what issues they were most interested in. Issues like the Crown Act and healthcare were very important. Del. Sean Hornbuckle was most interested in education and school topics. NAACP State President Darryl Clausell told me he was most interested in the Anti Racism Bill of 2023.

I also asked everyone what Black Policy Day means to them?

"It's a time to come together and see what's going on and how we can be better as people of color in West Virginia," said Pastor Shannon Robinson with the Partnership of African American Churches.

"It means that we can come together and start supporting some policies and learning about them," said Dural Miller, with Keep Your Faith Corporation.

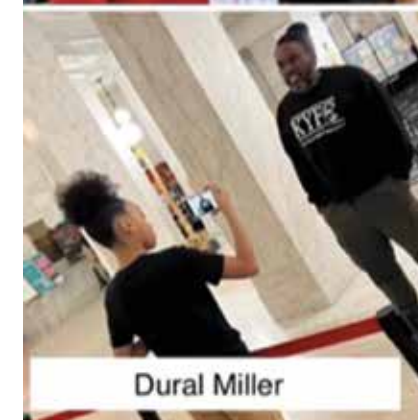
"It's a great networking experience also a way to share our common goals and our voices so we can see the change that we want to see in our state," said Octavia Cordon, with the Aspire Achievement Project.

As some of you may know, I'm the BBG fashionista, so I had to ask some people what they were wearing.

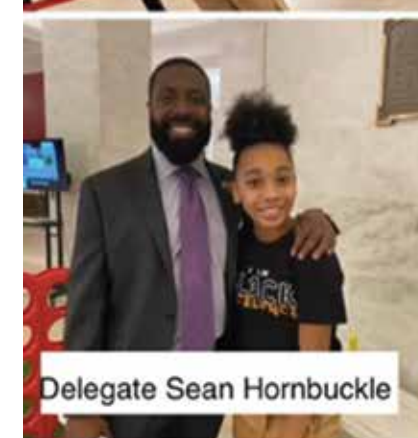
People were very stylish and were wearing everything from shirts with their own organizations on it, to Fashion Nova and even dress suits. Event organizer Katonya Hart with the Call to Action for Racial Equality said she likes to wear dresses that have design, especially those with bright colors and Afro centric



Dr. Shanequa Smith



Dural Miller



Delegate Sean Hornbuckle



Pastor Shannon Robinson



Crystal Good



Darryl Clausell

BBG Kids Fashionista Jayli, center, attended 2023 West Virginia Black Policy Day at the state Capitol.

patterns.

After interviewing a delegate, a pastor, lots of community members and event organizers I learned this was definitely a day to celebrate Black West Virginians who help shape our state. It was pretty clear that the organizers wanted to make everyone, including us kids, feel like our voice matters at the state Capitol. Even though Black History Month and Black Policy Day are over, we will continue to celebrate our history and culture in West Virginia as Juneteenth approaches. As always keep your head up and stay stylish WV!

Top 5 fashion trends for Summer 2023!

1. **Sheer Layering** — it's the summer of see-through
2. **Short & Sweet Jackets** for those cool summer nights.
3. **Double Denim** outfits work for girls and guys too
4. **Summer Stripes** are sure to sizzle too!
5. **Puffed Up Slides.** Almost like those big red carton boots that celebrities were wearing to make a fashion statement earlier this year.



TO READ:
New data shows racial, economic disparities persist in West Virginia school discipline practices

READ THE STORY BY DUNCAN SLADE
ON MOUNTAIN STATE SPOTLIGHT

Stark disparities continue to exist in how Black students and low-income students are disciplined in West Virginia schools, according to data released Wednesday by the state Department of Education.

As Mountain State Spotlight reported last year, Black students in West Virginia have been suspended twice as often as their white peers for the last two decades. And a lackluster report was given to lawmakers last summer that showed disparities still exist but did not include a plan to address them.



COMMENTARY

WV jails are in a humanitarian crisis

By Danni Dineen

As a first responder for people struggling in the margins, as a person in recovery and as a person who still deals with the trauma I experienced while incarcerated, I pay close attention to what West Virginia's leadership is doing to address the humanitarian crisis in our regional jails.

Recently, a lot of the public discourse involves the staffing shortages within the Division of Corrections and Rehabilitation. The burden is heaviest for people who work in regional jails and for the people incarcerated in them.

Staffing shortages have dire consequences for the folks I serve who wind up in jail. Most of them end up there because of untreated mental illness, substance use disorder or because they simply don't have a home. And incarceration causes further complications in their already problematic lives.

What this essentially means is that we are taking the most vulnerable people and locking them up in a cage within an environment where there's very little capacity for care or oversight. According to recent testimony before the Legislature, Corrections currently has more than 1,000 unfilled positions and vacancy rates as high as 70% at some facilities.

But for our state to really address the human suffering, the deaths and the overdoses that are all too common in regional jails — in addition to dealing with the understaffing — we also must work on policy solutions that reduce the overcrowding.

With that being said, I applaud the work of the Legislature, as well as Gov. Jim Justice, for passing and signing Senate Bill 633, which deals with how capiases are handled. A capias essentially is a bench warrant for a person's arrest.

Criminal law reform advocates like me who pushed for SB 633 are hopeful that it will help ensure fewer people sit for days and weeks in regional jail awaiting a hearing.

The new law requires magistrates and judges to set a hearing within five days of an arrest on a capias, whereas, previously, a person could be imprisoned for an indeterminate amount of time. Capias arrests are the No. 1 reason people were locked up in regional jails last year, a number that has grown 150% in the past decade.

Behind those numbers are countless stories of people whose lives are critically affected for a lifetime because

of arrest and incarceration on a capias. I am one of those people.

In 2020, I found myself at the mercy of a disease that told me the answer to my problems was to use heroin. I checked myself into seven rehab facilities before I was able to achieve and maintain the sobriety I still have today.

Shortly after I came home from rehab, I found out I was pregnant. Not long after, I was arrested on a capias that was issued while I was bouncing from rehab to rehab.

I was incarcerated for a week before I got a hearing, then I wasn't even given the opportunity to pay a bond. I had no choice but to stay in jail, pregnant.

During the time I was incarcerated, I saw a doctor for my baby only three times in four months.

I thank God every day that my daughter was born healthy. I believe in my heart of hearts that all the health complications during her birth could have been avoided and I could have carried my baby to term if I had not been incarcerated and had appropriate access to an OB/GYN.

I lost everything during the time I was incarcerated: my home and all my belongings, with the exception of the clothes on my back. I didn't have a single diaper, baby bottle or onesie for my newborn daughter to wear. I've been through a lot in my life. I moved out on my own at the young age of 13, I am a veteran, I've survived substance use disorder, and nothing that I have ever faced in my life was as horrific and traumatizing as that experience in regional jail.

To be clear, I was arrested not because I committed a crime but for a capias that was issued for failing to report my address, and then incarcerated for months after not being given the option for a bond.

With SB 633, at least now, people won't have to wait any longer than five days to have an initial hearing. It's a start to address this crisis, and it's a reminder that we also must focus on solutions that reduce the number of people who enter regional jails in the first place.

This humanitarian crisis in our jails is no single agency or institution's fault, but is a systemic failure that funnels and ensnares too many people, and a collective failure to imagine that there are more effective ways to address complex social problems.

Danni Dineen lives in Kanawha County. This opinion piece was originally published in the Charleston Gazette-Mail on Apr 26, 2023

OPINION

Surviving the environmental shock

Life Inside the West Virginia prison system

By Mark Peez

Coming from the "real world," as we inmates like to call it, the prison system is a stark contrast. It is the ultimate environmental shock, where the freedom to wake up, use the bathroom, or shower is completely stripped away. The adjustment to this new reality must be swift and firm.

Within the prison system, inmates face racism from authority figures and fellow inmates. With its nationwide reach and diverse inmate population, the federal system is more complex than the state prison system, which houses individuals from the specific state where the crime was committed. In the federal system, inmates are often divided into "cars" based on their state or region, leading to a distinct separation among Black inmates

that is not as prevalent among whites or foreigners. This division based on region or state makes unity among Black inmates almost impossible, as they are not identified primarily by their race but rather by the regions they represent.

Every day presents new challenges, even though the routines may seem similar. Inmates must constantly adjust to various situations, such as dealing with gangs, race riots, or conflicts over cells. This dynamic environment requires adaptability and the ability to handle unforeseen circumstances. Adjusting to prison life varies from person to person, and for many, the most significant adjustment is being separated from their loved ones, especially children. While it is necessary to maintain some connection to the outside world, inmates must also create a mental separation to cope with things beyond their control. It is not uncommon to witness individuals struggling with their mental well-being due to the inability to control external factors while the world outside continues to move forward. Accepting this reality and learning to compartmentalize emotions become crucial for survival in this ever-changing environment.

Mark Peez is currently incarcerated and focused on a brighter future.



BBG NEW SERIES

Words Beyond Bars: Bridging Perspectives and Inspiring Change through a Unique Prison Education Program

BBG's Words Beyond Bars series draws inspiration from The Inside-Out Prison Exchange at WVU. Although BBG is not directly affiliated with or endorsed by the program, we wholeheartedly celebrate its mission of creating a unique educational environment where college students and incarcerated individuals unite as peers to engage in a seminar conducted inside prison. This program aims to challenge college students' preconceived notions about crime and justice while providing incarcerated individuals with a broader context to reflect upon their life experiences. Like the program that inspired us, our series seeks to foster transformation and serve as a catalyst for social change.

AFFORDABLE BROADBAND

Connecting West Virginia

How the ACP can help close the digital divide



AFFORDABLE CONNECTIVITY PROGRAM

WHAT IS IT?

The Affordable Connectivity Program is an FCC program that helps connect families and households struggling to afford internet service.

The benefit provides:

- Up to \$30/month discount for internet service;
- Up to \$75/month discount for households on qualifying Tribal lands; and
- A one-time discount of up to \$100 for a laptop, desktop computer, or tablet purchased through a participating provider.

WHO IS ELIGIBLE?

A household is eligible for the Affordable Connectivity Program if the household income is at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines, or if a member of the household meets at least one of the criteria below:

- Participates in any of the following assistance programs: SNAP, Medicaid, Federal Public Housing Assistance, Veterans Pension or Survivor Benefits, SSI, WIC, or Lifeline;
- Participates in any of the following Tribal specific programs: Bureau of Indian Affairs General Assistance, Tribal TANF, Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, or Tribal Head Start (income based);
- Participates in the Free and Reduced-Price School Lunch Program or the School Breakfast Program, including through the USDA Community Eligibility Provision;
- Received a Federal Pell Grant during the current award year; or
- Meets the eligibility criteria for a participating broadband provider's existing low-income internet program.

TWO STEPS TO ENROLL

1

Go to AffordableConnectivity.gov to submit an application or print a mail-in application

2

Contact your preferred participating provider to select an eligible plan and have the discount applied to your bill.

Some providers may have an alternative application that they will ask you to complete.

Eligible households must both apply for the program and contact a participating provider to select a service plan.

LEARN MORE

Call 877-384-2575, or

Visit fcc.gov/acp



By Crystal Good

West Virginia is a place of rugged natural beauty and resilient communities, but unfortunately, for many of us, that resilience often means scrambling to find the best wifi signal.

West Virginians, lack of access to high-speed internet has made it harder to keep up with the demands of the digital age. As a fellow with Black Churches for Digital Equity (BC4DE) – an organization building a collaborative movement across the nation to make sure that our communities, communities with the least access, achieve digital equity – I work to raise awareness around an important initiative that can help all West Virginians have access to affordable and reliable internet services: The Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP).

The ACP is a federal program that provides low-income households with home internet broadband (meaning high-speed internet) service and smart devices like tablets and laptops. This program provides a discount of up to \$30 per month towards internet service for eligible households, and up to \$75 per month for households on qualifying Tribal lands. In addition, eligible households can receive a one-time discount of up to \$100 to purchase a laptop, desktop computer, or tablet from participating providers.

There are a number of ways to be eligible for these benefits, including having an income at or below 200% of the federal poverty guidelines or participating in certain assistance programs like SNAP or Medicaid. To learn more about all of the various ways you could be eligible, visit BC4DE's ACP page.

Despite the resources available, West Virginia has significantly lower enrollment rates in the ACP. For example, although an estimated 356,000 households are eligible for the program, only about 99,530 households have enrolled. The ACP could be a vital resource for all West Virginians, but only if we know about it and are able to enroll. According to the FCC's 2016 Broadband Progress Report, only 61 percent of rural residents have access to high-speed internet. In fact, West Virginia ranks 47th in internet connectivity, with 30% of residents lacking high-speed internet access. A report released by the Federal Communications Commission shows that the percentage of West Virginia residents with a high-speed internet connection to their home fell to 82.2%, one of only five states sliding backward.

Access to reliable internet is crucial for things like online

By Anna Brugmann

West Virginia is poised to capitalize on millions of federal broadband funding, and with it comes the opportunity to support local news.

Congress passed billions of dollars of broadband funding in the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. West Virginia has already been allocated \$6 million of that funding to help improve broadband access for West Virginians, with more money possible in the coming years.

Among those federal dollars is \$2.75 billion earmarked to help states pursue digital equity plans. And with those plans comes yet another opportunity for West Virginia — to address the growing gap between those who have access to quality local news and information and those who don't.

Digital equity describes the conditions by which citizens have the resources and skills to be full participants in their culture, society and economy. Despite all West Virginia's progress in recent years, only a third of West Virginians meet the federal standards for high speed broadband — the other 70% are considered underserved.

But simply connecting these residents to broadband won't fulfill the full promise of digital equity.

That's because at least half of the counties in the U.S. that do not have a local newspaper also fail to meet the federal minimum for broadband

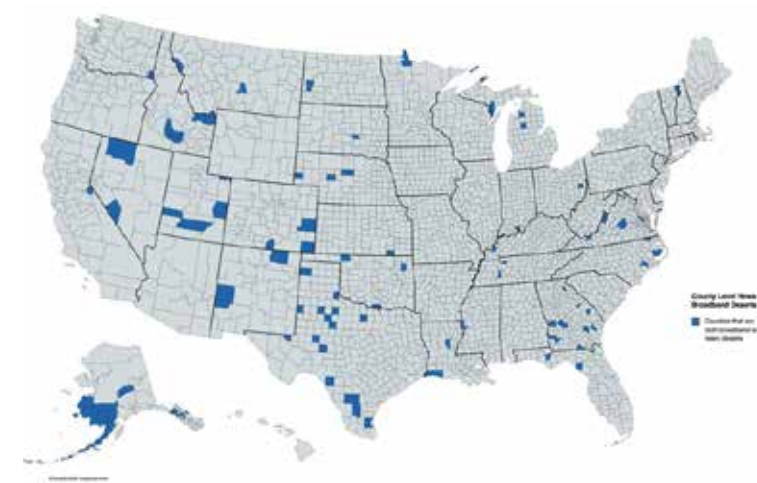
speeds, meaning an internet connection alone won't necessarily help those residents be full participants in their communities.

When these residents do get connected to the internet they will find, in many cases, what one expert called "high speed access to garbage." This is particularly alarming because the communities least likely to have local news are poor, rural and speak a language other than English, the same communities that are disproportionately targeted with mis/disinformation.

West Virginia is no different. Already this year, two newspapers have closed — the Pineville Independent and the Welch News, the latter located in McDowell county which has a median household income \$20,000 below the state average and a sizable Black population.

On average, two newspapers close per week in the United States. When a newspaper leaves a community, civic participation decreases, including volunteerism and voting rates – trends that run directly counter to the promise of digital equity. Herein lies the opportunity.

West Virginia must submit a digital equity plan by October 2023 to be eligible for more federal Digital Equity funds. According to the state's 2022 Annual Broadband Report, that plan must include plans for digital literacy innovation programs and integrate objectives for civic and social engagement — two areas of West Virginia's digital equity plans that could and should include



A map of "double deserts" across the United States created by Prof. Christopher Ali of Pennsylvania State University and PhD Candidate Ryan Wang. This map does not account for recent newspaper closures in McDowell and Wyoming counties in West Virginia.

local news outlets.

