

BBG

The
White
Thing

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CULTURE
FOLKLORE
MEDIA
AgriCULTURE
TRAVEL & TOURISM

MONSTROUS MYTHS:
WHAT WE'RE REALLY AFRAID OF



Conference Guide

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BBG

Black By God is at the forefront of community-led news and storytelling in West Virginia. We are committed to showcasing the diverse experiences of Black and BIPOC communities in the Appalachian region. Our core mission is to present a detailed and varied portrayal of life in these communities, focusing on agriculture, technology, community, civics, and business.

**Appalachian Studies
Conference
Marshall University
March 21, 2026
Special Issue**

Publisher: Crystal Good

Designer: Little Shiva

Cover art and art on pages
17, 18 and 19: Trinity Gyan



Letter from the Editor

Black By God – The West Virginian is proud to present this special **Appalachian Studies** issue — a collection of stories, voices, and visions rooted in the mountains we call home.

We hope this issue will give you a sample of the kind of work we publish across our website, newsletter, and social media.

We are deeply grateful to the contributors who helped bring this issue to life — from **Dr. Turner**, to our partnership with **Fresh and Fried Hard**, to the everyday reporting of our **BBG Folk Reporters**, and inspiring young artists like **Trinity Gyan**, who remind us that the next generation of storytellers is already rising.

Our hope is simple: that this issue travels far and wide across Appalachia and beyond.

Please take a photo of you with the issue somewhere meaningful and share it. And if you are able, please donate.

Above all, please help spread the news of *Black By God*!

crystal@blackbygod.org

On behalf of the
BBG team, Founder
& Publisher Crystal
Good holds a copy of
Black By God:
The West Virginian
at the Solutions
Journalism
Network's Blue
Engine Accelerator
in San Francisco.

Photo by
Annie Sprinkle



Black Voices, Scholarship, and History

at the 49th Annual
Appalachian Studies
Conference

March 19–21, 2026
Marshall University | Huntington, WV

About this guide

This guide highlights Black voices, scholarship, and history at the 49th Annual Appalachian Studies Conference. It exists to make evident what is too often treated as peripheral, though it is foundational to Appalachia itself. Across keynote scholarship, Affrilachian literature, public history, labor organizing, foodways, and community development, these sessions reflect Black Appalachia as both deeply rooted and future-facing. This guide invites attendees to engage intentionally, recognize their lineage, and encounter a fuller Appalachian story.

Keynote

Friday, 6:45–8:15 PM

William H. Turner
Been to the Mountaintop!

Book signing to follow: *The Harlan Renaissance: Stories of Black Life in Appalachian Coal Towns*

Plenary

Friday, 11:00 AM–12:15 PM

Appalachia's Powerful Literature
of Place and Its People

Jacinda Townsend

Black Appalachia: History, Community, and the Future

Saturday, 8:00–9:15 AM

Community Development Driving
the Future of Black Appalachia

Adam Dickson – Langston Centre

William Isom – Black in Appalachia

Jason Tartt – Farmer
and community developer

Milan Bush – Black
Appalachian Coalition

Black Huntington History Trolley Tour

Friday: 12:15–1:15 PM
1:30–2:45 PM | 3:00–4:15 PM

Led by Cicero M. Fain III, historian

Asbury Parker and the Underground Railroad in Appalachia

Friday, 8:00–9:15 AM

Cicero M. Fain III

Marlitta Perkins

Andrew Feight

Affrilachia, Black Literature, and Cultural Memory

Friday, 1:30–2:45 PM

Teaching Affrilachia as
a Subversive Act

Zanice Bond – Tuskegee University

Kristine Yohe

Theresa L. Burriss

Recovering Bessie Woodson Yancey: Poet and Political Voice for Justice

Friday, 1:30–2:45 PM

Whose Roots? Our Roots!: Black Women and the Creation of an Appalachian Homeplace

Friday, 4:30–5:45 PM

Economies of Solidarity: Black Grassroots Economic Development in West Virginia

Friday, 9:30–10:45 AM

Cameron Rishworth

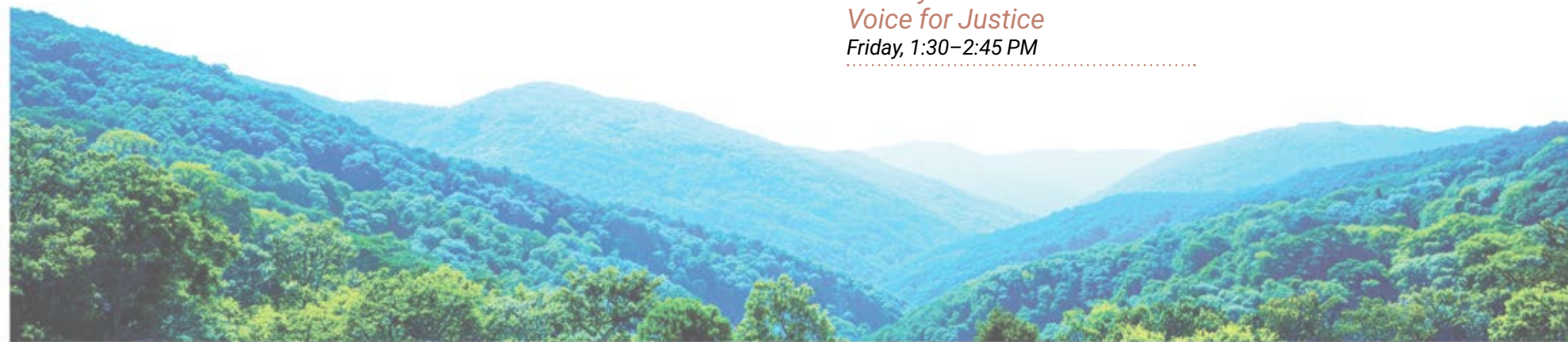
Foodways & Creative Practice

Keyarna “Chef Ke” Frederick –
Appalachian foodways practitioner

Posters & Research

Aliyah Smith-Gomis – Mental
health disparities among Black
farmers in Appalachia

Myya Helm – Embroidered
histories of Black coal miners in
West Virginia and South Wales



There's a Farmer on the Flag

BBG AGRICULTURE
MARCH 4, 2026

By Black By God – The West Virginian

There has been a farmer on the flag of West Virginia since 1863. The figure stands as a symbol of the state's agricultural roots. At *Black By God – The West Virginian*, we ask a simple question: *Who are the farmers behind that symbol today?*

Our AgriCULTURE reporting — featuring Farmer on the Flag — centers the stories of Black farmers, growers, and land stewards across Appalachia. These stories explore the deep connections between land, labor, culture, and community. They highlight farmers who are preserving family traditions, building new agricultural businesses, and shaping the future of food in the region.