Projects that meet these objectives could include participatory journalism programs, like Black by God's use of "folk reporters" that trains West Virginia residents to cover undercovered hears at the state capital. These programs make citizens more savvy information consumers, a component of digital equity.

But West Virginia could be even more creative. It could use its digital equity planning process to take a special look at the communities that lack both local news and broadband — what the national advocacy organization Rebuild Local News (where I work) calls double deserts.

The plan could include funding for local outlets — through Digital Equity Act programs called the Capacity Grants and Competitive Grants — who grow their

coverage into double deserts. Funds could even be given to local newsrooms who serve rural communities to help them grow their digital presence to be ready for when their communities and towns become better connected.

It's an approach that makes sense to Don Smith, executive director of the West Virginia Press Association. West Virginia, after all, invests millions in attracting business and industry. It keeps up roads and highways to support economic growth.

"The government could help that and say look, we recognize that you all fell behind because we didn't provide 'the (digital) highways,'" Smith said. "But we are going to give you some money to help the transition."

Right now West Virginia has exactly that opportunity.

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learning, remote work, telemedicine, and staying connected with loved ones. Without this access, both economic growth and educational opportunities are hindered, preventing our communities from being able to compete in the increasingly digital world. It's time to bridge the digital divide and ensure that all West Virginians have access to affordable and reliable

internet services. By bringing the benefits of the ACP to all of West Virginia and broader rural America, we can help ensure that all Americans have access to the opportunities and resources they need to thrive in the 21st century.

As a West Virginian, I know firsthand the impact that lack of access to high-speed internet can have on our community. But I also know that we can overcome this challenge by embracing the resources available to us as long as we spread the word and help

our communities enroll. To learn more about the program and how you can sign up for benefits, visit Black Churches 4 Digital Equity. By working together to bring high-speed internet to all corners of West Virginia, we can build a stronger, more connected community.

Crystal Good is a sixth-generation West Virginian, a poet, performer, and the founder and publisher of Black By God THE WEST VIRGINIAN, a multimedia news and storytelling organization.

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Appalachia is not a sacrifice zone.

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Photo credit: Tikkun Olam Productions

Visit stopmvp.org



JUNE 16, 2023

Meet CEG founder A. Toni Young

COMMUNITY EDUCATION GROUP WORKS TO IMPROVE
PUBLIC HEALTH IN DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES

communityeducationgroup.org

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ABOUT CEG

The Community Education Group's (CEG) work includes providing access to healthcare, public education, and job training, plus securing financial investments to underserved rural communities and community-based organizations in West Virginia and Appalachia.

Our focus is to improve access by providing leadership and advocacy to scale resources and funding to combat the syndemic cluster of widespread disease and public health crises, including HIV/AIDS, viral hepatitis, opioid addiction, and substance use disorder.

Our vision is that no matter where you live, what you do, or who you are, everyone deserves and has access to life-affirming resources for themselves and their families.



Community Education Group staff members, from left, Hailie Arnold and Trey Harvey, Ohio University Professor and CEG Director of Education Jason Lucas, and CEG Executive Director A. Toni Young.

Welcome to the Black By God Health insert!

This special Juneteenth/Pride BBG issue is sponsored by the Community Education Group (CEG). It includes this Health insert, which focuses on important themes such as HIV/AIDS, dancing for your health, Black infant and maternal support, and substance abuse disorder recovery in the Black community.

CEG is led by the dynamic Toni A. Young, who has been at the forefront of addressing HIV/AIDS and health disparities in disadvantaged communities for over 30 years and relocated to West Virginia in DATE. CEG is focused and committed to finding solutions to the unique challenges Appalachia faces and has actively dismantled barriers to healthcare access.

BBG proudly introduces CEG and Young to our readers across West Virginia and the West Virginia diaspora.

Young's journey began with a transformative friendship that ignited her passion for advocacy and support. This is the energy of this issue: passionate transformation and fierce advocacy.

Join us in exploring this brief but necessary overview of the Black community's health-related problems with personal stories, valuable resources, and thought-provoking articles that share important information with our friends, neighbor, and communities.

Remember to sign up for CEG's health newsletter and stay updated with BBG's bi-weekly newsletter.

Together, let's strive for improved health and well-being in our community.

~ Crystal Good

Black By God Founder/Publisher

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Community Education Group founder A. Toni Young thinks Appalachia needs people and organizations who are

AMBITIOUS ENOUGH TO TRY



Stephen Clement and CEG founder A. Toni Young met in the late '80s.

By Emily Blevins

To tell the story of Community Education Group (CEG), a 30-year-old non-profit that works to eliminate disparities in health outcomes and improve

public health in disadvantaged populations and underserved communities, you have to start at Stephen Clement.

Clement was unlike anyone CEG founder A. Toni Young had ever met before. When the pair met in the late '80s, a friendship formed that would change the lives of countless people from Logan Circle in Washington, D.C. to Logan County and beyond.

As Young and Clement's friendship deepened over the years, a single phone call changed it all. Clement called Young one afternoon and asked her to sit down.

"He said that the cold he thought he had wasn't a cold. It was AIDS."

This was the first of two conversations that would alter the course of Young's life.

After that conversation, Young got a new job coordinating HIV/AIDS initiatives at a public health organization, the experience giving her a better sense of how the virus was affecting communi-

ties across the country.

"I kept thinking about how big of a problem it was that women were not getting any services, resources or attention for AIDS even though their rates of infection were steadily increasing," Young said.

Young went to her supervisor to advocate that HIV/AIDS services for women be added to their programming but was told that the issue wasn't "relevant" for the organization's membership. She said her persistence in advocating for HIV/AIDS resources for women caused continued tension at that organization and, more broadly, in the activism space.

"I wasn't the voice people wanted to see or hear when it came to the conversation about women and HIV," she said.

Simultaneously, Clement's condition was worsening.

One afternoon, he sat Young down for the second conversation.

"He said 'if this was you, I'd be your only friend who'd have the resources to help with medication, doctors — anything,'" she recalled.

"He said, 'if you look out in the living room, those are white men with access. It's not that your other friends wouldn't

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want to help — they wouldn't have the means. One day, this disease will look more like you. More Black. More female. And you need to start working on that now.”

After that conversation, Young started the National Women and HIV/AIDS Project (NWAP), which would eventually change its name to become Community Education Group in 1995.

CEG operates with a two-pronged approach: fund themselves and fund the community.

“It's easy for us to shore up grants to fund ourselves so we can provide technical assistance and operate programs like CHAMPS to train community health workers,” Young said. “But if we can't do anything to help financially sustain other organizations on the ground, we've failed. That's why it's our job to also secure investments for communities and organizations.”

With a robust 30-year CV of trailblazing harm reduction initiatives and leading programs devoted to mitigating HIV/AIDS, there's a lot to cover when it comes to CEG's history.

“We're not stagnant,” Young said. “Everything we've done over the years has been in service to the changing needs of individuals and communities. We've evolved as the environment evolved, and that's our same philosophy moving forward.”

There was a brief point in time where Young felt that CEG's future was uncertain.

“I was trying to figure out what was next for CEG when a colleague sent me a report on the most vulnerable counties in America, and 28 of West Virginia's 55 counties were on the list,” Young said.

After reviewing the report, Young described seeing the writing on the wall.

“There's a connection between substance use disorder and hepatitis C, and it was only a matter of time before AIDS was going to be a part of the picture for Appalachia.”

It was time for CEG to move its homebase from Washington, D.C., to Lost River, West Virginia.

“The move came as a bit of surprise,” Marc Meachem, head of external affairs at ViiV Healthcare, said. ViiV Healthcare is an independent, global specialist HIV company.

“But something I've always admired about Toni is the way she can analyze a situation, figure out what is and isn't working and intervene to create impact.”

Meachem, whose friendship and professional relationship with Young dates back more than a decade, said that throughout the years, he's been continually



A. Toni Young visits Stephen's personal memorial square of the AIDS Memorial Quilt.

inspired by Young's leadership of CEG.

“I've watched that analytical mind of hers connect the dots in Appalachia, and I think the fact that she's not from the region but has become a leader there and is doing meaningful work there is a real testament to who she is and her authenticity.”

In Appalachia, the nonprofit's strong record of providing technical assistance and securing financial investments for other organizations would be put to the test in a region suffering from decades of underinvestment and underestimation.

“The region has 26 million people in it — and a lot of outsiders have preconceived notions about who exactly is here, and many barriers were built in service of those preconceived notions,” Young said.

CEG is breaking down those barriers, and doing so using culturally appropriate interventions and a litany of cutting-edge initiatives.

“The conversation around HIV and AIDS is different in Appalachia, and that's why we're focusing on the syndemic, which is the idea that not only is HIV connected to viral hepatitis and substance use disorder. And it's why we're having broader conversations about connections to workforce development, educational attainment, and other health outcomes.”

Darwin Thompson, director of public affairs and

corporate giving at Gilead Sciences, Inc., a research-based biopharmaceutical company focused on innovative medicines, said that CEG is having conversations about HIV in Appalachia that defy many expectations.

“There's this myth that HIV doesn't exist in the region, but we know that's not true,” Thompson said. “I think Toni has a great team working behind her to dispel this myth and to connect health departments and community organizations to effectively address the syndemic.”

During the early stages of the pandemic, CEG worked to secure funds to support their work and other organizations throughout the region, but the sum they were initially promised didn't pan out. However, they kept their \$1 million regranting commitment, which represented a third of the funds they ultimately received.

Over the last two years, the nonprofit has regranted more than \$1.5 million to 37 organizations, and in the next two years is seeking to train more than 100 community health workers.

Young said there's still work to be done, and that she and the CEG team are always looking at opportunities to scale, to ask for more and to aim high.

“I think people think we're a bit strange, some may even say ‘crazy,’ because of our no-wrong-doors approach,” Young said. “But Appalachia needs people and organizations who are ambitious enough to try.”

Meachem has no doubt in his mind that it's possible for CEG to achieve the impact they're seeking.

“Toni is tenacious and has this uncanny ability to pull people in, and she's created a great team at CEG,” he said. “If anyone can build a movement around health and recovery in Appalachia, it's Toni and CEG.”

While Young and CEG still have transformative work ahead, Young said that what's guiding her forward is Stephen Clement.

“There've been moments in the last 30 years where I've felt a tap on my shoulder that gave me guidance, or made me pump the brakes and think for a minute. I know in my heart that it's Stephen, and it's others who were placed in my life for a reason.”

She listed out their names like a prayer: Stephen Clement. Belinda Mason. Nolte. Pandora Singleton. “Thick-Glasses” Chuck.

“Some people wonder why God put them on this earth, but not me. I'm here because of them; CEG is here because of them. And I don't want to let them down,” she said. “I'm here so that CEG can make a difference in peoples' lives.”

CONNECTING PEOPLE TO CARE

Graduation photo from the first cohort of Appalachian CHAMPS, which includes the students, coaches, and CEG program staff.



Coach and Healing House Assistant Director Theresa Galloway facilitates discussion about a CHAMPS Training module.

CHAMPS training program builds healthcare delivery infrastructure in West Virginia

By Emily Blevins

For Jason Lucas, Director of Education at Community Education Group (CEG), spearheading the CHAMPS program for the 30-year-old nonprofit is more than just part of a job. “Fundamentally, it's about connecting people to care,” says Lucas. CHAMPS, or Community Health and Mobilization Prevention Services, is one of CEG's signature educational programs and works to train Community Health Workers (CHWs), frontline public health workers who are trusted members of the communities they serve.

When CEG started the CHAMPS program in 2004, it was geared towards training CHWs in the District of Columbia. “Back then, because D.C. is a population-dense, metropolitan area, you could operate out of a central hub,” says CEG Executive Di-

rector A. Toni Young. “But in retooling the program to train CHWs in West Virginia, we had to think differently about how this curriculum needed to be structured and delivered, and how we could overcome logistical challenges to ensure a low barrier of entry into the training program.”

In D.C., the CHAMPS curriculum focused on training CHWs on resources, programs, and care initiatives focused on HIV/AIDS. The current curriculum still focuses on HIV/AIDS, but given the specific needs of Appalachia, it also folds in information on resources for substance use disorder and recovery, as well as hepatitis C. The program's curriculum is built from material from Boston University, the New England Public Health Training Center, and new modules that CEG developed in concert with Dr. Tamara Henry at The George Washington University Milken Institute of Public Health.

Currently, CHAMPS is a virtual training program, with participants joining in from across the state. However, there are also three centralized locations in Charleston where individuals can participate in the virtual training but also have face-to-face engagement with their peers at the site.

“Because the pandemic made everyone more familiar with virtual learning and meeting platforms like Zoom, we have more options when it comes to making the program more accessible to a broader number of people,” says Lucas.

CHAMPS also uses a learning management system that has low bandwidth requirements, so the entire training program can be completed on just a cell-phone.

Lucas says that CEG's CHAMPS program is more intensive than many other CHW training pro-

Continued on page 30

KYFC clinic has a focus on BIPOC representation

By Alecia N. Allen
MA LPC NCC Clinical Director/Supervisor

The licensed Behavioral Health Center at Keep Your Faith Corporation (KYFC) is a social enterprise designed to fill gaps in access to culturally sensitive behavioral healthcare across the state.

Located in Charleston, West Virginia, the behavioral health clinic is the only existing healthcare service of its kind with a focus on BIPOC representation in behavioral health in the state.

A diverse staff of 10 BIPOC clinicians and administrators work together to provide professional individual and group outpatient counseling, including intensive services and clinical outreach.

The center is in network with West Virginia Medicaid and all managed care organizations and private

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH PROGRAM OVERVIEW



Pictured right to left: Clinic Founder, Alecia N. Allen, MA LPC NCC Clinical Director/Supervisor, Chenelle Coy-Williams, LGSW, Dr. Yvonne Lee-Long, Ph.D, Taniesha Poore, MA, Shanna Phillips, WV Provisionally Licensed Counselor

insurance carriers, as well as supported by grant funding from several supporting foundational, state, and federal partners. Clinical supervisors provide oversight for provisionally licensed clinical staff who wish to become independently licensed.

The clinicians utilize progressive strategies in psychotherapy to increase positive outcomes with an added focus on improved access to professional care for diverse and minority populations in West Virginia and across the Appalachian region.

Community need and impact

KYFC's culturally sensitive behavioral health program provides support that is threaded through a three-pronged organizational approach to address social and health disparities in black and minority communities in West Virginia including: food-systems access, workforce development, and access to

culturally appropriate healthcare. These programs are designed to sustainably impact social drivers in minority and marginalized communities that contribute to and mediate environmental impacts and community viability in relationship to people's preferences, behavior and capacity to influence change.

Historically, Black and indigenous populations experience barriers to mental healthcare that include mistrust of healthcare systems as a result of negative cultural experiences in behavioral and primary healthcare.

The clinic and other social program efforts at KYFC work together to promote equitable resources across sectors in order to positively impact individual and community wellbeing.

Trends in mental health and healthy lifestyle practices directly impact sustainable development in marginalized and distressed communities of color in West Virginia and across the region.

More than 5,000 West Virginian children and families have been impacted through direct care, clinical outreach and training efforts since 2020.

Clinical outreach

In addition to in-office and telehealth direct counseling services, KYFC offers clinical outreach programming that includes individual and group counseling onsite at partnering schools, as well as health screening and training events that engage community members and stakeholders while providing data that gives insight to community mental health trends among the target population each year.

Clinic Founder Alecia N. Allen, MA LPC NCC, is the Clinical Director/Supervisor at Keep Your Faith Corporation Behavioral Health Center



CEG Senior Director of External Affairs Lee Storrow gets an HIV test from Anchor Medical Group. HIV rates are disproportionately high in the region. Take control of your health and get tested. National HIV Testing Day is June 27.

A POWERFUL TOOL FOR PUBLIC HEALTH Bringing HIV self-testing home to Appalachia

By Emily Blevins

When Community Education Group (CEG) set its sights on addressing the syndemic of substance use disorder, viral hepatitis, and HIV in Appalachia, they brought with them more than 25 years of experience providing connections along the continuum of care for individuals from underserved and under-resourced communities.

Now 30 years old and firmly rooted in Appalachia, the nonprofit has doubled down on their efforts to address the syndemic, and have joined Emory University's Together TakeMeHome (TTMH) initiative, which seeks to distribute more than 1 million HIV self-tests across the country.

"Being a part of this project is a call back to the work we've done for 30 years, all while simultaneously addressing the barriers to health resources that Appalachia faces," says CEG Executive Director A. Toni Young.

"Through TTMH, individuals can request tests to be mailed to them, and once they've tested themselves, they're able to send that test back through the mail at no cost to them. This is huge for communities whose healthcare infrastructure is fragmented, and it's huge for Appalachia."

CEG joined TTMH as a technical assistance provider, so the organization helps train community based organizations on how to participate in the program and how to get connected with other local organizations to build coalitions that overcome existing barriers to healthcare access. However, CEG's work



around expanding access to HIV testing kits doesn't start or end there.

Over the past two years, CEG has been collaborating with the CDC Foundation to support their nationwide

self-testing efforts, working with 52 community organizations across the country to establish or expand HIV self-testing programs.

"Self-testing is a powerful tool for public health, and through our work with the CDC Foundation and other community partners across Appalachia, we were able to help organizations in Kentucky lift the restriction on test kit distribution by community organizations," says CEG Director of Policy Tricia Christensen. "Community-based organizations are the key to building a comprehensive continuum of care, and lifting this restriction reduces the stigma around HIV and allows more people to know their status and access the care they need."

Due to the impact of the opioid epidemic in West Virginia and Appalachia, HIV rates are disproportionately high in the region.

"There's this myth that HIV doesn't exist in Appalachia, but we know that's not true, and the data is supporting that," says Young. "National HIV Testing Day is on June 27, and it's a good time to take control of your health and get tested. HIV isn't a death sentence, and CEG is here to connect you with resources."

CHAMPS from page 27

grams because of the sheer length of exposure and engagement with the curriculum. As it exists now, CHAMPS is a 147-hour training course that takes place over the span of six weeks, and its curriculum focuses on resources around HIV/AIDS, substance use disorder, addiction recovery, and viral hepatitis. “We provide stipends to all trainees in the program because if we want them to attend an all-day training and to graduate well-equipped from the program, we have to make sure that the program itself isn’t keeping them from the things they need to live their lives or that they don’t have to get another job to be able to afford to be in the program,” he says. “We can’t ask someone to give up six weeks of their pay and also expect them to be able to graduate from the program.”

The CHAMPS curriculum focuses on HIV/AIDS, but given the specific needs of Appalachia, it also folds in information on resources for substance use disorder and recovery, as well as hepatitis C.

In addition to training CHWs across West Virginia, CEG is also working within the legislature and advocating for the state to include a certification requirement, as well as lift regulations so that community health workers—those that CEG trains and those already in the field—are able to bill their services to Medicaid. “West Virginia needs community health workers, and expanding the resources available to fund CHWs would mean that we could create more jobs in the state while also connecting more people to the care they need,” says Lucas. “The extra boon here is that we’re training CHWs in the communities they’ve lived in for most, if not all, of their lives.” Lucas emphasizes that trust relationships are important bridges for public health. “Culturally, I think Appalachians have a distrust of outsiders, and there’s

a wealth of history that backs this up. Similarly, Black communities also tend to have a well-justified distrust of the medical system, which again, is a byproduct of a really shameful history,” he says. “CHWs who are rooted in their communities become especially vital in these contexts.” In many ways, CHAMPS represents a second chance for individuals and communities across West Virginia. After completing the program, many CHAMPS graduates go on to become patient navi-

gators or gain other employment working in public and community health. “It’s a workforce development program as much as it is a healthcare delivery program,” says Lucas. “A lot of times, our CHAMPS trainees are individuals who are returning from incarceration or are in recovery and are looking for a way to reconnect with themselves and their communities—and CHAMPS creates a system of care and support for both the program participants and the community they live in.”

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STATUS!



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June 27th is...

NATIONAL
HIV TESTING
DAY (NHTD)

2023



By Joe Severino

Darryl Cannady has long been doing the work needed in southern West Virginia to slow the spread of HIV. He’s been on the ground for more than 30 years, maintaining a consistent presence in counties that healthcare providers have deserted. Serving as executive director for the Bluefield-based nonprofit South Central Educational Development, Cannady said the perception of HIV has progressed since the organization formed. When he started, however, folks were quick to dismiss HIV’s presence. “The community’s perception was, “If I can’t see it, touch it or feel it, then it doesn’t exist,” he said. From 1981-1990, 100,777 deaths among persons with AIDS were reported to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) by local, state and territorial health departments. Almost one-third of these deaths were reported during 1990 alone. During the 1980s, AIDS emerged as a leading cause of death among young adults in the United States. By 1988, HIV/AIDS had become the third leading cause of death among men 25-44 years of age and, by 1989, was estimated to be second, surpassing heart disease, cancer, suicide and homicide. Once HIV became something people could not ignore, requests for prevention, education, condom distribution and links to health departments for treatment and care increased. South Central formed as an off-shoot from the American Red Cross. A younger Cannady, who moved from his native state of New York to southern West Virginia, said he was hired to lead their HIV outreach in Black communities. But Cannady said it was necessary for his small team to eventually split from the Red Cross, knowing the needs of the community did not exactly line with their national image at the time — such as the need to do work in jails and prisons. “As we moved through the years, requests from

IN SOUTHERN WEST VIRGINIA

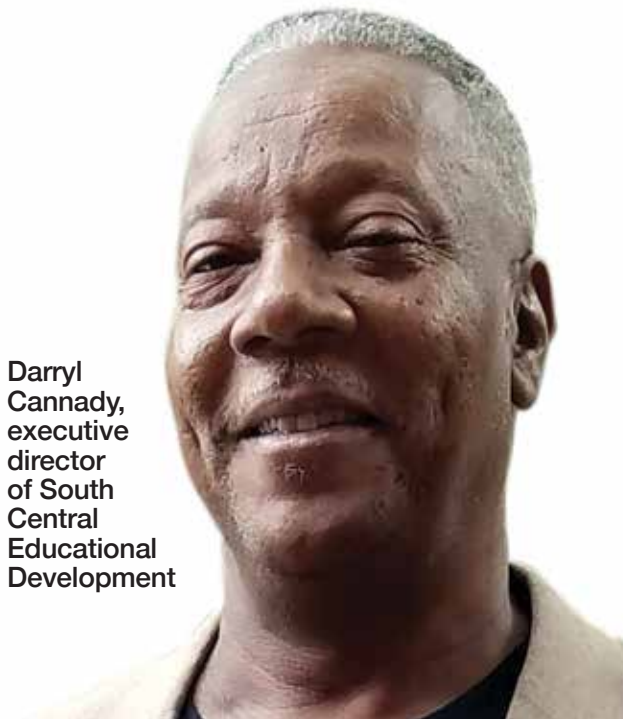
Longtime advocate has grown HIV network in face of adversity



LEARN MORE

white communities [also] began to increase. So although we are a minority-based organization, we started providing HIV prevention to anyone that asked us,” Cannady said. In southern West Virginia, both Black and white communities face the issue of not having reasonable access to medical care — especially preventative screenings, Cannady said. Over time, workers with South Central noticed how often people with HIV were also living with other comorbidities, such as diabetes or kidney failure. This discovery helped South Central transition into the holistic health service program it is today. The group connected people to no-cost healthcare access, as well as introducing HIV-positive folks in southern West Virginia. They shared information, access and experiences to form the closest thing to a regional health network in southern West Virginia. The work had always been hard, but steady, Cannady said. Until early 2020. “COVID-19 totally changed the pace of the work we do,” he said. No coal mine explosion or factory closing impacted the network like the coronavirus had. “We found clients falling out of care, we found clients moving out of the area. Our client base dropped,” he said. Opioid abuse spiked. Children and families — already with little options for healthcare — still needed access. Health disparities and comorbidities did not stop because of the pandemic. South Central has turned to championing a new program called Making Health Happen. Cannady

says the program has maintained access to prevention and treatment during the pandemic. The core goal, he said, is to get people to take their health seriously. “The goal of the program is to know your health status because if you don’t know your status, you cannot address it,” Cannady said. “What’s important is for rural communities to know their health status.” Cannady said he’ll be the first one to say there is a long way to go. While acceptance is easier to come by now than in the 1990s, Cannady said there is still a negative regional perspective of HIV and AIDS. “HIV has never been one of those acceptable diseases down here,” he said. Accepted or not, HIV and AIDS has continued to spread in southern West Virginia, much like they still do globally. But thanks to Cannady and his team, there is a prevention and treatment network to catch people from falling through the cracks.



Darryl Cannady, executive director of South Central Educational Development

LGBTQ+ youth face legislative challenges

Advocates fight for equality and mental health support

By Jules Ogden

Several attempts were made to ban or limit the rights of LGBTQ+ people, and specifically youth, in West Virginia during the 2022-23 legislative session.

One of the bills introduced and passed was House Bill 2007, signed into law by Gov. Jim Justice in March and aimed at banning gender-affirming care for individuals under the age of 18. The bill becomes effective on June 9.

In earlier forms, the bill banned gender-affirming surgeries, which experts say are rare or non-existent in the state, in addition to banning hormone therapy and puberty blockers, a reversible medication that pauses puberty to allow a patient experiencing gender dysphoria to explore other options. This initial version, which passed through the House, made no exceptions for mental health.

However, in the last week of the session, lawmakers in the Senate added a provision that would make an exception for youth at risk of suicide or who experience severe gender dysphoria to explore hormone therapy or puberty blockers.

The bill states that the exceptions can only be made if the patient, excluding prepubescent youth, has



To learn more about the West Virginia Black Pride Foundation and their resources, please visit wvbpfoundation.com

cases before its passage, mental health is still a problem for LGBTQ+ youth in the state.

About 60% of transgender and nonbinary youth in West Virginia considered suicide in 2022, with 14%

been diagnosed with severe gender dysphoria by a minimum of two medical or mental health providers who have training in treating gender dysphoria and who provide written statements indicating that gender-affirming care is needed to prevent self-harm.

Additionally, the patient's parents or legal guardians and primary physician must give written permission for the use of hormone therapy or puberty blocker, which is also limited to the lowest dose necessary to treat the patient's psychiatric symptoms and never for gender transition.

Although the bill was amended to include exceptions for severe mental health

attempting suicide in the same period, according to a survey by the Trevor Project.

West Virginia Black Pride Foundation board member Lekili Dean said that there are misconceptions about gender-affirming care, and that lawmakers often focus on the possible negative effects of hormone therapy and puberty blockers as opposed to acknowledging positive outcomes.

"They [legislators] just don't understand the care for the minors, for the kids. It's not that they're going to start offering surgery to five-year-olds ... We are just trying to provide a safe space for our kids and to be able to receive health care without being discriminated for who they are inside," she said.

Dean said that lawmakers might think that they are protecting the state's youth by restricting their decision-making about their gender identity. However, she believes that this only exacerbates mental health struggles or anger in trans youth.

"They [lawmakers] say their feeling is that being children, that their minds aren't fully developed ... they say that they feel that they're helping the youth by allowing them to grow and experience life some more before they make those decisions," she said.

"But they're making other decisions while they're

Continued on page 34

By Rhonda Rogombe

West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy

Infants and birthing parents are dying at alarming rates in West Virginia. Infant and maternal mortality rates are an important statistic measuring overall societal health. The disparities in life outcomes between Black and white babies and mothers in particular raise questions about health equity and the ability of our health care system to meaningfully respond to both babies' and mothers' needs. There is much that we do not know, especially on the state level, which limits experts' capacity to make policy recommendations that properly respond to this critical issue. In the meantime, West Virginians continue to die often preventable deaths. It is imperative that the state addresses the issues of infant and maternal mortality immediately, which includes producing nuanced data and implementing evidence-based policies. It is literally a matter of life or death.

Infant mortality in West Virginia

The infant mortality rate measures the number of deaths in children under a year old per 1,000 live births. Between 2014 and 2017 (the most recent multiyear data available in the state), West Virginia's infant mortality rate was 7.2 deaths per 1,000, outpac-

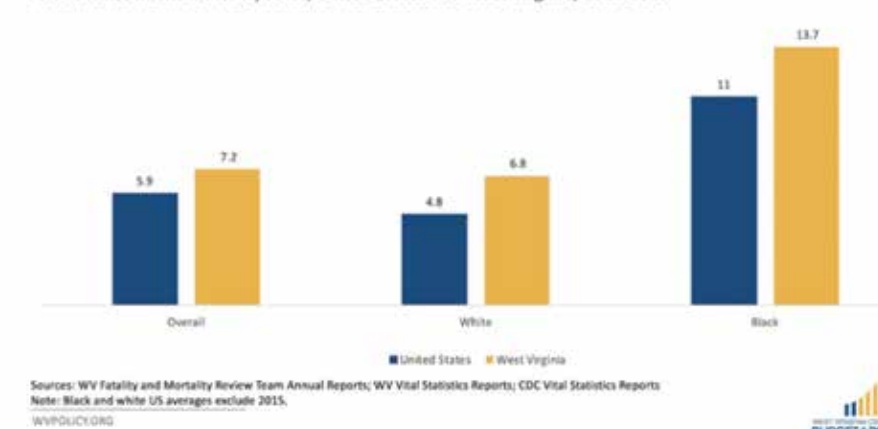
DISPARITIES IN LIFE

Black infant and maternal mortality needs to be addressed in West Virginia

Black babies in the Mountain State were twice as likely as their white peers to die in their first year of life



Black Infant Mortality Rate Exacerbated in West Virginia
Black-white infant mortality rates, United States and West Virginia, 2014-2017



ing the national rate of 5.9 deaths per 1,000. When controlling for race, we see that the state's white infant mortality rate was only 6.8 deaths per 1,000 while the Black infant mortality rate was 13.7 deaths per 1,000 over the same period. Plainly stated, Black babies in the Mountain State were twice as likely as their white peers to die in their first year of life.

The infant mortality rate has decreased over the past several decades, but the racial disparities persisted despite health care advancements. Some of the leading causes of infant mortality include low birth weight, birth defects, maternal health complications, and sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). High-quality pre- and post-natal care can play a key role in mitigating these and other factors contributing to infant death and improve outcomes significantly. However, a lack of access to health care is a

Would you like to learn more and share your experience?

Join our community conversation on July 21, 2023, at noon. All are welcome, particularly Black families and families of color who've experienced infant and maternal loss, inaccessible or biased health care, or are passionate about these issues. We need your voices and expertise. Register here



bit.ly/IMMR-WV

We hope to see you soon!



wvpolicy.org

pervasive issue for many West Virginians, especially for Black folks in rural parts of the state.

In 2019, the Black uninsured rate was 10.1 percent in West Virginia, two percentage points higher than that of their white counterparts. In several rural counties, the Black uninsured rate doubled to over 20 percent. Even with health insurance, many struggle to find adequate care within their communities. To provide just one example, West Virginia is facing an obstetrics care crisis: as of 2022, 37 of the 55 counties in the state did not have hospital birthing centers, requiring many to travel long distances to receive necessary care. Most of the state lacks both the workforce and infrastructure required to adequately care for infants and prevent complications that make their survival less likely.

Continued on page 34

INFANT MORTALITY from page 32

Further, evidence shows that the doctor-patient relationship plays a significant role in life outcomes for Black infants. Racial bias and structural racism in the health care system shape how Black mothers and infants receive care. A study published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences found a positive correlation between having a Black doctor and Black infants’ survival rate. Though the data has limitations, this study found that being cared for by a Black doctor correlated with a nearly 50 percent decrease in Black newborns’ mortality rate. Existing health policy fails to challenge and address racial disparities despite ample evidence outlining the significant role it plays in the survival rate of Black babies.

Maternal Mortality in West Virginia

The maternal mortality rate measures the number of maternal deaths related to or aggravated by pregnancy per 100,000 live births. Between 2014 and 2019, the maternal mortality rate in the US was 17.3 deaths per 100,000. During that period, West Virginia reported 14 deaths per 100,000. While the state reports a figure slightly lower than the national average, a lot of relevant data is missing, making it impossible to fully understand how pervasive the issue is for various communities. Notably, there is no breakdown of this state data by race, so researchers must rely on inferences from national data and anecdotal state evidence.