Agriculture is more than crops and fields. It is culture. It is history. It is a pathway to community health, economic opportunity, and self-determination.

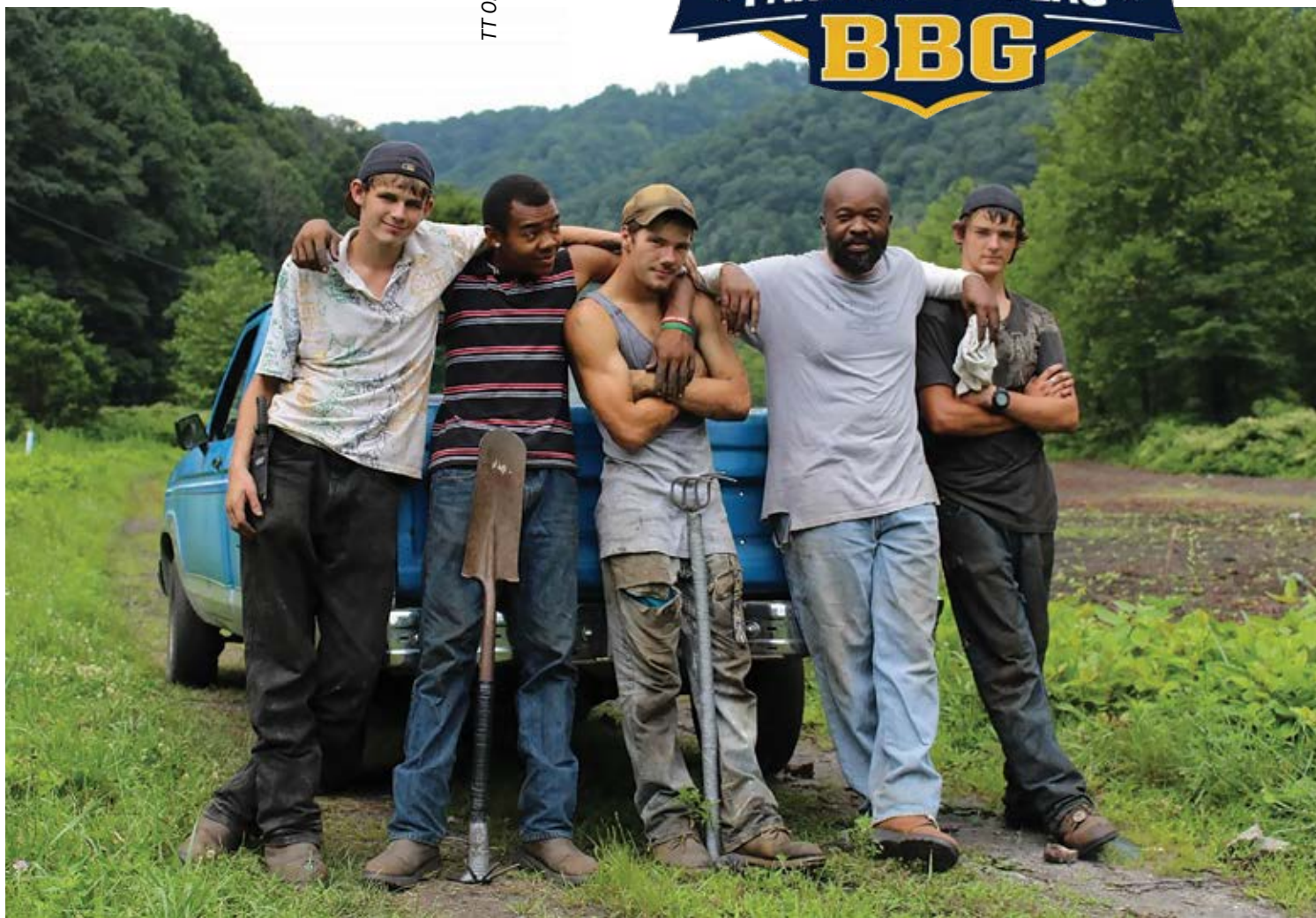
Through AgriCULTURE and Farmer on the Flag, BBG is documenting the voices and experiences that are too often left out of conversations about farming in Appalachia. These stories honor the legacy of Black farmers while lifting up the next generation

cultivating the land today.

Stay connected. Sign up for the BBG Agriculture Newsletter to receive farmer stories, land and food reporting, and updates from across Appalachia.

Follow @blackbygodwv on Instagram for farmer spotlights, field reporting, and community stories from the region.

TT Organic Farms and EDGE <https://edgeus.org>





Black Appalachian Landowners – I Am Appalachia

BBG AGRICULTURE
MARCH 4, 2026

By Black Appalachian Coalition

This content was originally published by Black Appalachian Coalition.

Core Truth: Black land loss in Appalachia was not accidental, cultural, or inevitable – it was produced by racist policy, law, and practice. Black landownership in Appalachia existed – and was deliberately dismantled.

Black farmers and landowners were present across Appalachia for generations. They acquired land through purchase, inheritance, and community networks – often under hostile conditions – and used it to build farms, businesses, churches, schools, and mutual aid systems. Their presence was not marginal. It was foundational.

The myth that Appalachia lacked Black farmers helps obscure a deeper truth: Black poverty in the region is not cultural or accidental – it is structural.

Discriminatory lending, heirs' property laws, racially biased taxation, exclusion from USDA programs, violence, fraud, and legal manipulation all worked together to strip Black families of land and security.

This land loss was not the result of poor decisions or neglect. It was the outcome of racist U.S. policies and practices that rewarded dispossession and punished Black ownership.

What followed was erasure: of ownership, of contribution, and of responsibility. Naming this history is not about nostalgia – it is about accountability, repair, and refusing the lie that Black Appalachians simply disappeared.

Visit Black Appalachian Coalition at blackappalachian-coalition.substack.com



Mama's Meatloaf

From a 2025 Appalachian Foodways Practitioner Fellowship winner, a family dish with a reputation!

BBG AGRICULTURE
FEBRUARY 10, 2026

By Ronnie Marie Tartt

A Recipe With A Reputation

Secret ingredients: Love and Mama's Meat Sauce

Serves 6–8 | Prep time: 20 minutes | Cook time: ~1 hour

Ingredients

2 lbs ground beef (80/20 for juiciness)

1 cup Mama's Meat Sauce, plus more for topping

(Ketchup may be substituted if needed)

1 cup breadcrumbs (or crushed toast)

1 cup cornflake crumbs

1/2 cup finely chopped onion

1/2 cup finely chopped green pepper

1 can of tomatoes

2 cloves garlic, minced

2 large eggs

1 tsp salt

1/2 tsp black pepper

1/2 tsp crushed red pepper (optional)

Mama's Meat Sauce is available on AppalachianGold.com



Instructions

Preheat oven to 350°F (175°C).

In a large bowl, gently combine ground beef, onion, green pepper, garlic, breadcrumbs, cornflake crumbs, tomatoes, eggs, salt, black pepper, and crushed red pepper. Mix until ingredients are thoroughly distributed.

Stir in ¾ cup Mama's Meat Sauce, reserving the rest for topping.

Shape into two loaves and place in loaf pans or on a baking sheet.

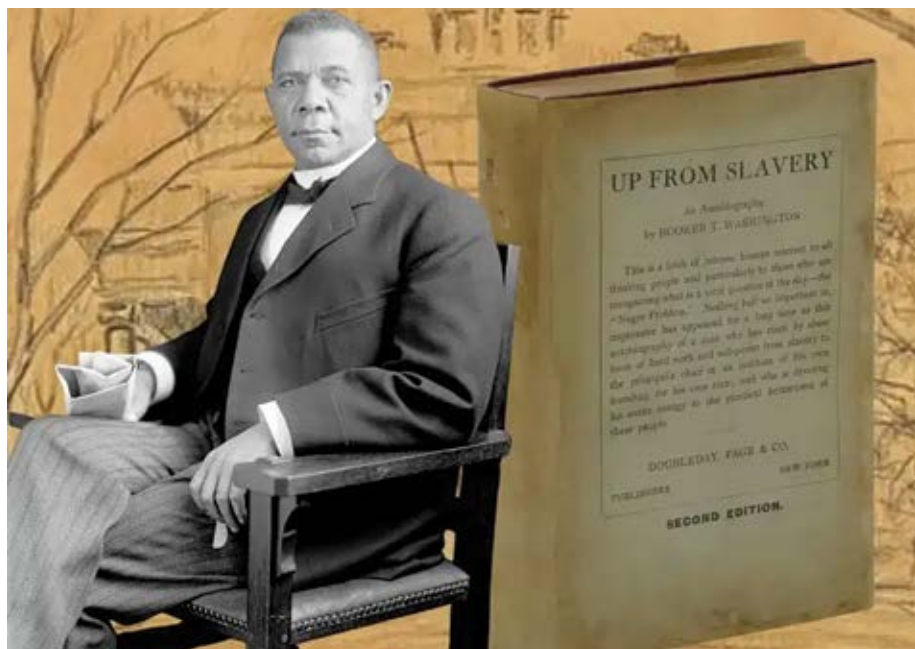
Spoon additional sauce over the top.

Bake for 45–60 minutes, until the internal temperature reaches 160°F and the top is caramelized.

Let rest for 10 minutes before slicing.

Scan the QR code below to read the rest of the story at BBG online.





Receipts: Booker T. Washington's "slave" food memories

By Fresh and Fried Hard

There's something insightful about first-person accounts, in *Up from Slavery*, Booker T. Washington allows us to see how his earliest food memories influenced his lifestyle and style of leadership. The son of a plantation cook, Washington had much to say about hunger, an inability to have a proper family dinner, and the lack of food the enslaved were allotted in his autobiography. He also details how the people in the big house suffered without the culinary luxuries they enjoyed before the Civil War. It's fair to believe that his upbringing loomed in the background as he brought the vision of Tuskegee Institute to life; from the vegetable gardens to the

farm to the coursework to community outreach to local farmers, and in the presence of renowned teachers like George Washington Carver. There was his personal life as a public figure who dined at tables his mother would have served as an enslaved woman. And as a husband and father, no one would ever deprive him of the privilege of spending time with his family around the dinner table. Read excerpts of Washington's food story in his own words in "Receipts: Booker T. Washington's "slave" food memories" on our website.



Salt and Reclamation: A Black History Dinner on the Ground Where Enslaved Hands Once Worked

COMMUNITY & CULTURE

MARCH 13, 2026

By Lekili Kini Dean

Malden, W.Va.

The salt remembers.

On the grounds of JQ Dickinson Salt-Works in the Kanawha Valley — where enslaved Black people once labored to harvest salt from the earth — a sold-out crowd gathered this Black History Month and sat down to eat.

Keyarna "Chef Ke" Frederick set a five-course, farm-to-table table on that land. She seasoned the dessert with salt pulled from that same ground. And she did it surrounded by community.

JQ Dickinson Salt-Works has not hidden its history. On its own website, the company states plainly that the Kanawha Valley salt industry "relied heavily on slave labor. Our ancestors were no exception. They owned slaves, and it is necessary and right to acknowledge that the industry was built on the backs of the enslaved."

People rarely think of West Virginia as once having been a slaveholding state. It was. On this evening, that history was not ignored — it was faced, full on, across a beautifully set table.



Carrying the Tradition Forward

Let the record be clear: Black folks have been farm-to-tabling for generations. Long before it had a name or became a culinary trend, Black grandmothers were walking out to their gardens and coming back with dinner. Black farmers were feeding families and communities from land they fought to keep. What Chef Ke is doing is not new — it is ancestral. She is the latest in a long, unbroken line.

Scan the QR code below to read the rest of the story at BBG online.





Miss Black WV Heaven Smith Is Growing a Movement Rooted in Justice, Youth Power, and the Future of Black Appalachia Agriculture

BBG COMMUNITY & CULTURE
NOVEMBER 28, 2025

By Black By God – The West Virginian

West Virginia's new Miss Black West Virginia, Heaven Smith, is not stepping into her crown for glamour — she's stepping into it for purpose. A Human Nutrition and Food major with a minor in Horticulture at West Virginia University, Heaven is using her statewide platform to speak boldly about agriculture, food justice,

and the power of young people to transform their communities.