Between 2017 and 2019, the US reported 14.1 white maternal deaths per 100,000. Black women faced a mortality rate nearly three times as high,

with 39.9 Black maternal deaths per 100,000. This racial disparity has existed for decades. Even when controlling for educational attainment and income, Black mothers are still nearly three times more likely to die within a year of childbirth than their white peers. This severe gap is harrowing and indicative of deeply ingrained racial and structural problems that no level of access to care has addressed thus far.

There are many concerning unknowns in West Virginia, which makes it incredibly difficult to shape nuanced policy that is responsive to the needs of mothers across the state. National statistics collected during the COVID-19 pandemic indicate that the racial disparity in maternal mortality has only widened in recent years, illustrating the compound effects of long-standing health care inequity. While it is clear that the elevated uninsured rate among rural Black West Virginians and the state’s obstetrics care shortage impede access to necessary pre- and post-natal care, national data indicates these factors are not the only ones contributing to Black maternal mortality.

Without more detailed data, it is impossible to precisely understand what is happening in West Virginia and how significantly Black and other minority mothers in the state are harmed by the problem. While we are lacking some state-level data, the racial disparities in infant and maternal deaths in our state and around the country are undeniable. Eliminating racial inequities requires advocates, government leaders, and those most impacted to come together to demand an explanation for the missing data and put forth community-rooted ideas for solutions.

from their families and community and without any added pressure from lawmakers who are there to create, strike and edit the laws for the people, not for themselves, but for the people.”

She also said that the state’s population could continue to suffer and become less diverse as a result of discriminatory legislation because it encourages people to move and leaves those who can’t move feeling more lonely.

The West Virginia Black Pride Foundation offers mentoring and hosts community events to provide safe spaces for the LGBTQ+ community, including trans youth.

TO READ: Birthing Justice: My Journey to Becoming a Doula and the Importance of Black Doulas in West Virginia

A BLOG POST ON THINKKIDSWV.ORG

EXCERPT: By Crystal Good

Writing for the “When All Are Counted” Project

When I gave birth to my first child at 20 years old, it was a challenging experience. The episiotomy, epidural, and creepy OBGYN made me feel uncomfortable, and I gave birth in a hospital under harsh fluorescent lights. However, the birth of my healthy 9lb 10 oz baby boy made it all worth it.

It wasn’t until I had my second child at 23 that I had a better birthing experience. I had the support of a doula, Pia Long, a Black doula from a local midwifery practice and part of the tradition of Black midwifery in West Virginia. At the time, Pia was the only Black doula in the state. With her guidance, I had more control over the birthing experience and could make more decisions.



READ THE BLOG
POST AT
thinkkidswv.org

However, Dean said that identifying people and getting them to attend events has been difficult as some fear retaliation and ridicule.

“It’s a lot of individuals out there and we’re trying to bring it together. So we can be one community instead of several different individuals.”

The organization is working closely with the ACLU and now has representation on a board with the City of Charleston. Dean said that she also works with high schools in the state to build Gay Straight Alliance chapters and create safe spaces for children in their schools.

NAVIGATING GRIEF

Dear Readers,

Scalawag magazine has always been a significant source of inspiration for BBG, especially with their “Grief & Other Loves” series. When they started this series, it resonated deeply with us and prompted us to call for stories, poems and contributions in the same vein for BBG.

See story, next page

They say death often comes in threes. Recently, I’ve had to deal with the passing of my dad, my step-mom and a cousin. I’m grateful I had the chance to delve into Scalawag’s content on grief. As much as anything can, it’s helped me feel slightly more equipped to navigate the enormity of my grief in all its forms.

Death’s impact vibrates across so many.

I’m not alone in these losses. I share them with many family, friends and colleagues, including my cousin, Gladine Pannell Bruer, a poet from South Charleston, West Virginia.

“Gla” resides in Houston, Texas. She has been married to Carl Bruer Sr. for 56 years and is a proud mother of three children — Mike, Carl Jr. and Denitra (Dee) — and a grandmother of seven. Gladine is also the author of “Reflections From The Heart.” She retired after fulfilling careers at Dow & Shaffer Law LLC. She’s now enjoying retirement and devoting her time to writing.

Please have a read and be encouraged.

~ Crystal Good
Publisher, Black By God



Dear Cousin Crystal,
I am sending you this poem / not out of grief nor sorrow because my thoughts of my Aunt Shirley, Uncle Wes (aka Red), and sister-in-law Rena Lee Pannell are of such pleasant memories.

Such Memories

How fond the thoughts of yesterday
Reminiscence that do not stay
Sentimental of great times
Hearts, flowers, and bell chimes
Smiling and laughing, we always yearned
From Granny’s advice, we could always learn
That memories are yours to keep and store
To love, cherish, and adore
But such memories, feel free to keep
Because sometimes you will ponder and weep
Oh, such memories!

Always,
Gladine Pannell Bruer
(aka Beaner per my Uncle Red)

LGBTQ+ YOUTH from page 32

young that is detrimental to themselves and to the community.”

Dean said that Black trans youth are especially affected by anti-LGBTQ+ legislation because they also lie outside of white heteronormative standards.

“The sad part is that the collateral is the trans youth in West Virginia, especially the Black trans youth,” she said. “Again, there is a lot of mental health issues surrounded by that, not only for them to sift through and sort out what’s going on intrinsically inside again without any added pressure

Read:

grief
&
other
loves**Remembering Tyrik***'My grief is circular, never-ending, omnipresent. I feel like I'd been grieving before you passed.'*

My little brother was murdered on his birthday last year. Now I mourn the way violence and trauma disrupted our childhood.

by IREASHIA BENNETT

Southern mourning rituals are community work.

Feed you.

Hold you.

Shepherd you.

Remind you.

Love you.

But when the pies and casseroles and bouquets and check-in messages stop—and they always do (or perhaps they never manifested in the first place)—grief finds its way in. A creeping heaviness, or a rush all at once. Many of us know how we're supposed to mourn: We wear the right things, call our folks, and tend to the affairs of transitioning. We flow through mourning's visibilized process. But so many of us also struggle to turn inward and grieve: We begin and get stuck. In denial. In depression. We try to bargain our way out. We struggle down grief's long, winding, seemingly-forever road, a silent solo trip into the unknown.

Scalawag's "grief & other loves" is a reckoning and an invitation. As the late bell hooks wrote in *All About Love: Other Visions*, "To be loving is to be open to grief, to be touched by sorrow, even sorrow that is unending."

"grief & other loves" is also a reminder: Even though your journey is your own, you're not alone. Sharing stories about how we sludge through the muck of grief and its dovetail, love, allows us to bear witness to our individual processes as we move toward acceptance together.

If our future is to be the loving, caring, and just world we're fighting for, our healing must be as interconnected as our freedom.

Please read these stories of grief. Then, come and till these soils, where the muck lies, so that we may create bounty together—healing as we reap, as Southerners do.

Let our harvest usher out the legacy of enduring, often devastating loss that marks our beloved South.

Grief and Love, Outside the Changes*Jazz Vocalist Nnenna Freelon on Black love, grief, and her album 'Time Traveler'*

Six-time Grammy-nominated jazz vocalist and host of the podcast "Great Grief" Nnenna Freelon discusses love, death, and growing through the changes on her first album in about a decade.

by JULIAN REID

**THE SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH**

The Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) are the conditions in our environment that impact our health, functioning, and quality-of-life in our communities and influence how we interact with the world through work, play, and worship. These conditions can also affect how we live, learn, and age.



Unleashing the Power of Dance

Transform your health and community with West Virginia Soul Line Steppers

By Leeshia Lee

Dancing is one of the most invigorating expressions of art and communication. Dance captivates by engaging various participants from young to old, rich to poor. Dance is a cultural staple embedded in many different genres.

Dance is also an effective exercise that raises your heart rate, works your muscles and provides a way to escape repetitive negative thoughts and worries.

Mental health is often stigmatized in the Black community, and dancing offers a familiar outlet from life's stressors. Moving to a beat gets the adrenaline going and soothes the soul as we concentrate on making the melody one with our movements.

"We dance when times are sad. We dance when times are good. So, if we can get into the habit of dancing more consistently, we actually would improve our health," Founder of West Virginia Soul Line Steppers Carl Chadband said.

Chadband has been fighting to change the stigma. Chadband said he started the group because body movement is a great way to get active and counteract the poor health indicators among African American men. In addition, he said it is an excellent way to lower cholesterol, blood pressure and sugar in diabetes.

In 2018, West Virginia ranked first in the nation for the prevalence of poor physical health, poor

mental health and activity limitations due to poor physical or mental health, according to the West Department of Health and Human Resources.

"So that's the thing, it's to kind of trick people into being healthier by getting out and doing something they like to do," Chadband said, reiterating how communities of color love to dance.

He said that love is passed down from generation to generation and credits his parents for his love of dancing.

Chadband grew up dancing for his parent's friends during their house parties and later perfected his craft during childhood with dance battles against siblings and in talent shows.

"My dad is Western Indian from Trinidad and Tobago; he grew up in the South. So, I grew up with house parties at a very young age. Your parents would get you to dance when their friends came over," Chadband said. "I always had creative moves."

He wants to eliminate the perception that big men can't dance.

"I love to dance. Big guys are criticized for not dancing, but I love to dance. I love to show that you can get out there and move," Chadband, who's also a former college athlete, said. "After you go from doing all that strenuous activity, and you stop, and you start putting on pounds, you start gaining weight. So, I found that body movement was a good way to learn, get active."

The history of soul-line dancing is debatable. Its beginning is often credited to the Electric Slide and has grown in communities nationwide. Classes are done in a group setting and without a partner.

Dancing in unison was popular during the Harlem Renaissance but went deeper as a means of communication in the days of slavery. The movements were used to help locate the Underground Railroad.

"There has always been a dance in our culture

connected to a song. So whether it's The Boogaloo, The Mashed Potato, The Twist, any of those, if you get people in a line dancing, that is a line dance," Chadband said.

"It's just a call-and-response medium. Folks have been jamming for a really long time."

Dancing in public has always been Chadband's thing, so it was natural for him to teach others the moves that he said will ultimately allow them to live longer.

"So, we've always danced. We've always not been afraid to dance in front of people. And we get so many compliments: 'Man, if I could just learn that.' So, instead of being out at the party, we figured we'd have practices where people can learn these dances, where they can be ready for an event like Woody's white party or a soiree event or things like that, you know, you need to practice before you get to the event, not try and learn when you get there."



Assistant teacher Kamari Terrell shows dance moves to the class at the Kanawha City Rec Center.

Learn soul-line dancing
Contact the WV Soul Line Steppers Facebook group.



REGRANTING PROGRAM

CEG's COVID-19 commitment to Appalachia

By Emily Blevins

When the COVID-19 pandemic surged in the U.S. in March 2020, CEG was still relatively new to West Virginia. The nonprofit, whose headquarters were previously located in Washington, D.C., relocated to Lost River, West Virginia a decade ago because their work shifted toward addressing the intersection of HIV/AIDS, substance use disorder, and viral hepatitis in Appalachia.

Through CEG's Appalachian Partnership Fund, managed through a cooperative agreement with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, CEG regranted more than \$1.5 million to more than two dozen organizations not just in West Virginia, but throughout Appalachia as a whole. "Through this partnership with the CDC, we had a regrantee commitment to the region," says A. Toni Young, CEG executive director. "Not only is that a core component of how we operate normally, but the pandemic presented real existential threats because of how it had downstream effects on other health states within the region."

In the first year of the Appalachian Partnership Fund, organizations supported by CEG served more than 53,200 individuals in communities across West Virginia, providing more than 6,800 COVID tests and 4,000 COVID vaccinations, more than 2,290 HIV tests, more than 2,100 HCV tests, and more than 1,790 influenza vaccinations. "There are real



COVID vaccine event in North Carolina.

and persistent barriers that prevent individuals from accessing healthcare," says Lee Storrow, CEG senior director of external affairs. "It was important to consider that as CEG and our Appalachian Partnership Fund awardees were engaging with communities about COVID-19, we had the opportunity to provide additional care for other health concerns in those interactions."

Community Connections, one of the organizations supported through the Fund, reported that they were able to partner with quick response teams in Mercer County to not only assist individuals experiencing an overdose, but were able to also conduct rapid tests

for COVID-19 and HIV, while also disseminating information about the COVID vaccine and infectious disease control. "Through the Fund, we were able to help our awardees bring their services to libraries, Walgreens, Dollar Generals, supermarkets, and other locations that are heavily trafficked by community members, and that allowed these organizations to reach people they would've been unable to reach otherwise," says Storrow.

In addition to providing access to multiple points of care, CEG's Appalachian Partnership Fund empowered other organizations to expand capacity and forge closer relationships with the communities they serve. "APF helped pay for our nurses who worked with our high-risk population and individuals who maybe wouldn't have felt comfortable in other settings and we were able to connect with our community members in a way that endeared trust and comfort," said Harm Reduction Coordinator Michelle Perdue from the Cabell-Huntington Health Department, one of the awardees.

Young says that it's the personal relationships forged between APF awardees and their communities that made the biggest difference. "There's a historic and justified mistrust of outsiders in Appalachia, and especially outsiders tethered in any way to healthcare," she says. "But the trust relationships between local organizations and the communities they serve make a huge difference for public health outcomes. Those are the relationships that save lives."



PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS JACKSON

The Rev. James Patterson, the founder and CEO of West Virginia's Partnership of African American Churches.

POUR MY BREATH INTO YOU

IN WEST VIRGINIA, THE STATE WITH THE NATION'S HIGHEST RATE OF DEATH BY OVERDOSE, FAITH COMMUNITIES ANSWER URGENT CALLINGS FROM ANY AND ALL.

By Taylor Sisk

Originally published by Salvation South.

Some in the clergy consider it their primary mission to get fannies into pews. Others believe their higher calling is to propel butts into action.

Rev. James Patterson is among the latter.

Some years ago, Patterson, founder and CEO of the Charleston, West Virginia-based Partnership of African American Churches, was introduced to a theological philosophy that shaped the direction of his ministry. What engaged him was the notion of a prophetic — as opposed to a priestly — approach to ministry. The notion is, essentially, that the church is not so much a place one goes to, for affirmation, as it is a place one goes from, to practice what's been preached.

"The prophetic voice has to be involved with the entire existence of the individual," Patterson asserts,

"as opposed to just trying to get folks to heaven." In so many African American communities, he says, the Black church is an institution of power and influence. It must leverage its status for the earthly well-being of its community.

Such was the inspiration for the Partnership of African American Churches. Today, PAAC offers a range of essential health care services to residents of Charleston's West Side — a once-thriving community — and all else in need.

Among the most pressing needs are services addressing the drug crisis. Patterson and his PAAC colleagues recognized that in a particularly hard-hit city in the state with the nation's highest rate of fatal overdoses, countering this crisis was critical to the health and well-being of the community as a whole.

"If someone can find a way to function in life in a way that is healthier for them, and they're living a better life, to me that's the goal. Wholeness and healing are the goal."

Among the services it provides is Suboxone treatment, a form of buprenorphine that reduces opioid withdrawal symptoms and cravings, offering a path to recovery.

Twenty-five miles to the northwest of Charleston's West Side, at Winfield United Methodist Church, Rev. Chris Scott likewise answers a calling to prophetic ministry: He too embraces a responsibility to address the crippling crisis of overdose.

Scott will tell you that there but for the grace of God... He admits that in his youth he did some drugs and believes he was blessed, unlike some friends and family members, to have escaped addiction.

Thus his drive to launch the Ezekiel Project, an initiative to train faith communities throughout West Virginia in how to administer naloxone, a medicine that rapidly reverses an opioid overdose. Naloxone is available as a nasal spray or for injection. It's avail-

Continued on page 40



Future of Nursing WV Center for Nurse Entrepreneurship receives \$50,000 to advance health equity



LEARN MORE

Future of Nursing West Virginia Center for Nurse Entrepreneurship is among 16 organizations to receive a Health Equity Innovation Fund award, which will be used in West Virginia to launch the project "Dismantling Structural Racism in Entrepreneurship: Supporting the Minority Nurse's Path to Business Ownership."

The awards from the AARP Center for Health Equity through NursingSM and the Future of Nursing: Campaign for Action, an initiative of AARP Foundation, AARP, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), are for projects offering promising solutions aimed at eliminating structural inequities, particularly structural racism.

POUR MY BREATH from page 39

able in pharmacies and through harm reduction programs — and, if Scott’s vision is fulfilled, faith communities far and wide.

“Our focus scripture is Ezekiel 37:5, which simply says, ‘I will pour my breath into you, and you will live,’ Scott explains. “And that’s exactly what naloxone does.”

The state of West Virginia provides naloxone training. But for Scott, these encounters are about much more. They offer entrée, an opportunity to open hearts, to encourage fellow believers to explore their capacity for compassion. He’s striving to eliminate the stigmatization of people who use drugs and to initiate conversations about the full range of harm reduction measures.

These faith-based organizations, PAAC and the Ezekiel Project, are answering urgent callings.

Culturally sensitive health care

The impetus for the launch of PAAC twenty years ago was a study documenting low-birth weights for children of color, which led, says Dr. Wendy Lewis, PAAC’s clinical director, to initiatives addressing racial health disparities, which in turn led to a recognition of the need to close the achievement gap in West Side schools. Today PAAC operates three 21st Century Community Learning Centers for young people.

PAAC’s role in the community and beyond has incrementally expanded. Throughout the pandemic, it has assumed a leadership role in addressing vaccination hesitancy throughout West Virginia, sending community health workers into underserved areas.

The organization’s substance-use disorder services are available to all. In addition to Suboxone, it offers support in prevention and recovery, including recovery housing.

Patterson grew up in the town of Laurinburg, in the Piedmont region of North Carolina. As a child, his physician was a white man who treated Black patients — but only if time permitted after he saw his last white patient. Patterson recalls being administered a suppository and told he best hurry on home because the restroom down the hall was off limits.

Such experiences linger. Patterson’s mission is to provide culturally sensitive health care — sensitive to how a person may previously have been mistreated by the health care system “for no other reasons than because of their gender, because of their sexual orientation, because of their color.”

PAAC administers Suboxone in tandem with



Dr. Wendy Lewis is the clinical director of the Partnership of African American Churches.

therapy. The program has an extensive client list, but Lewis says only eighteen percent are people of color. Given that Charleston’s West Side has the largest Black population in the city, that number seems low. Three years ago, though, it was but three percent.

Research shows that judges are significantly less likely to refer a person of color to buprenorphine treatment as an alternative to incarceration.

“We’ve spoken with the magistrate’s office, we’ve spoken with the drug courts system and judges,” Lewis says, “and we’ve told them that we’ve noticed that there’s a disparity in referrals.” Those conversations now appear to be taking effect.

PAAC has enlisted community high school students in its prevention efforts, with a program in which they’re trained as mentors in a substance-use prevention program sponsored by the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

‘Holy for all of us’

The genesis of the Ezekiel Project came at health fairs hosted in Charleston by a community group called Solutions Oriented Addiction Response, or SOAR, at which a range of services, including naloxone distribution, was provided to people affected by drug use. Scott offered spiritual sustenance to those who attended.

The exchange of clean syringes for used ones was the primary attraction of the fairs, and when, in

2021, state and local government took measures that curtailed that exchange, the health fairs were discontinued.

“So we were wondering,” Scott says, “‘Okay, where do we fit in? What can our role be?’” Naloxone training for faith communities was the answer. He received a grant from the United Methodist Foundation, and the Ezekiel Project was launched.

SALVATION SOUTH



READ MORE

what he does. He’s a weirdo.”

That said, Scott believes the experience has been “holy for all of us, to be able to see and experience and put names and faces to stories, and sometimes misinformation, that they’ve heard.”

In communities where the overdose crisis is impossible to ignore, the reception has been overwhelmingly favorable.

On a late-January Sunday afternoon in the small

southern West Virginia town of Sophia, Scott gives a half-hour talk to a dozen-plus folks on how to administer naloxone and then engages them in a discussion of the role they might play in countering stigmatizing narratives about addiction.

“I would say that the best thing that we can do as Christians,” he says, “is start changing the conversation around substance-use disorder” to acknowledge the humanity of those who use drugs.

Scott believes mainstream churches have, in general, done “phenomenal work” in reaching out to those who’ve made the journey to recovery or are on the verge of doing so.



The Rev. Chris Scott launched the Ezekiel Project in Winfield, West Virginia.

“I think where the gap might be,” he says, “and where the most discomfort comes in for a lot of people, is when we get into harm reduction and ministering with people who are using drugs currently.

“I encourage and celebrate everyone in recovery,” Scott affirms. “I also don’t think it’s helpful to have such a strict dichotomy between people who use drugs and people in recovery. We have this separation, and I think it should be seen as a spectrum.

“If someone can find a way to function in life in a way that is healthier for them, and they’re living a better life, to me that’s the goal. Wholeness and healing are the goal,” he says. “If we can’t love people, then and there — that’s where I think the biggest transition needs to be. How do we minister to people exactly where they are?”

Claire Shanholtzer, now a pharmacy resident at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center’s McKeesport hospital, grew up in the United Meth-

odist Church denomination, has known Scott all her life and was on board the Ezekiel Project from the outset. She lost a dear friend, Mackenzie, to overdose at age twenty-six. She provides naloxone trainings in Mackenzie’s memory.

There have been times, Shanholtzer says, “when I was really kind of nervous about the audience. But “what I’ve found is support in a lot of unlikely places, even a lot of our more fundamental evangelical congregations.”

Scott agrees: “It’s been wonderful.”

Someone close

“If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal,” the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority.”

It’s about “more than just getting folks to heaven,” James Patterson says. It’s about getting folks healthy, vaccinated, cared for, assisted on a path to optimal well-being. “We’re trying to help them live a successful and decent life here on Earth, on their way to heaven.

“Prophetic ministry is about the journey, and that’s what PAAC is trying to fulfill,” he says. PAAC, he says, embraces the “entire spirit, soul and body.”

Chris Scott aspires for every faith-based community in West Virginia to display its “We Carry Naloxone,” bordered with the Ezekiel scripture, signage.

“I guarantee you that someone in your church has a family member or friend” who is using drugs illicitly, he tells those gathered in Sophia. Displaying that message will indicate there’s at least one person within who’s not going to judge that loved one.

Scott hopes to build a network of harm reduction advocates rooted in faith communities and, in so doing, advance more humane policies and practices to address drug use.

“One step at a time,” he says. “We start with naloxone and see where we can take it from there.”

Taylor Sisk is a Nashville-based health care reporter whose work primarily focuses on how policies and practices affect people’s lives.

Salvation South .

Salvation South is a publication for people who believe that our region — the American South — actually could become the “beloved community” envisioned by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.



Sober Black Girls Club offers support to people in recovery or considering it

Sober Black Girls Club is nonprofit organization that provides resources and support to Black girls, women, femmes, and nonconforming folks practicing sobriety, in recovery or considering it.

The Club values community, inclusivity, truth-telling, creativity, and social justice. No two journeys along the same path are exactly alike. It is important to engage in honest and open conversations to be able to name the pain behind using and seek healing. The Club is continuously looking for new and creative solutions to support our community and create more equitable support systems in the recovery realm.



READ STORIES OF RECOVERY
<https://soberblackgirlsclub.com/>

IT'S A FAMILY AFFAIR

Get your family and friends vaccinated for Covid-19, Flu, Pneumonia, Meningitis, Shingles, and mpox!

Here are some facts:

- Everyone 6 months and older should get a COVID-19 vaccine.
- All adults need an annual flu vaccine.
- 1 In 3 will develop shingles in their lifetime, but vaccines can reduce this risk.
- CDC recommends meningitis vaccines for all preteens & teens.
- Children under 2 and adults over 65 are most at-risk for pneumonia.
- People at risk of mpox should get both doses of the vaccine to most protection against infe

Get Involved with
CEG here:



For more details,
visit: <https://www.vaccines.gov>
or call: 1-833-734-0965
#BoostUp!

Black By God: empowering community journalism through Folk Reporters Program

Black By God seeks citizens from diverse communities to participate in the Folk Reporters Program, attending public meetings and reporting on them. With a focus on Black and intersectional issues, the program democratizes news at the local level, fostering community engagement and amplifying voices. Volunteers receive training and guidelines, documenting meetings and sharing insights on social media. The program combines Folk art with journalism, providing underrepresented communities a platform and promoting transparency in government. Join Black By God in filling the media void and shaping community journalism.

Contact crystal@blackbygod.org to learn more about our upcoming trainings.

My Experiences Folk Reporting

By Tyler West

I started Folk Reporting a few months ago at the start of the 2022-23 legislative session.

Folk Reporting has been one of the most rewarding things I have done. It has allowed me to do something constructive with interest in politics while using my social media platform to share information with others while also proving to be an amazing learning opportunity and connecting me with so many great people.

As a Folk Reporter, I regularly posted committee agendas on my Substack during the legislature's regular session and interim committee meetings. I also posted short Twitter threads on bills of common interest that appeared on an agenda for the upcoming day. On occasion, I would also watch and live-tweet committee meetings, sometimes writing a short article to accompany the thread.

Beyond covering the legislature, I attended a town hall in Wheeling held by Governor Jim Justice on his personal income tax cut proposal while live-tweeting and writing an article

about the event. I have also attended and tweeted about a Marshall County Commission meeting, which I plan on doing more regularly.

I use my personal Twitter account while folk reporting, which creates an interesting dynamic at times. I tweet my opinions on topics that are important to me, often overlapping with the state and local politics that I cover while reporting.

This can also spill into my attendance at local government functions.

While I'm covering events as a Folk Reporter, I'm also a member of the community with my own interests and opinions on what is happening.

For example, when I attended Justice's Wheeling town hall, I was there as both a Folk Reporter and a citizen that would be affected by the proposed tax cut and its implications on the state budget. As a Folk Reporter, I live-tweeted the event and wrote a short article about it after. As a citizen, I asked questions and took pictures with Babydog.

Continued on page 49

What the Folk Reporters Say!

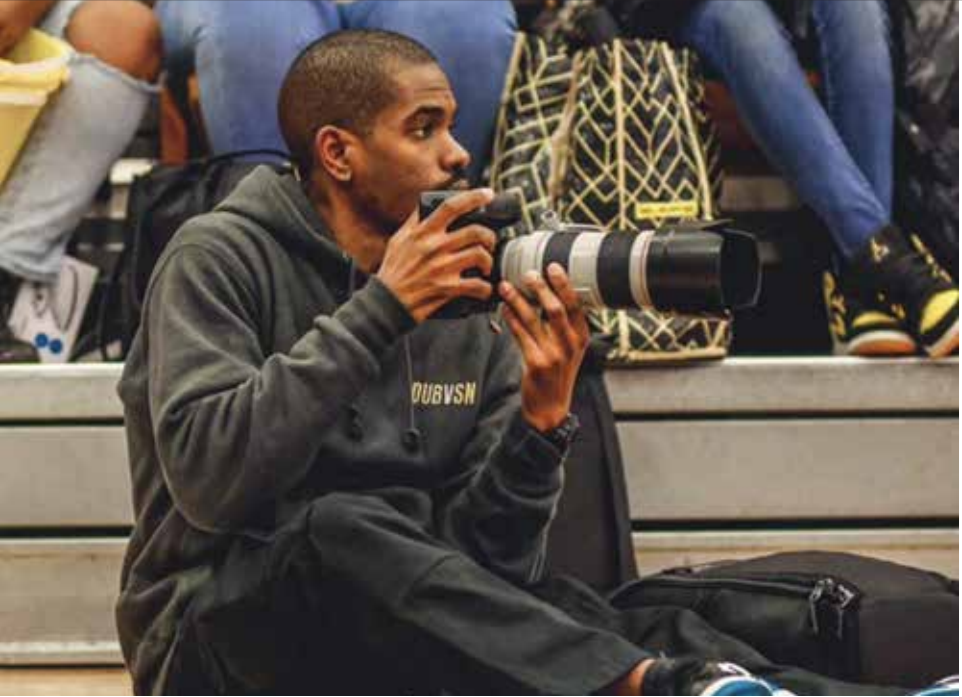
Tyler West

@tylerwvv

If only local news covered local government meetings as thoroughly as they do arrests and sporting events. Especially since the only record of said meetings are usually in the form of vague minutes.

@LyzSays

I just heard an amazing line regarding intersectionality... "A focus is NOT an exclusion" This is exactly why I work with @BlackByGodWV & @FolkReporters. Just because I'm not the focus doesn't mean I'm excluded. When we focus on and lift up marginalized communities we all win.



Sports photographer and videographer CT Minimah.



Joseph Beane Jr. plays on the Capital Midwestern Coach Pitch League. Joseph is the one of the youngest players on the team. At this level the competition is a little more serious, as they begin to record outs and keep score.



Madilyn Beane plays in the Capital Midwestern Teeball League. At this age they are still learning how to play the game. Majority of the time in the outfield she is conversing with her teammates and doing cartwheels.



Lily Jordan is a member of the Morgantown High School Girls Basketball Team. Morgantown defeated Wheeling Park to win the Class AAAA Championship this past season.



Alektra Watts plays in the King Center Women's Flag Football League.

CT MINIMAH: Championing Black sports journalism through lenses and lives

By BBG

CT Minimah has been capturing live-action sports photos since 2017. He is a self-taught photographer and videographer who got his start as a photojournalist for a local news station. Minimah has a philosophy that, due to the nature of sports being unscripted, “There is only one chance to get it right.” Through his photos and videos, the athlete, parents, family and friends can relive these moments and cherish them forever. Minimah is part of a long and often overlooked history of Black sports journalists who have impacted the American sports landscape. Black sports journalists were only allowed to work at African American-based publications in their early years. Still, pioneers like Wendell Smith and Sam Lacy withstood racism and discrimination to form important bonds with the athletes they covered to tell their stories. These writers traveled abroad with Black athletes to get access and material for stories, detailing how these athletes were treated with more respect and regard in other countries than in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s. Today Minimah’s work as a Black sports photojournalist

in West Virginia continues this important legacy as so many stories, both in front of and behind the camera, have not been given their due appreciation.

In Minimah’s upcoming documentary on the West Side Girls Basketball team and his documentation of West Virginia’s athletes, from youth sports to women’s flag football, his images are invaluable to the record.



To view more of Minimah’s work, visit his web portfolio at ctminimahsports.com

The evolution of Black men and women into what was once a white-only field has been slow and meticulous, but one only needs to watch ESPN for a few hours to see the plethora of Black faces in sports media. Despite progress, there remains a great deal of work to be done by mainly white-run establishments before true equality and diversity is achieved. Minimah’s work is a testament to the importance of Black sports journalists, past and present, and the impact they have made on American sports and culture, and BBG is proud to feature CT Minimah’s story and exceptional work.



Photo from the Edgar Randall Classic hosted by Groove Phi Groove.

WEST VIRGINIA COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

A service of remembrance and repentance for those lynched in West Virginia

June 19, 2023 at 6:30 p.m. West Virginia State Capitol steps (Kanawha Blvd.)