In her reel, Heaven introduces herself simply and powerfully: "I'm Heaven Smith, Miss Black West Virginia — and I'm using my crown to plant seeds. Agriculture is power, it's our history, and it's our future. I'm here to help our youth grow something great."

Those three lines capture exactly who she is and what she intends to do.

Heaven didn't learn this work from books. She learned it on Charleston's West Side, following the example of her mother, Dr. Shanequa Smith, a respected advocate who has spent years teaching families how fresh food can build connection, dignity, and community health. Heaven grew up surrounded by gardens, workshops, and grassroots leadership —

and that foundation is now blooming into her statewide platform.

Her advocacy is not symbolic. She's pushing to close the "college SNAP gap," calling attention to rising food costs, low wages, and the lack of resources for students trying to stay fed while earning their degrees. She uplifts initiatives like WV Foodlink, which helps West Virginians locate grocery stores and identify which ones accept SNAP, promoting the belief that everyone deserves access to safe, nutritious food with dignity.

This year, she carried that message far beyond West Virginia's borders — speaking at the Bread for the World Advocacy Summit in Washington, D.C. and participating in the Black Farmers and Gardeners Conference in Detroit. In both spaces, Heaven represented the heart of Black rural Appalachia, joining national conversations where West Virginia voices — especially Black voices — are almost never heard.

Her crown itself carries a deeper story. For nearly a century, the Miss West Virginia Pageant allowed only women "of the white race" to compete. Not until 2017 did the state crown its first African American winner. Miss Black West Virginia emerged from this exclusion, creating a space where Black women could be celebrated, uplifted, and heard. Heaven stands in that legacy with intention, proving that beauty and leadership are not mutually exclusive — they are powerful together.

But the kind of work Heaven wants to do — youth agriculture workshops, travel to national advocacy con-

ferences, community garden days, statewide speaking engagements — requires resources. It requires travel support, materials, tools, uniforms, and the ability to show up fully prepared in every space where she is called to represent West Virginia.

That is why community support is not optional — it is essential.

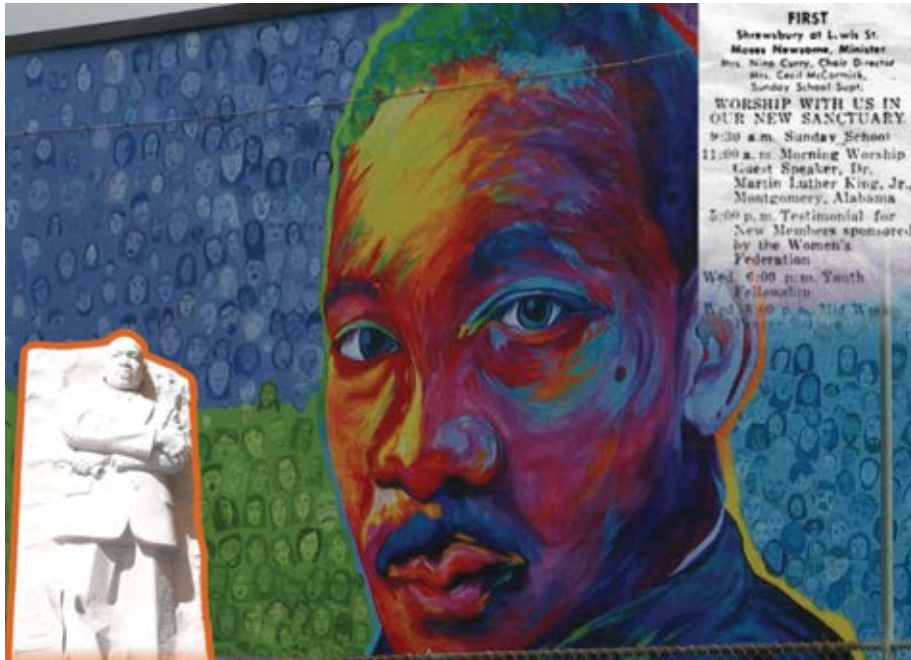
When people donate to Heaven's campaign, they are not funding pageantry. They are investing in a young Black woman planting a movement rooted in justice, food access, land education, and youth empowerment in one of America's most overlooked regions. They are helping her take Black Appalachian stories and solutions into national spaces where they are desperately needed.

Anyone who wants to support, collaborate, or donate to her campaign can contact Heaven directly at: hs0075@mix.wvu.edu, or scan the QR code below to go to this story on our website, where we include her direct donation codes.

Miss Black WV Heaven Smith is not asking people to believe in her crown.

She is asking them to believe in the seeds she is planting — and the future she is growing for Black Appalachia.





BBG Travel & Tourism Stop: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr Community Mural Project

TRAVEL & TOURISM
MARCH 3, 2026

By Paula Kaufman

Photo courtesy of Lori Hostuttler,
Director, West Virginia & Regional
History Center (WVRHC)

Black WV Arts Map Project

Location: outside the Martin Luther
King Jr. Community Center, 314
Donnally St, Charleston, near I-64

Artist: Greater Charleston
community and Jeff Pierson

As you make your way into Charles-
ton on I-64, keep an eye out for a wall

that seems to glow with splashes of
vivacious color. There you will find a
larger-than-life portrait of Dr. Martin
Luther King Jr. in vivid hues — and it's
unlike any mural you've seen before.

Yes, the rainbow palette is eye-catch-
ing. But what makes this piece
truly special is who helped create
it. Surrounding Dr. King are 1,325
individual self-portraits painted by
people from across the community.
Children, parents, teachers, church
members, artists, first-time painters.
Their efforts joined to make the
largest collaborative painting in
West Virginia, and one of the largest
participatory murals in the country.

The project was led by artist Jeff
Pierson. He stated that his vision
was "of the community and by the
community." This is in keeping with
the theme of Dr. King's leadership
style which emphasized "we"

over "me," and bottom-up grass-
roots community organizing.

It took three years and more than 30
painting workshops held around the
city to complete the mural. This gave
as many opportunities as possible
for individuals to paint their self-port-
raits. The portraits were painted
on polytab, a material later adhered
onto the mural. Black churches, local
schools, and members of the LGBTQ
community played an important
role in bringing the mural to life.

The mural was created to mark
the 60th anniversary of Dr. King's
"I Have a Dream" speech, however,
it also connects to a meaningful
moment in Charleston's own history.
On January 24, 1960, a 31-year-old
Dr. King visited First Baptist Church
in Charleston as a guest speaker.

According to the Charleston Gazette,
the church was filled to capacity —
the balcony, gymnasium, and even
the aisles packed with people eager
to listen. The newspaper called
him "courageous" and urged the
Charleston community to prove
King's message had not been in vain.
The mayor attended and introduced
him. During his sermon, King spoke
of change, saying that "an old order
is dying and a new one is being born,"
and reminded listeners that progress
is not inevitable — it's something
we must actively work toward.

That message feels increasingly
urgent, as impulses of greed and
individuality seek to eclipse a
community-minded framework.
We have made great strides and
yet many remain. We are still miles
off from a world of economic

and racially equal society and
international mutuality and peace.

Standing in front of the mural,
the many small faces add
together to create a whole. It's
a vital visual reminder that we
do nothing by ourselves and no
project is made entirely alone.

Scan the QR code below to read
the rest of the story at BBG online.



Sometimes
journalism
means
notebooks.

Sometimes it
means berry
buckets.

BBG kid-reporter
Jayli Phillips
joined us for BBG
Berry Picking
Day (2025)

Want to join
us for BBG
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Day 2026?

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Monstrous Myths: What We're Really Afraid Of

*In today's political climate,
West Virginia's cryptids
might be the least scary
things in these mountains*

By Crystal Good

*Do you really know who or what we
share these mountains with? Because
it's not just Morrisey and Mothman.*

The Real Monster Is Fear Itself

Before we dive into West Virginia's most fascinating cryptids, let's talk about something I've been thinking about as a folklorist: what if many of these mythological creatures weren't born from actual encounters with unknown beasts? What if they were created by white settlers who were more afraid of the wilderness — and the people already living in it — than any actual monster lurking in the woods?

Think about it. European settlers arrived in Appalachia, a landscape completely foreign to them, occupied by Indigenous peoples they sought to displace, and filled with dangers they didn't understand. Maybe, instead of confronting the very real threats — their own violence, systemic exploitation of laborers, environmental destruction from mining — they invented monsters. Creatures to blame for disappearances, for livestock losses, for the consequences of their own actions. Or maybe not. Maybe some of these stories have roots we can't fully trace.

Sound familiar? Turns out creating imaginary threats to avoid dealing with real problems might be a time-honored American tradition. Whether you're Democrat or Republican, you've probably heard some scary political rhetoric lately that makes Mothman look downright reasonable.

Our Different Story

Now, here's where it gets interesting for us: Black folks in Appalachia have always seemed to have a different relationship with these mountains and these stories. Our ancestors didn't arrive here as fearful settlers — many came as enslaved people, then later as workers in the mines and timber camps. We weren't afraid of the wilderness the same way; in fact, the wilderness was often our portal to freedom. When we say we weren't scared, we mean it — the woods were where you ran to escape bondage, where you could hide, where you found your way North. The forest wasn't the enemy; it was a sacred sanctuary.

Black Appalachian folklore shares some superstitions with white mountain culture (don't whistle at night, listen to what the animals tell you), but our stories carried completely different warnings. While white communities created monsters to explain their fear of the wilderness, our elders were teaching us how to avoid slave catchers, Pinkerton guards, and police. Our "monsters" weren't cryptids — they were men with badges, dogs, and guns who had the law on their side. They were company bosses who'd let you die in a mine collapse rather than lose profit.

Our folklore wasn't about imaginary creatures; it was a survival manual.

The irony? While communities were spinning tales about imaginary beasts, Black coal miners were dying in very real numbers from silicosis and unsafe working conditions. While stories spread about creatures in the Monongahela River, the actual horror was the Hawk's Nest Tunnel disaster that killed hundreds of Black workers in the 1930s. The true monsters wore suits and owned mines, not horns and scales.

When our grandmothers said "don't go into those woods after the dark," Mothman wasn't the concern. Slave catchers with bloodhounds were. Pinkerton agents hired by coal companies to intimidate Black workers were. Police who saw us as threats just for existing were.

When they told us to trust our gut feelings, to notice when things felt "wrong," they were teaching us how to stay alive in a world where the real monsters wore uniforms and carried legal authority to harm us.

Black Appalachian folklore is rich with stories about ancestors who guide us, about dreams that warn us, about intuition that saves lives. It's about resilience — how we made homes in these mountains, how we built communities, how we survived and thrived despite everything designed to break us. Those stories deserve to be dissected. They deserve their own deep dive, their own celebration.

But here's the thing: these cryptid stories have become part of West Virginia's cultural fabric, and Black West Virginians are woven into that



fabric, whether these stories started with us or not. We can examine these tales with clear eyes, acknowledge their problematic origins, have some fun with the lore, and still remember that the most monstrous things in Appalachian history were never the creatures in the shadows.

These cryptid tales are much more than entertainment. They're a window into what communities feared, valued, and couldn't explain. They show us how people made sense of a harsh environment, economic instability, and rapid social change.

The beauty of folklore is that it evolves. These stories belong to West Virginia now, and Black West Virginians are part of West Virginia. We can visit the Mothman statue, attend the festivals, tell our kids about Sheepsquatch, and enjoy the communal aspect of regional legends while also understanding

their origins and maintaining our own storytelling traditions.

I prefer the real stories, or at least the traditional ones that have been passed down for generations — a good old-fashioned Braxton County monster or Bat Boy. I love how the Mothman Museum brings people to Point Pleasant, and the cryptid festivals bring money to small towns. Not these newly invented "Bigfoot in West Virginia" tales that pop up trying to cash in on cryptid culture. Give me the old folklore with roots and history, not the manufactured monsters for tourism campaigns. One thing I know for sure: BIGFOOT IS NOT REAL!

But let's also remember: the most important monsters to fight have always been the human ones — inequality, injustice, and indifference to suffering. And those monsters? They're not mythological at all.





Erasing Black Appalachia: 60 Minutes Missed the Full Story in McDowell County

OPINION
FEBRUARY 25, 2026

By Dr. William H. Turner, PhD

Author: The Harlan Renaissance: Stories of Black Life in Appalachian Coal Camps (2021)

Cecilia Vega's report on poverty and safety net cuts in McDowell County, West Virginia, for *60 Minutes*, which aired on CBS Sunday, February 22, 2026, portrayed a wide-ranging story with impressive visuals, but it excluded any references to the

population of Black people that has lived, labored, suffered, and persevered in the Pocahontas coalfields since its founding in 1858. The majority-Black town of Keystone – through which the feature did a drive by – going back to the early 1900s, was one of the first communities in WV to establish substantial Black political autonomy, with Black residents holding positions on the city council and electing one of the state's first Black mayors. Nearby Gary and Welch, still have significant numbers of Black residents.