DISMANTLING RACISM

A SERVICE OF REMEMBRANCE AND REPENTANCE FOR THOSE LYNCHED IN WEST VIRGINIA

JOIN US
JUNE 19, 2023
6:30 P.M.
West Virginia State Capitol Grounds



WEST VIRGINIA COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

"And the LORD said, What have you done? Listen, your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground!"
(Genesis 4: 10, NRSV)

NAME	DATE	CITY	NAME	DATE	CITY
William Bailey	2/1/1808		William Lee	5/11/1900	Hinton
Mant Lee	7/9/1879		William Brooks	7/22/1901	Elkins
John Thomas	9/21/1879		T. Williams	2/7/1902	Glen Jean
Joseph Smith	4/7/1882		William Carrol	7/24/1902	Waniesdorf
Johnson	2/18/1885		Rudolph Clements	7/24/1902	Waniesdorf
Arthur Jackson	3/10/1885		Peter Jackson	7/25/1902	Elkins
Joe Burns	2/19/1886		Unknown	7/25/1902	Logan County
Sylvester	4/29/1886		Unknown	7/25/1902	Logan County
Thomas Sayer	11/1/1888		Unknown	7/25/1902	Waniesdorf
John Carter	7/24/1889	Hinton	Unknow	7/25/1902	Waniesdorf
John Turner	8/30/1889	Fayetteville	Frank Brown	2/4/1903	Madison
Samuel Garner	9/14/1889		Moses Lovern	9/24/1905	
Green McCoy	10/25/1889	Hamlin	Unknown	8/31/1907	
Bell Allen	3/8/1890		Charles Lewis	11/3/1909	Sutton
Alexander Foote	4/11/1891	Princeton	Unknown	10/14/1910	Huntington
Luther Wells	5/11/1892		George Johnson	10/14/1910	
Mills Luther	5/13/1892	Mercer	Walter Johnson	9/5/1912	Bluefield
Red Smith	5/15/1892	Naugatuck	Unknown	11/22/1917	Welch
James Smith	5/27/1892	Logan County	Unknown	11/22/1917	Welch
Edgar Jones	07/06/1892	Weston	E.D. Whitefield	12/15/1919	
Cornelius Coffee	11/28/1892	Keystone	George Banks	12/10/1931	Lewisburg
Anderson Holliday	8/2/1894	Elkhorn	Tom Jackson	12/10/1931	Lewisburg
Alexander Jones	1/28/1896		Arthur Warren, Jr.	7/4/2000	Grant Town
Unknown	2/1/1896	Branwell	Wetherford Irving	3/8/2001	

For more information on the service, please contact
Rev. Jeff Allen at director@wvcc.org.

In memory of those who were murdered by lynching in West Virginia, the West Virginia Council of Churches will hold a service of Remembrance and Repentance on Monday, June 19, 2023, at 6:30 p.m. in Charleston on the front steps of the Capitol building on the Kanawha Boulevard side. The service will be a time of reflection on our state's history with regards to racism and an opportunity to remember those who were murdered and to repent of West Virginia's complicity in the practice of lynching. During the service, there will be a reading of the names of the persons who were lynched in West Virginia between 1808 and 2001 (please see the ad included in this issue of Black by God) and a message from Rev. Ron En-

glish, President of the NAACP, Charleston Chapter. The service is a program of the Council's Dismantling Racism Task Force, which was created in response to the many shootings in our nation and world. The Task Force's efforts have mainly focused on establishing a West Virginia Historical Remembrance Project, which seeks to help West Virginia understand its past with regards to lynching and racism and also to place a monument on the State Capitol Grounds in Charleston highlighting African American history in West Virginia. The Reverend Kay Albright, a United Church of Christ pastor, was inspired to take on this project after visiting The National Memorial for Peace and Justice

in Montgomery, Alabama. Rev. Albright and Rev. Roberta Smith, an African Methodist Episcopal Church pastor and the President of the Charleston Black Ministerial Alliance, are the co-chairs of the West Virginia Council of Churches' Dismantling Racism Task Force. If you are interested in being a part of this project or would like more information concerning the service, please contact Rev. Kay Albright at pastorkay2@gmail.com or Rev. Roberta Smith at charlestoncbma@yahoo.com. Our meetings take place via Zoom. Also, anyone who has stories or a connection to those who were lynched, please contact us at the above emails.

STEEL DRIVIN' MAN

John Henry Days set for July 7- 9

By Kabrea James

Talcott's annual John Henry Days celebration kicks off on Friday, July 7 at John Henry Park. This three-day festival is jam-packed with food, fun and friends coming together to "keep the legend alive." The legend of John Henry is one that is cherished by the residents of Talcott and the surrounding area. Henry, better known as "The "Steel Drivin' Man," has come to represent strength and determination for all who encounter the legend.

Pam Lewis, president of the John Henry Days planning committee, said attendees can expect an abundance of local vendors and crafts, as well as live music followed by fireworks. The event wraps up Sunday, July 9, with a morning church service at Big Bend Tunnel and the annual car show. "It's about celebrating John Henry, the man, the myth, the legend," Lewis said. "It's also about celebrating Talcott. I'm looking forward to the parade, and the music is going to be great." Attendees can anticipate annual favorites such as the Grand Parade and the Rubber Duck Pluck, a content where participants buy rubber ducks to race from the top of a river. Lewis said that a building left over from the town's early railroad days was recently transformed into a visitor cen-

ter, which will be open just in time for this year's festival. Attendees will also have access to the John Henry Museum and Gift Shop. "Put it on your calendar, and come out and have a good time," Lewis said. "It's always a lot of fun." Historians believe that Henry was a newly-freed slave from either Virginia or North Carolina working for the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad. Accounts state that Henry arrived in Talcott around 1870, and that he stood at about 6 feet tall and weighed approximately 200 pounds. It is believed that Henry was incredibly muscular and is known for using two hammers, one in each hand, to blaze through Big Bend Mountain with his railroad crew. When the railroad company introduced a steel driving machine, threatening the livelihood of Henry and other railroaders, historians substantiate that he challenged the steel driver to a contest. Accounts state that the contest went on for about an hour, and that when it was all said and done, Henry had beat the steam drill by more than 5 feet. Thus, the legend of John Henry was born and forever cemented into the hearts of Talcott residents. Those interested in volunteering for the event are encouraged to contact Lewis through the John Henry Days Facebook page.



A statue of John Henry stands outside the town of Talcott in Summers County, West Virginia.

RESOURCES & INFO FOR BLACK FARMERS & LANDOWNERS

Sign up for our physical newsletter to stay up-to-date on upcoming funding oppurtunities & workshops: www.BlackInAppalachia.org/land



PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Reparations and the master thief

By the Reverend Jeff Allen

A little over a year ago, the United Methodist Foundation of West Virginia established what is believed to be the first reparations fund in West Virginia. As described in an article from the Foundation announcing its creation, the fund has the two-fold purpose of beginning the work of “repairing the damage inflicted by slavery, segregation, and racism as experienced by the African American Community in West Virginia” and to “provide a model for congregations, communities, businesses, and the state itself to establish reparation funds and supply a means for individuals, congregations, and others to support reparations to the African American community in our state.” Proceeds from the West Virginia Reparations Fund will be used for projects relating to reparations to the African American community as identified by a steering committee comprised of representatives of African American organizations and individuals.

The West Virginia Reparations Fund is not the end-all of reparations, but it is a beginning. It’s an opportunity for individuals, organizations, and institutions to take a look at how they both contributed to and benefited from racism in our country.

An important aspect of the West Virginia Reparations Fund is that it’s not charity; it’s reparation. In charity, the donor makes the decision as to where the money goes and how it’s to be used. Reparation is different. Reparation is in some sense restoration. When the United Methodist Foundation started the Reparation Fund, the donor who first contributed to the Fund relinquished control of how the money would be spent. Control of the funds now belongs to representatives of the African American community to spend as they see fit. Why? Because the donor recognized that it wasn’t her or his money to begin with. A story helps to illustrate the point:

There was once a thief who stole from families in a particular neighborhood. The thief raided family after family for a very long time. One day, the thief discerned that a time of reckoning was at hand and loaded up their ill-gotten gain. As the police were closing in, the thief ran down a street in another neighborhood and started tossing bags of money up on those porches as he passed by.



The next morning, those families came out on their porches and discovered the money. Rather than asking, “whose money is this?” The families took the money inside. Some used the money to pay off their mortgages; others sent their children to college to become doctors and lawyers; and still others started business. Meanwhile, the families who were robbed lost their houses because they couldn’t pay the mortgage, couldn’t send their kids to school, and couldn’t start businesses. Generation after generation, one set of families parlayed the money they found on their porches that day into more wealth while the other families suffered the consequences of the original theft.

Reparations is about returning wealth to its rightful owners with interest. It’s about making people whole for the damage that we as a nation have done, without which reconciliation is problematic. It’s about understanding our history, loving our sisters and brothers, and taking a step towards the Beloved Community. As the original donor noted, quoting the Reverend Doctor Howard Thurman, “there can never be a substitute for taking personal responsibility for social change.”

Asked about the motivation for establishing the fund, the donor also stated, “I do not believe our country can heal from the wounds of slavery until

we acknowledge the damage done by slavery and our responsibility to make amends for that harm. It’s not about being a ‘white hero’ or even an ally, it’s about recognizing that our country through wage theft, segregation, and denial of opportunity systematically took wealth from our sisters and brothers who are African American and that there is a moral responsibility to return that wealth to its rightful owners.”

There are many ways for the white community to support the West Virginia Reparations Fund including annual gifts during Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, Black History Month, Juneteenth celebrations; bequests; dedicating a percentage of a congregation’s or organization’s budget or an individual’s income to the fund. For instance, one supporter has made an ongoing commitment to send 2.5% of their income to the Fund.

For more information on the West Virginia Reparations Fund, please contact Rev. Jeff Taylor (jefftaylor@umfwv.org) or Ms. Kim Matthews (kimmatthews@umfwv.org) at the United Methodist Foundation or by calling the Foundation at (304) 342-2113.

The Reverend Jeff Allen is a United Methodist minister and the Executive Director of the West Virginia Council of Churches. The views expressed in the article are the opinion of the author.

COMMENTARY

The unpaid debt

Reparations for slavery in the United States

By Donna Willis

An old debt Congress has ignored since 1864 is coming due, and there are no extensions left on the books.

From the moment foreign-owned ships docked at ports on land bodies stolen from their owners, European thieves had a choice to make, and they chose to make the wrong one.

The buyers in what would be called “human trafficking” today also chose to drag such a practice into the new country they formed.

Laws were enacted by the newly formed Congress and its original thirteen state legislatures that sanctioned, protected and taxed owners of those being trafficked.

They became slaves.

Forced to do the bidding of others without pay, choice or rights of any kind.

Along with the trafficked Africans, the natives of the land now called America and unfortunate criminals shipped from Europe worked their lives away under sanctioned laws.

Throughout history slave holders and their subsequent generations have denied wrongdoing. They claimed, and many still claim, that Africans sold Africans into slavery.

Americans who have not studied the history of the slave trade have failed to learn that at no time during “slave trading days” did America have any legally binding agreement with Africa.

In other words, “What happened in Africa stays in Africa,” mainly because it has nothing whatsoever to do with what took place in America.

Slave reparations is a long overdue debt in the United States.

When the three most powerful bodies chose to reinstate Confederate-held states back into America’s fold after they surrendered at the end of the Civil war, Congress incurred their part of debt due to the newly freed.

The gold held by the United States Treasury belongs to those slaves.

It was the slaves’ sweat, overworked bodies and tears that formed every one of those gold bullion blocks.

As for the silver owed, well that’s interest due on an unpaid bill

And since the slaves, who earned the gold and silver are dead and can’t collect, the burden lies on their descendants to do so in their absence.

Such payments are not “racist” or “unconstitutional,” not by a long shot.

Restitutions are reparations, and Congress has a long history of paying out both.

The only debt Congress has failed to pay is that owed to slaves. Now that’s “racist” and “unconstitutional.”

Here is a fact that all late to America’s making immigrants, descendants of immigrants and those who recently in the last twenty years immigrated to this land; invitations have never been sent, RSVP never requested and if choosing to be here connects you to America’s debts, that’s an immigrant problem not anyone else’s.

It seems that sometimes on occasions it’s worth researching a place before making it your home. Raising a hand in allegiance.

Donna Willis lives in Institute West Virginia.

Pro Tips:

- Use the hashtag #folkreporter to separate reporter tweets from personal commentary.
- Acknowledge the emotional toll of covering local government and emphasizes the importance of self-care.
- Highlight the value of Folk Reporting in filling gaps left by traditional media coverage.
- Record detailed accounts of meetings that would otherwise go unreported, adding diverse perspectives to the narrative.
- Encourage others to try Folk Reporting, attend local government meetings, and share information with their communities. we’re not too bad, and maybe, “the kids are alright.”

FOLK REPORTERS from page 43

I try to limit personal commentary on my Twitter when acting as a Folk Reporter, and I label them with “#folkreporter” to separate being a reporter and a community member that attends the same meetings and uses the same platform. The hashtag also helps to both make folk reporter tweets easier to find and identify them as folk reporter Tyler.

If the tweet or thread doesn’t contain the hashtag, then it is coming from community member Tyler.

Folk reporting can have its drawbacks. Covering local government can be emotionally draining at times. Finding out who local leaders are and how local government works (or doesn’t) can be disappointing.

It’s local, so it hits close to home. The actions of local government directly affect us all, and it’s hard to not care.

It’s incredibly important to take breaks when needed so that it doesn’t take a toll on your mental health.

Even with its drawbacks, I consider Folk Reporting worth it, and I strongly believe that it is essential for us to grow. Many of the meetings covered by Folk Reporters are not covered by the press.

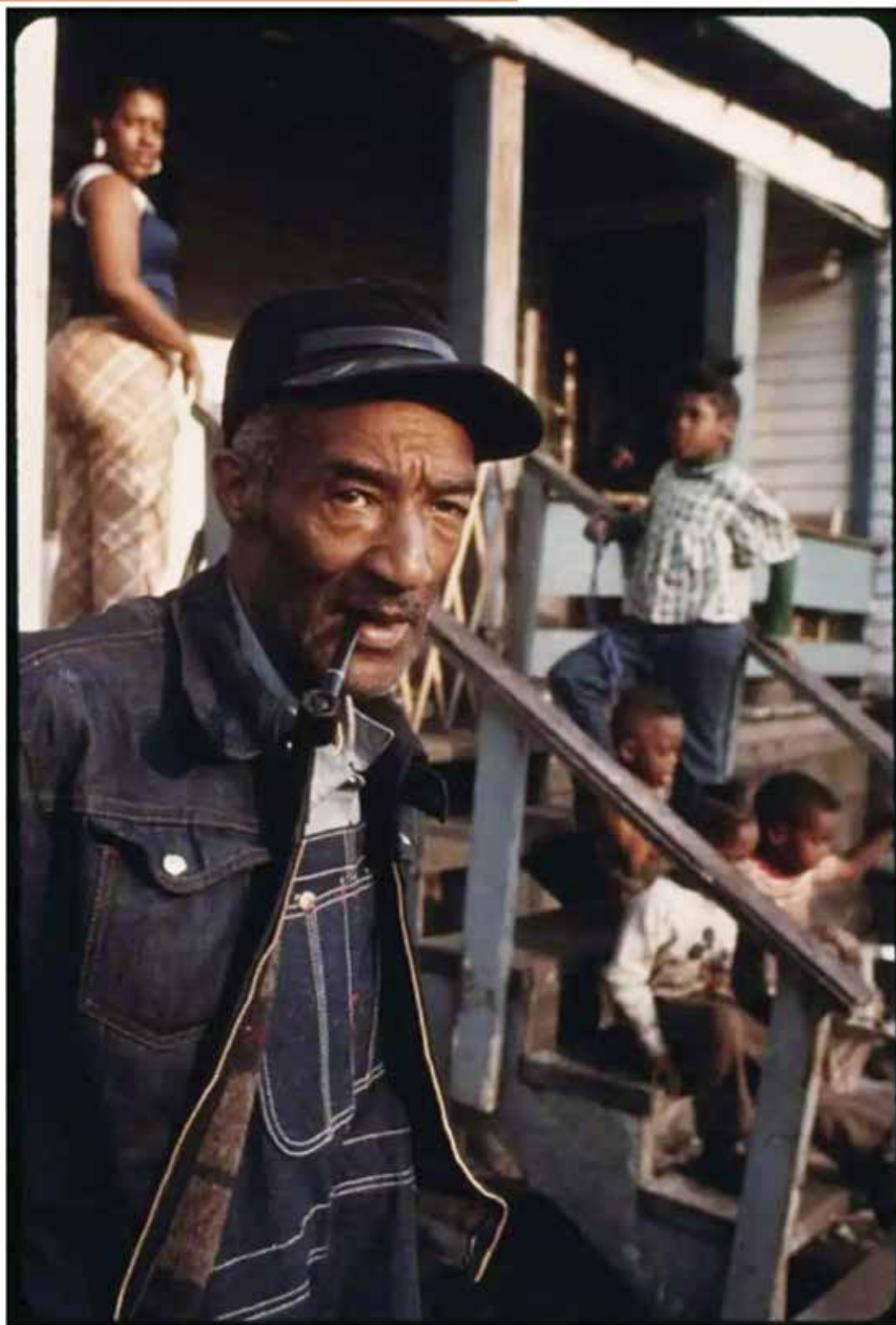
Many local government meetings are not recorded or broadcast, and many local governments hold their meetings at times that many people cannot attend. Often, the only record of a meeting will exist in the form of (usually vague) minutes.