Having spent more than a half century mapping the lived experiences of Blacks in Appalachia (the title of a book I co-edited 40 years ago), I assume the omission of Blacks in the episode was deliberate, if only

because it was executed with relative attention to detail. Then too, the new management at CBS – and its parent company, Paramount Global – made it clear that they are committed to eliminating or significantly rolling back Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies, which impacts editorial content.

Poverty in the Appalachian coalfields is not a wholly White experience. Mainstream media portrayals of coal company towns (like the one I was raised in – Harlan County, Kentucky) are almost always carefully rendered around the historical exploitation of coal miners, environmental devastation, and generational hardship. Usually, such depictions of Appalachia, like Vega's, present a very distinctive optical and historical profile. Black coal miners, families, churches, neighborhoods, political operatives, medical and educational professionals, labor organizers, and Black children growing up amid the same scarcity simply fail to make the cut.

One can only imagine they were edited out for reasons of storyline consistency. Then too, in the spirit of VP

JD Vance's New York Times best-selling memoir *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016), poverty presented across racial and ethnic lines clutters the script. Race and social class exploitation muddies the plot, and acknowledging Black Appalachians would have required much deeper mining-down and a much broader analytical brush: for example, common sense informs us that where protracted poverty exists, being black makes one poorer than the average White person.

Ms. Vega's 60 Minutes episode operated on the premise that Black residents either did not exist in West Virginia's disadvantaged communities or existed so irrelevantly as to be undeserving of comment. In a curious way, it is refreshing to see poverty portrayed without the burden of historical accuracy. By obliterating Black West Virginians from the account, 60 Minutes replicated the perception of Black invisibility in the Appalachian narratives of hardship. The episode depicted a region already misunderstood and rendered it even more incomplete.

If CBS and *60 Minutes* revisit West Virginia and include its entire people – not just the ones who conform to a familiar and commercially viable image – it will also tell Black – and increasingly Hispanic (clearing my throat, Ms. Vega) – stories that will deepen, rather than dilute, the stories of Appalachia. However well-intentioned was CBS's latest "Appalachian poverty tour," the impact of once again presenting an all-White Appalachia is distorted, disingenuous, and a disservice to the public.





Free the Black Op-Ed: Why Black Voices in Mainstream Media Matter — and Why They Should Be Accessible to All

OPINION
FEBRUARY 24, 2026

By Crystal Good
Black By God – The West Virginian

For generations, Black West Virginians have written our way into the public record — not because mainstream media sought our voices, but because we demanded to be heard. From the pulpits to the op-ed pages of local newspapers, leaders like Rev. Matthew Watts,

Rev. Ronald English, and David Fryson have authored an estimated 300 opinion pieces between them, creating a living archive of Black thought leadership in Appalachia.

But here's the painful irony: many of these voices now sit locked behind paywalls, inaccessible to the very communities they were written to serve.

West Virginia has a 150-year history of Black-led newspapers. From *The Beacon Digest*, which closed in 2006, to *The McDowell Times* and *The Pioneer Press*, Black newspapers served as essential information infrastructure for our communities. They documented our achievements, advocated for our rights, and provided perspectives that mainstream papers often ignored or misrepresented.

When these papers closed, they left a void — not just in news coverage, but in community voice. Without Black reporters and Black-led newsrooms in West Virginia, the perspective gap widened. Today, precious few Black journalists are covering our communities from a Black perspective.

This is where op-eds became critical survival tools. If we couldn't own the newsroom, we could claim space on the opinion page.

The Double-Edged Sword of Mainstream Op-Eds

Writing for mainstream newspapers fulfilled a need. It gave Black voices a platform when Black newsrooms were disappearing. But it also created a complicated dynamic — one that I grapple with as the founder and publisher of *Black By God*.

Here's what people often don't understand: an op-ed is not the opinion of the paper. It's labeled as outside commentary precisely because it doesn't represent the editorial board's position. This distinction allows some newspapers to give voice to perspectives they might not otherwise platform — with little accountability or commitment to the communities those voices represent.

A newspaper can publish a powerful op-ed about racial justice on Tuesday and run coverage that undermines those same communities on Wednesday. The op-ed provides the appearance of inclusion without requiring institutional change.

And here's the part that hurts: *Black By God* has been desperate for opinion pieces. We need Black

voices writing about our communities, our challenges, our victories. But when I see talented Black writers publishing in mainstream papers — writers whose work would enrich our pages — I feel a pang of loss, even as I encourage them to write wherever they can.

The shift to digital subscriptions has created a new barrier. Opinion pieces that were once clipped, shared, and saved are now trapped behind paywalls. Rev. Matthew Watts' powerful reflections on prison policy and education reform. Rev. Ronald English's analysis of Juneteenth and civil rights. David Fryson's community advocacy. All hidden from the people who need them most, and that includes the record, the digital archive.

One that BBG is building. Through our partnership with Portico's News Preservation Pilot — a national initiative that permanently preserves local journalism — *Black By God's* reporting, photography, and opinion pieces are being archived forever in a secure digital vault. When you contribute to BBG, your voice doesn't just participate in today's conversation. It becomes part of history.

Scan the QR code below to read the rest of the story at BBG online.



Black By God's Folk Reporters are rebuilding rural civic coverage in West Virginia

FOLK REPORTERS
FEBRUARY 26, 2026

By Haeven Gibbons

This article was originally published by The Pivot Fund, an organization helping funders identify, invest in and support hyperlocal news outlets at scale, to create significant local, state and national impact.

Across West Virginia, public decisions are increasingly made without journalists or residents in the room. Legislative committees meet. Boards vote. Agencies set policies that shape daily life. In many rural communities, no one is consistently there to witness and document what happened, and that absence is an accountability problem.

Pivot grantee partner, *Black by God*, is addressing that gap through its Folk Reporters program, a community-powered initiative that trains residents to cover legislative sessions and public meetings. Inspired by City Bureau's Documenters Network, the program invites community members into the reporting process as civic witnesses.

"Witness" as civic infrastructure

For *Black by God* Publisher Crystal Good, the purpose is simple: witness.