Folk Reporters get to cover and create a more detailed record of meetings that would otherwise go unrecorded.

Folk Reporters get to bring their own unique and diverse perspectives that are not usually seen in traditional reporting. Even with limited commentary, my (often snarky and always sparkling) personality still shines through in my work.

Folk reporting is important work. It creates a record of important local government meetings that would otherwise go unreported. It empowers and uplifts diverse voices that aren’t usually heard. And it shares information with the community, empowering people to become informed citizens.

I highly encourage everyone reading this to go and give Folk Reporting a try. Go to a local government meeting, write a Twitter thread, a Facebook post, a short article, make a TikTok, get creative with it, have fun with it and Folk Report!



Edward Austin, 64, lives in the Black portion of Fireco, a small town near Beckley, West Virginia, in Raleigh County. He receives black lung benefits and a United Mine Workers pension, after working in the mines from 1925 to 1956. He has 20 children and does not regret having them one bit. April 1974

DOCUMERICA

Jack Corn captured Appalachian realities

By Adam Payne

According to the US National Archives, retired photojournalist and professor Jack Corn was just one of over 70 other photographers commissioned by the EPA to capture photos for the DOCUMERICA project. Spanning nationwide, this far-reaching series sought to “photographically document subjects of environmental concern.”

Throughout the 1970s, Corn repeatedly visited the Appalachian Mountains and captured both the intimate realities of Americans living there and their unique relationship to the environment. His expansive work included documenting the coal miner culture of West Virginia and the countless lives changed by unsafe working conditions, racial segregation, poverty and black lung disease.

The striking photographs from Corn’s collection are preserved with their original captions. While highlighting some of the encircling plights of all West Virginians, his images and stories also spotlighted the often underrepresented perspective of Black West Virginians during that time period. In small towns where the railroad tracks cleave the population by race and dozens survive off of black lung restitutions, this collection excavates a vital slice of the state’s history.



Throughout the 1970s Jack Corn visited the Appalachian Mountains and photographed coal miner culture of West Virginia. View his full DOCUMERICA archive here



Youngster returning to school after going home during recess to get an ice cream cone. The town of Chattaroy, West Virginia, near Williamson, is small enough so the youngsters can do this. Many of them also go home for lunch. The town has no industry, and most of the people survive on welfare, pensions, Social Security and black lung benefits. April 1974



LEFT: Dora Darlene Hancock, daughter of Martha Crider, living in Fireco, West Virginia, near Beckley. Town is divided between Black and white populations by the railroad tracks. Dora walking up her street in a new dress on the way to a band concert at the local grade school. April 1974



Harvey Thaxton, 64, lives with his mother in Rhodell, West Virginia near Beckley. A retired miner, he used black lung money to buy whiskey and paint the wall in the picture red. He receives a monthly benefit in addition to a one-time black lung payment. The picture on the wall shows him in World War II uniform with his wife, now dead. April 1974

Mrs. Thaxton, 90, is a widow and mother of retired miners who live in Rhodell, West Virginia, near Beckley. Nurses in the outreach program from the Mountaineer Health Plan visit her and check her health. April 1974

BOOK REVIEW

‘House of Cotton’ a haunting tale of identity, desperation, and ghostly secrets

By Terri Schlichenmeyer

The role is yours, if you want it. You can play the part on a stage or in a film, but there are a few requirements: you have to be able to sing and dance and speak with an accent. Can you convince an audience that you’re someone you’re not? As in the new book, “House of Cotton” by Monica Brashears, can you play dead?

Mama Brown wouldn’t have liked all the praying and singing, not at all. Nineteen-year-old Magnolia knew that for sure. Also for sure, Mama’s funeral was the last time Magnolia would go to church. Wasn’t anything there for her anymore.

No, she’d just go to her overnight job at People’s Gas Station, and try to avoid her landlord, Sugar Foot, who offered to trade sex for rent. She’d try to keep homeless “Cigarette” Sammy from eating out of trash barrels. She’d swipe on Tinder and, using a pseudonym, she’d sleep with random men.

She’d try to forget that she was pregnant and alone.

And then one night, a well-dressed man came to the gas station and told Magnolia that she could be a model. Was it a come-on, a cliché that every almost-pretty girl hears? She couldn’t afford to ignore his offer and so she walked across Knoxville, walked across town, to a funeral home where her new job was ready for her.

Cotton was the man’s name; he said he was a seer and he’d inherited the business from his uncle. Under his ownership, the funeral home was offering a new feature: for a fee, mourners who didn’t have closure over a loss could talk to Magnolia, who was made to look like their dearly departed, thanks to professional make-up and lighting. For an hour of her time, Magnolia would earn more money than she would in



House of Cotton

by Monica Brashears

c.2023 Flatiron Books

\$27.99

304 pages



Monica Brashears is an Affrilachian writer from Tennessee. She is a graduate of Syracuse University’s MFA program. Her work has appeared in Nashville Review, Split Lip Magazine, Appalachian Review, The Masters Review, and more.

a month at the gas station.

It was an easy job. Cotton didn’t charge her rent for living in the home. For once in her life, Magnolia had money. She also had ghosts from the past, nudging her for her sins...

Sitting somewhere between fairy tales and a suspense novel, hovering around both an erotic tale and a humor story, it’s pretty safe to say that “House of Cotton” is unlike any other novel you’ve ever read. It’s weird, and it’s heartbreakingly beautiful.

Author Monica Brashears’ main character, Magnolia, is someone you want to reach into the pages

and hug — if you weren’t sure she’d push you away for it. She’s just learning how to be an adult, and not liking it; she’s smart, but innocent yet and that’s a bad combination in this great story. Once she finds a job with Cotton and his Aunt Eden, then, the book takes a dark, ominous turn, like a modern-day old-fashioned Gothic novel.

Readers shouldn’t be one bit surprised if they become nervous by then. It’s for good reason.

“House of Cotton” will surprise you. It’s not what you think it might be, and more; it’s a vacation read here for the packing, if you want it.

BOOK REVIEW

‘Pig in the Hood’ is heartwarming story of friendship and diversity

By BBG

In today’s society, where many people struggle to make friends, “Pig in the Hood” is a much-needed reminder of the art of making and being a friend. This beautifully illustrated book tells the story of a lovable pig who learns important lessons about self-love, acceptance, friendship and diversity.



Pig in the Hood: An Edgar the Pig Adventure

Written by Georgia Wade-King and Shayla Leftridge

Illustrated by Shaheem Chapman

energy of the characters. One of my favorite parts of the book is the line dancing and booty-shaking, which will leave readers feeling uplifted and energized.

In a world where it can be hard to find connection and community, “Pig in the Hood” offers hope and inspiration. It’s a perfect book to share with children of all ages and will leave them with a greater appreciation for diversity, self-love and friendship.

Don’t miss out on this heartwarming adventure with Edgar the Pig!

And who knows? Maybe Edgar will meet another favorite piggy with West Virginia roots, Wand Petunia, in the future!

The book is available at Taylor Books, BookTenders and through Amazon.

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BOUNCING BACK WITH BRUSHES

Adriana Law’s artistic journey from basketball to portraiture

By Kabrea James

When the pandemic cut her basketball season short in 2020, Beckley resident Adriana Law looked to her passion for art to stay uplifted.

“Once quarantine hit, that’s really all I had,” Law said. “Drawing and art was really the only way I knew how to relieve stress from not being able to play.”

Law was a star player for the Lady Flying Eagles basketball team during her time at Woodrow Wilson High School. Unfortunately, Law dislocated her shoulder the season following the pandemic, causing her to miss her junior year and the first four weeks of her senior year.

Despite her obstacles, Law finished her senior year strong and maintained her love for basketball since she was four years old.

“Really, my whole life revolves around basketball and drawing,” Law said.

Law majors in sports studies and athletic training at West Virginia State University. Although she dreams of working professionally in the WNBA, NBA or NFL as an athletic trainer, Law said she will still make time for her portrait work on the side.

“It’s a way to express myself,” Law said. “I like to listen to music and get in my own world while I work.”

Law said she is most inspired by her dad, who is an artist himself. She said she loves to admire his work and also get feedback from him on her own creations.

“To see the things he created when he was my age and the things he liked to draw is one of the reasons I kept drawing,” Law said. “Art became something that I really liked to do and that me and my dad could do together.”

Law typically completes drawings of athletes and entertainers and other important people in her personal life, such as her grandmother and late grandfather. Law said it feels good to finish up a new piece finally and that she enjoys looking back at her old work and comparing it to where she is now in regard to her skill level.

“Depending on how long it took, I tend to feel relieved,” Law said. “I’m also usually pretty proud to see the growth in my work. It’s a really encouraging feeling.”



PHOTOS BY RODNEY SORRELL

Beckley artist Adriana Law likes to draw athletes, entertainers and other important people in her personal life. Law says she is most inspired by her dad, who is an artist himself.

Healing through nature

From the hiking trails in the New River Gorge to historical sites in Harper’s Ferry, West Virginia is the perfect place to get in touch with nature

By Kabrea James

Boasting 37 state parks, six national parks, and an abundance of other hidden getaways, West Virginia is the perfect place to get in touch with nature.

A study from August 2022 by the University of Tokyo uncovered that nature can provide many positive benefits, including physical and mental health improvement, spiritual fulfillment, deeper social bonds,



COURTESY PHOTO
Kabrea James soaks up some nature.

and a stronger sense of place.

The Mountain State is home to endless hiking trails that accommodate all skill levels. Hiking builds strong muscles and bones, improves balance and heart health, and may reduce stress.

Hiking is also a great way to bond with family, friends, and romantic partners, as this activity allows plenty of time and space to talk and get to know someone better.

The feeling of completing a trail is unmatched, especially when you’re rewarded with a pleasing vista. This feeling of accomplishment can boost confidence and self-esteem.

The land offers West Virginians many options for engaging with nature and getting grounded. Sky-gazing, which can consist of simply watching the clouds go by, birding, or even just looking to the sky and daydreaming, can help ease one’s mind. Gardening can also combat feelings of anxiety and depression and is proven to aid in recovering from stressful events.

One can’t deny the tranquility of experiencing the trickle of a small stream or the rush of mighty rivers crashing over rock formations. For those looking to tap into the spiritual element of nature, conscious breath-work through outdoor yoga and meditation provides fresh air and an overall grounding experience. Letting your bare feet or other parts of your body contact with soil is also a great way to connect with the earth.

For those a little more adventurous, mountain biking, rock climbing, white-water rafting, ziplining, mountain rappelling, and ATV riding are also exciting outdoor options.

Whether you’re exploring the New River Gorge in the southern part of the state or enjoying the historical offerings of Harper’s Ferry National Park in the Eastern Panhandle, the healing properties of the mountains are accessible to all.

Kabrea James is a contributing journalist to BlackbyGod. Her website is LEUPHORIQUE A Space Journey to Love and Light



Space Dreamin’ is an electrifying online talk show dedicated to seeing things from a higher perspective hosted by BBG Contributor/Journalist Kabrea James.

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Keep a look out for a special Pride episode of Space Dreamin’ releasing on Youtube June 21st!

GANGSTAGRASS

Blending bluegrass and hip hop to create a message of unity and freedom

By Linda Caudell-Feagan

This year’s Juneteenth will be the third anniversary of Gangstagrass’s release of “Freedom,” the opening track of No Time for Enemies and the first album featuring real hip-hop MCs to reach number one on the Billboard Bluegrass Chart.

The song “Freedom” was created through collaboration and serendipity. It started with Gangstagrass fiddle player B.E. Farrow playing a Solomon Northrop fiddle tune described in the book, Twelve Years a Slave.

This sparked Gangstagrass MC Dolio the Sleuth to remark to his fellow MC, R-SON the Voice of Reason, that songs about liberation are so often about waiting for eventual salvation, and there should be one that stands up and declares that “we’re not going to wait any longer.”

The first verse in “Freedom” tells the story of the successful slave revolt in Haiti. It then goes into the chorus, “I ain’t gonna wait no more to get this freedom!”

The second verse flashes forward in history to the civil rights movement, and the third verse looks ahead to two possible ways to move forward: taking the power by any means necessary or increased representation bringing peaceful change.

Gangstagrass, a United States and world-touring phenomenon, blends two kinds of uniquely American music, bluegrass and hip hop, and creates a third that’s greater than the sum of its parts.

What started as a studio project 17 years ago by Brooklyn-based producer Rench first gained national attention



Gangstagrass, blends two kinds of uniquely American music, bluegrass and hip hop, and creates a third that’s greater than the sum of its parts.



gangstagrass.com

when “Long Hard Times to Come,” the theme song for the hit FX television series, Justified, was nominated for an Emmy award in 2010.

Today, MCs R-SON and Dolio the Sleuth trade verses and freestyle alongside the unparalleled skills of fellow vocalists Dan “Danjo” Whitener on banjo, B.E. Farrow on fiddle and Rench on guitar and beats. The band members hail from all over America, including Nebraska, Philly, Pensacola, California and Washington DC.

Americana Highways proclaimed Gangstagrass “America’s band” because they take so much of what’s amazing about this country — ingenuity, freedom, creativity, people’s strengths and struggles — and distill it into a message of common ground and unity.

After their America’s Got Talent audition in 2021, Howie Mandel described Gangstagrass as “the recipe

that America has been looking for” and “what America needs right now!” And Gangstagrass was thrilled to be featured on PBS’s The Caverns Sessions, which debuted last fall and is still appearing on PBS stations around the country.

The themes of racial, socioeconomic and environmental justice flow through the music of Gangstagrass, as the band stays true to its roots in both traditional bluegrass and old-school hip-hop – and those roots are not as far apart as people think.

Bluegrass and hip-hop both originated in economically depressed communities where people used these distinctively American art forms to come together to lament their struggles and find joy in music. The cypher in hip-hop, which could materialize in a club or on a sidewalk or front stoop (but could happen anywhere), involves MCs trading rap verses over music or with

someone beatboxing.

As it turns out, that’s very much the same concept as the “pick” in bluegrass, which one might envision happening on a front porch somewhere in Appalachia (though it too could happen anywhere), in which instrumentalists trade solos over the music being played. The banjo, which is widely thought to be an Appalachian instrument, actually comes from Africa – as do so many of the roots of America’s unique culture.

Historically, southern music involved a lot of blending and cross-pollination of differing styles by white folks, Black folks, rural folks and urban folks. In the 1910s, recording technology started the mass-market of recorded music.

Companies that were first offering these records from Southern musicians faced choices where Jim Crow laws physically separated audiences. The companies that were selling records at

the time decided that these were two different markets that needed separate products, even though the recordings were often sold with different labels – “hillbilly music” or “race records” – were the exact same recording.

Today, even as we see the increased blending of musical genres by artists and broad tastes among listeners, that legacy of segregation continues in genre-based music marketing and playlisting and is in stark evidence in the still-pigeonholed categories of the Grammy Awards.

At every show, Gangstagrass strives to tear down the walls that divide us and demonstrate that what we have in common is so much greater than our differences.

The magic of Gangstagrass is that their audiences cross all lines – demographic, generational, political, musical. When folks who are different come together for something they can enjoy together, it creates an unspoken understanding, and at the shows, people of all descriptions who don’t share similar life experiences or political views bond

with each other and become friends.

Each show is a celebration, with little kids and grandparents and everyone in between dancing together, like a congregation sharing a dynamic experience rather than an audience watching a show.

As Gangstagrass MC Dolio the Sleuth explained, “When we perform, we get conflicting notions of what we are; someone could see us and say ‘See, racism doesn’t exist,’ but we do this in spite of racism. Our existence doesn’t prove that the problem doesn’t exist – it shows that there is hope to get past it, and do the work to fix it. That’s why we address those things in our music: we talk about racism, and classism, suicide, depression, water rights, workers’ rights. But we also get people to shake their butts; revolutionaries gotta party too!”

So for a truly unique, memorable and inspirational experience, grab your dancing shoes and your favorite people of all ages and come see this incredible band at one of their favorite venues. Everyone is welcome at the Gangstagrass party!

GOOD OLD DAYS OF CHURCH MUSIC

‘Those Who Came Before’

By Doris Fields

In this day of mega churches, praise teams and liturgical dancers, it’s nice to remember what could surely be called the “good old days” of church going — the days when all it took was the right hymn picked up by the right church mother to send the congregation over the edge and into the realm of the holy spirit.

This was the Black church in the ’60s and ’70s. I reference those decades because that was the time frame of my youth.

My Sundays, morning and evening, were spent in church services, Baptist and sometimes Pentecostal. This was not because I was so “holy,” but because I loved the music.

As a young child, there were two particular groups that would come to Bethlehem Missionary Baptist in Chesapeake, West Virginia, and I revered them both. They helped to reinforce my dream of one day being a famous singer.

There was the Penn Family Singers from Powellton, West Virginia, which consisted of Lorene Penn and her children. She would sing the lead vocals, and her children played the instruments.

As a 7-year-old girl whose only real exposure to live music was in church, this was major. I would sit as close to the front as possible to catch every nuance of Miss Lorene’s singing. She always sang as if she had just recently spoken to God, and He said, “Tell the people this!”

She was the epitome of the Black church.

Then, there was the Gospel Family Affair, a group of family members based in the Rand area of Charleston. Their harmonies had me hooked and mesmerized.

Again, this group included young siblings playing instruments and looking very sophisticated in my young eyes. The members of this group, as well as the Penn Family Singers, were superstars to me.

They were people just like me and they were doing what I wanted to do. That was an important revelation to a little Black girl in West Virginia who wanted more than anything else to be a singer.

Those dreams I had eventually came true, to some extent. But another dream that I have been cultivating for the past 10 years or so, has also come true.

I have now been given the opportunity to document some of West Virginia’s most notable Black musicians and community leaders through the art of filmmaking.

Through my video series, “Those Who Came Before,” I have been able to talk to some of my heroes about their lives, contributions and who inspired them. The third video in this series will feature “The Gospel Family Affair.”

They will be featured along with some other notable musicians in the state. As an introduction to some and reintroduction to others, the group will be performing at the premiere of the second installment of “Those Who Came Before” at the Raleigh Playhouse & Theater on Neville Street in Beckley on June 15 as a kick-off to their Juneteenth Celebration weekend.

The second installment of the video will also include Jean Evansmore of Dubois On Main in Mount Hope, Hubert “Rabbit” Jones, a well-known bassist and historian and Leeshia Lee, author, playwright, photojournalist and community organizer, both from Charleston.



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The Melungeon people were described by scholars as being tri-racial isolates. They were of European, African, and Indigenous ancestry who settled in isolated places such as the Appalachian Mountains.



Melungeon heritage

Unearthing the mixed ancestry in my family's genealogy

By Heather Andolina

I remember the first time I heard the word, Melungeon. I was visiting my great-grandmother, along with my mother and grandmother. We were all sitting on the front porch and one of my mother's cousins asked us if we had heard of Melungeons. I said, "Melungeons? What and who are Melungeons?" And my mother's cousin replied back, "I think we are Melungeons." Thus began my research and interest into the Melungeon people.

Fast forward a few years, and I, along with several family members, began taking DNA tests. As expected, besides the obvious European ancestry, we also had African, Native American, Middle Eastern, Jewish, and Southeast Asian. We always knew there was more to our ancestry, but it had been kept a secret. The only thing we were ever told was that we had Cherokee ancestry. I remember sitting with my grandmother at her kitchen table and her telling me



Heather Andolina is President of the Melungeon Heritage Association

that she was told we had Cherokee ancestry and that's why she had light brown skin. Well, with the DNA discovery, we realized there was so much more to our ancestral story, so I began my research into the Melungeon people, the same way most people do, by unearthing mixed ancestry within my family's genealogy. I wanted to know more about who

the Melungeon people were, and how was my family connected to the them?

Let's start off with a very brief history about the Melungeon people. The Melungeon people were

described by scholars as being tri-racial isolates. They were of European, African, and Indigenous ancestry who settled in isolated places such as the Appalachian Mountains. Their beginnings have many different theories. To name a few they are associated with: the Lost Colony of Roanoke, early Spanish expeditions of the 1500s, shipwrecked Portuguese/Middle Eastern sailors, enslaved Africans brought into Jamestown beginning in 1619, and a Lost Tribe of Israel. The truth of their beginnings is probably a little bit of all of these theories. It's quite clear the Melungeon story begins with the intersections between Europeans, Africans, and Indigenous people in the 1500s, 1600s, and 1700s, but we have as yet to pinpoint a definitive beginning.

The term Melungeon, has its roots in the French term, "mélange," which simply means mixed. There are also several different possible roots for the term Melungeon, but the French term, "mélange" is the

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most likely root of the word. Although the term began as an obvious observation of describing a people who were of mixed ancestry, it eventually became a term that was used as a derogatory term and racial slur used against people of mixed ancestry. The first time the term Melungeon appeared in print was in the meeting minutes of the Stony Creek Baptist church in 1813. The Stony Creek Baptist church was located in what is now Scott County, Virginia, and was a well-known location that had a Melungeon settlement. A congressional member of the church had remarked about another member housing a “Melungin.”

Even though this is the first instance of the term being written down, it’s quite clear that the term had been used verbally for some time.

In the 1990s a book by Brent Kennedy, “The Melungeons: A Resurrection of a Proud People” was published. It shined a light on the Melungeon people, a people of mixed ancestry, that had all but been hidden from not only American history, but the very people with this ancestry. Brent Kennedy along with several others in 1997 got together and had the first Melungeon Union, and in 1998, the Melungeon Heritage Association was formed.

The Melungeon Heritage Association is a nonprofit



Since 1997, the Melungeon Heritage Association has had a yearly Union or conference to bring together people who have Melungeon ancestry, mixed ancestry, or just want to learn more about our organization. This 2023 conference will be in Berea, Kentucky on June 23 and 24. Photo is from last year’s MHA Union/conference in Martinsville, Va.

organization documenting and preserving the history of mixed ancestry peoples in the southern and eastern United States. Although our main focus is on the Melungeon people of Appalachia, we firmly believe in the dignity of all mixed ancestry groups, and commit to preserving this heritage of ethnic harmony, inclusivity, and diversity.

Since 1997, the Melungeon Heritage Association has had a yearly Union or conference to bring together

people who have Melungeon ancestry, mixed ancestry, or just want to learn more about our organization. This 2023 conference will be in Berea, Kentucky on June 23 and 24. Our conferences celebrate the Melungeon and mixed heritages that created this country. We have always been a multicultural and multiethnic nation, and we just want to get the truth out there.

Who knows, you might be a Melungeon descendant too.

Stratton High School to be demolished this summer

By Kabrea James

“They’re going to tear down our school,” Stratton High School Alumni Mary Mayes said. “Nobody can do anything about it.”

Mayes, who graduated from Stratton High School in 1966, said she and others don’t support the on-going construction of a new school. Mayes credits fellow alumni Rev. Nelson E. Staples, who passed in 2021, as the only force preventing the demolition.

“I give all praises to Rev. Staples,” Mayes said. “He did everything he could before he died to stop all this with petitions and everything. All the other folks are either dead or outside of West Virginia. There’s no one left to take interest in trying to stop this.”

Named after the Reverend Daniel Stratton, the school was the first all-Black high school in Raleigh County. Under the passionate guidance of E. L. Morton, the school’s first principal, Stratton began teaching high school subjects in 1919. The school graduated 2,786 students before integrating into the all-white Woodrow Wilson High School in 1967.

Graduates of Stratton blossomed into renowned engineers, doctors, lawyers, teachers, nurses ministers and even entertainers, including 1956 graduate Bill Withers, who had a highly successful music career.

Now operating as an elementary school, Stratton’s rich history has always bred concerns about preserving the school’s legacy. Audrey Jean Cain Cox, daughter of the late Herbert G. Cain, who taught English and coached at Stratton, stated that when the schools integrated, all of Stratton’s memorabilia was burned up in an incinerator.

Many descendants of Stratton alumni wonder where all of the trophies, books and pictures documenting the school’s accomplishments vanished away to.

During a city council meeting on April 25, Beckley Mayor Rappold spoke highly of the new Stratton Elementary School after having toured the structure earlier that day. Rappold also said that alumni would be given bricks from the old building in memory of Stratton High School.

Councilwoman Janine Bullock followed by encouraging residents to provide their own memorabilia to

be displayed inside the new building.

The new school, which is currently being built directly behind the old Stratton, will open at the beginning of the upcoming academic year. Despite the city’s efforts to ease the minds of former alum, Stratton, as many have come to know and love it, will be demolished after this school ends on June 8.

BBG Note: In Kanawha County the Board of Education has approved the sale of the former all-Black Garnet High School building in Charleston, West Virginia, to the Garnet Alumni Association. The alumni association plans to preserve the building’s legacy as a multicultural gathering venue and community space. The sale is pending the alumni association’s approval as a non-profit organization. The building had been used for adult education classes but will now be repurposed. The deal may include a provision that returns the property to the school system in five years if the alumni group does not fulfill their plans. The alumni association hopes to attract tenants, including non-profit organizations, to utilize the space and contribute to community development.

Gun violence shakes Beckley

By Kabrea James

“It was the worst thing I have ever experienced in my life,” Rhoneka Medley said. “I ain’t never been through nothing so tragic. He was the love of my life, and I had to watch him take his last breath.”

On April 20, Rhoneka Medley and her husband Malique were driving in the East Park neighborhood when someone fired multiple rounds into the passenger side of their vehicle.

Malique would later die as a result of his injuries, leaving a pregnant Rhoneka and their two children, who were also in the car at the time of the shooting, heartbroken and traumatized. He was 30 years old.

Two days before the incident, a 17-year-old was shot in the Harper Road area while walking home from work. On April 22, three more victims were injured by gun violence, resulting in the death of 26-year-old Lashawn Shelton.

Protesters marched through East Park on April 23, seeking peace and unity after three instances of gun violence occurred in the span of five days. Danielle Stewart, chair of the Beckley Human Rights Commis-

sion, stopped and called for a moment of silence near Seventh Street and Sheridan Avenue, where the most recent shooting took place.

Community outcry carried over into Beckley’s city council meeting on April 25, where several residents voiced their concerns. Braxton Berry said he longed for the days when people found solace living in Beckley.

“There was a time when this community was a family-oriented place, a safe place,” Berry said. “But look at where we are now. We are afraid for our lives, afraid for our elders’ lives, and most of all, our children’s lives. We have taken what used to be a safe space in our community, and we’ve allowed it to be replaced with a horrible epidemic of gun and drug violence.”

Berry also called for unification among Beckley residents in the hopes of restoring the city’s sense of safety.

“We need to link together as a people, like a mighty chain in unity, and take back what belongs to us, our freedom and our peace,” Berry said. “And with that, let there be justice for those who lost their lives.”

For Malique’s mother Donna Medley, peace of mind does not seem feasible after suffering the loss of her son. Her grieving process has also been compounded

by a lack of communication from the Beckley Police Department regarding their investigation.

Donna said her and her family are also still receiving death threats from the people who may be responsible.

“Now we’re just at a stand-still trying to get justice for Malique,” Donna said. “His life shouldn’t have been taken like that. We grieve every day. Not one day goes by that I don’t cry for my son. I can’t live like this for the rest of my life. I can’t walk out here on these streets and know that these people are still around me.”

In a statement released on April 23, Deputy Chief David Allard said that detectives are investigating the possibility of the shooting that killed Malique to have been retaliatory, which Donna said simply isn’t true.

She’s now doing everything she can to protect herself and her family going forward.

Anyone with any information regarding the shootings is urged to contact BPD at 304-256-1720 or Crime Stoppers of West Virginia at www.Crimestopperswv.com. Cash rewards will be paid for information leading to any arrest.

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REKINDLING MEMORIES

By Leeshia Lee

Music: it's always been the soundtrack of my life, the rhythm pulsating through my veins. From singing to dancing, rapping and beyond, it's the energy. It's the vibe that music radiates that truly captivates me.

My most vivid memories take me back to my formative years, growing up in a neighborhood alive with anticipation for local talent shows – community gatherings where everyone would rally together to cheer on those brave enough to take center stage — a tradition warmly fostered by my grandfather.

The melodies of my childhood still play in my mind. I can still feel the wind blowing as I listened to the combined melodies our neighborhood songbirds Kalline and June Love harmonizing to the Earth Wind & Fire's "Reasons" below the streetlights. Kalline dressed in normal all white jogging pants and white t-shirt with his curly jet black hair blowing in the wind. June Love in the latest sneakers rocking from side to side as he howled up at the moon.

To this day, I can still hear Brenda Wiley saying, "To the Woo to the Woo." Brenda lived on the third floor of Bowman court and she was the head organizer of the community dance groups. Year after year she put the best choreographed routines in the talent shows.

I remember the older teenage boys in their rope chains preparing their rap songs, Hype Touch, an R&B group that would bring the house down with their voices. They would start getting their vocals ready and the sounds would make anyone smile.

My favorite part was watching the dancers get their moves down day in and day out until they were perfect. O.M.P. aka Orchard Manor Posse was legendary to me. Their dance routines were top tier. I remember the routine to Doo Doo Brown and how they stole the show and had the whole city talking about their moves.

When Multifest was introduced, my favorite part was the talent portion where every group put their best on the stage in hopes of leaving with the title for that year.

We would walk around in a circle at the Capitol grounds, decked out fresh in our airbrushed outfits and clean Nike Air Forces, just laughing and enjoying the culture of our state. The youth put on their best clothes with outfits they had been planning all summer,

A talent show journey from childhood to the Multifest stage



An Instagram moment where Mr. Isaac Petty danced with singer Mya went viral. A vibe that only Multifest could provide.

mer, while the older folks showed out sometimes in their Sunday best.

This was the epitome of an era; this was our time to shine.

I remember rushing to the stage to cheer on our own as soon as the talent portion began.

I think I was about 11, it was the early 90's when I first stepped foot on the stage at Multifest. That was the moment I knew that maybe this is something I could do. I don't know why Multifest stopped doing the talent show portion, but it was one of those things



You could always count on Brenda Wiley to get a group together and make sure they were on point with every performance for Multi Fest talent shows. These kids were dancers from Orchard Manor and LittlePage Housing Projects

that everyone always said they missed.

Last year, I hosted the first Friday night edition of "Ladies' Night," and being on that stage in front of over 40,000 people with my best friend Rashaun was euphoric. We will be hosting year two of this landmark Multifest event.

My favorite moment was capturing a vibe that only Multifest could provide with Mr. Isaac Petty dancing with singer Mya — it went viral. The world definitely needs to see what Multifest has to offer.

I knew I wanted to give the kids coming up a shot to experience Multifest in its originality.

I'm so excited to announce that on Thursday, August 3, 2023 Multifest will be showcasing the return of the legendary and historic Talent Night!

Talent Night is not only for the new, up-and-comers, but it's for those over 50 years old that think, "I Still Got It."

Get ready for a trip back in time, to an era where we'd cheer for familiar faces and discover talent from beyond our borders. But, most importantly, we gather to support those who've prepared to shine brightly on center stage.

Contact Leeshai Lee for more information:
leeshialeebbooks@gmail.com.



Appalachian

Research Consortium



Community Education Group is leading the effort to create the Appalachian Research Consortium (ARCo), whose mission is to engage researchers, educators, academics, and community partners in strategic, locally-derived research initiatives that reduce health disparities across the Appalachian Region. Specifically, the ARCo is committed to:

1. Providing scientific leadership and institutional infrastructure to advance community-level health research.
2. Stimulating, cultivating, and supporting innovative and translational health research based on community-level needs.
3. Developing community-level investigators, including the creation of a sustainable rural research coordinator training program (RRCTP) that allows communities to conduct translational research to address and improve health at a local level.
4. Enhancing communication among and fostering strategic new collaborations between the Consortium investigators/partners and academic, government, community, and other clinical partners.
5. Acquiring resources to support research led by the Consortium (i.e., government grants and contracts, as well as support from foundations and corporate entities).

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