"When citizens come into a room with a notepad or a recorder, it changes the room," she said. Noting that officials behave differently when someone is documenting, and decisions become harder to obscure.

Just as importantly, participation grows. When a neighbor covers a meeting and shares it, it signals possibility: "If she can go, I can go. If she can write, I can write," Good said.

In rural communities, where trust is often rooted in personal relationships, that visibility matters.

Closing rural coverage gaps

The program helps address barriers created by geography, limited broadband, long travel distances and inadequate public notice systems.

"There's so many things happening in our state that are often so terrible, and there are simply not enough people to write about them," said Folk Reporters Editor and Program Manager Ellie Heffernan. "I have tried to steer reporters towards beats that I know aren't really getting covered enough."

Recent Folk Reporter stories have covered proposals on maternity leave, abortion pill access, private school regulations, needle exchange program bans and a bill that could weaken child labor standards.

How the model works

Community members are recruited through open calls, newsletters and outreach. Participants complete training and verification before publishing. Heffernan provides live and recorded sessions, in-person workshops and hands-on editing.

"Every community has people who are maybe passionate about politics or interested in writing and telling these stories, and every community needs the infrastructure to teach those people and to mentor them," Heffernan said. Participants who complete training receive \$100-\$150 stipends for assignments.

The approach adapts the Documenters model to rural Appalachia. As Lynelle Herndon, Detroit Documenters coordinator at Outlier Media, explained: "Each city is different, so they're each going to face different challenges, regardless of whether it's rural or urban. But when it comes to the work...we're doing this for the people. We're trying to share information and just teach people about local government and help them get their power back and use their voices."

A practical blueprint for rural newsrooms

Folk Reporters offers a replicable model for rural publishers:

- Anchor coverage in public meetings
- Create clear training and verification pathways
- Invest in strong editing and mentorship
- Compensate contributors
- Collaborate instead of duplicating efforts

Sustaining and expanding the program statewide will require consistent funding for coordination, editing and meeting tracking. But Folk Reporters shows what becomes possible when communities become part of the newsroom: neighbors



Illustration: BBG, in the image of Rapper Shelem

become witnesses, and the public record becomes harder to erase.



Black Love & Marriage According to *The Advocate*

The newspaper only survived 12 years but thanks to the foresight of the publisher, an archive of Black West Virginian marriages and wedding practices exists 114 years later.

COMMUNITY & CULTURE
FEBRUARY 14, 2026

By Fresh and Fried Hard

By Fresh & Fried Hard Appalachia powered by Black By God – The West Virginian, which focuses on the foodways and lifestyle of

Black West Virginians as well as neighboring Central Appalachia from a historical perspective.

West Virginia's Black newspapers of old provided a slice of life for its readers. Publishing day was Thursday, and faithful readers couldn't be happier to receive a copy of their favorite newspaper. After scanning the front page filled with national and international stories, they'd go straight to the sections that held their interest. And those sections were made interesting because they were all about the reader.

The religion and social pages featured the names and faces of people they knew from school, church, lodges and the neighborhood. They saw their own names. *The Advocate* had

a "correspondence" section, where readers could send a sentence or two about their travels, or out-of-town guests, or hosting, or illness and death announcements. But there was one type of announcement that was guaranteed to make tongues wag as well as solicit congratulations: the love announcements. Engagements and weddings were big news.

Samuel Starks was the first African-American state librarian for West Virginia. In many ways, *The Advocate* under Stark's direction was much like an archive with his attention to the social lives of readers. While the newspaper only survived 12 years, it is an excellent guidepost for understanding Black West Virginia and her people in the early 1900s.

Since February is the month of love and Blackness, it is only fitting to time travel to bygone eras of Black West Virginia to sample news from *The Advocate* about engagements and weddings in news print. The few examples below are largely about people near Huntington. Maybe you'll see the names of your people. [Most of the images may be blurry due to the condition of the newspaper at the time of photographing for microfilm.]

As you can tell, *The Advocate* covered all of the love news fit to print, including secret marriages, license applications, and fancy display announcements. It is a valuable source of information about love and marriage in West Virginia's Black communities.

If you are a family history enthusiast, then you can read archived copies of *The Advocate* on the Library of Congress's website.

Leaving home last week, ostensibly to visit relatives at Columbus, O., Miss Stella, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. C. H. James, notified her parents and several friends, a few days after her departure, of her marriage to Robt. L. Foy, who left this city several months ago, after a residence of two or three years. Coming so soon after several other unexpected marriages, Miss James' nuptials strengthened the belief that our young people are infected with the marriage bacillus.

CALLOWAY-THURSTON NUPTIALS

On Wednesday morning, Oct. 6th, the home of Dr. P. H. Calloway, at Mt. Hope, was the scene of a beautiful wedding.

The contracting parties were Rev. S. A. Thurston, pastor of the 16th Street Baptist Church of Huntington and Mrs. Ada R. Calloway, former principal of the Glen Jean public school and daughter of Mrs. J. D. Rotan, of Fayetteville. The bride wore a traveling suit of steel colored panama with hat to match, and the groom wore the conventional black.

After the ceremony breakfast was served to relatives and friends. The out of town guests were Rev. C. N. Harris, J. A. Vlar, Miss Annie Rotan, Mrs. Alice Morse, of Fayetteville; Mrs. A. L. Peck and Maude Rotan, of Lanark and Mrs. Gertrude Thompson of Sun.

The bridal party left at 1:15 for Huntington where they will make their home.



\$100 Hidden in This WV Hip-Hop Drop — *It's Been Fun*

COMMUNITY & CULTURE
FEBRUARY 13, 2026

By Crystal Good

*Producer Myles Satterfield and crew
paying it forward*

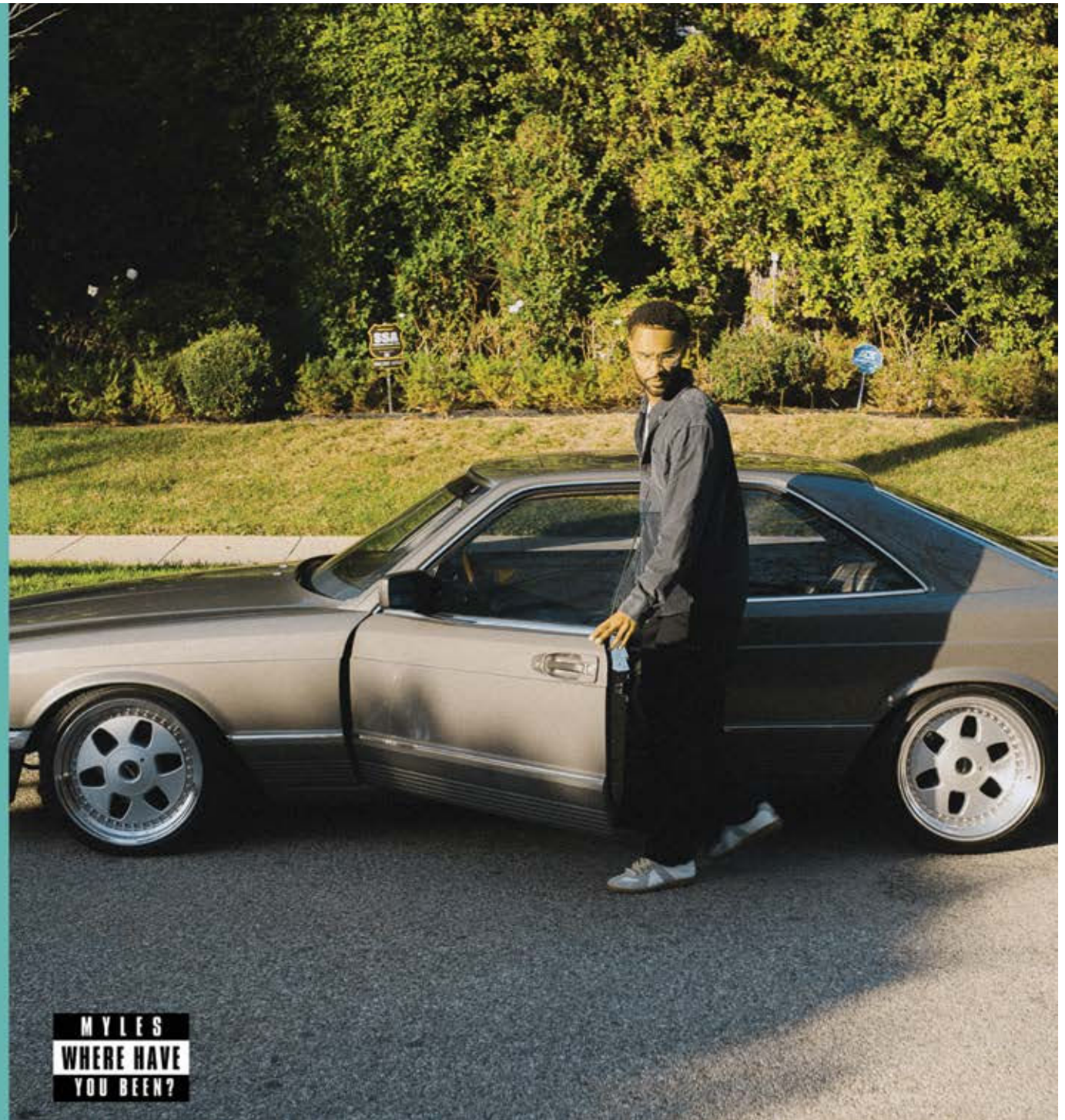
There's \$100 hidden somewhere inside *It's Been Fun*. The first person to find it and tap in wins.

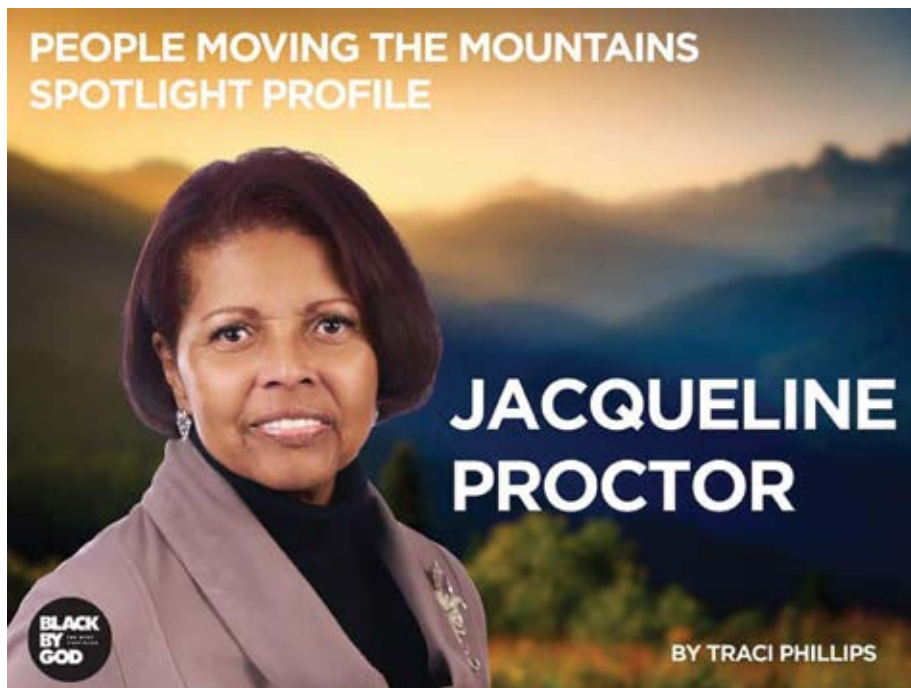
But that's not really the story.

The story is the people — tucked into each track where the Wild & Wonderful fun begins.

Producer Myles Satterfield — known professionally as Myles T — brings together four West Virginia producers he's been building with for most of his beat-making life, a journey that started when he was 10 years old.

Scan the QR code below to read the rest of the story at BBG online.





Black By God: People Moving the Mountains Spotlight Profile: Jacqueline Proctor

COMMUNITY & CULTURE
DECEMBER 24, 2025

By Traci Phillips
Black By God – The West Virginian

The Woman Ensuring West Virginia's Seniors Are Not Forgotten

In West Virginia, where the population is aging faster than most states and access to care can depend on geography, transportation, and income, the work of supporting seniors is both complex and urgent. At the center of that work is Jacqueline

Proctor, Deputy Commissioner of the West Virginia Bureau of Senior Services, a role she has held since 2014.

For more than a decade, Proctor has helped oversee the state's lead agency for programs serving older West Virginians. Her work ensures that seniors across all 55 counties have access to information, in-home support, and community-based services that allow them to age with dignity. Quietly and consistently, she has helped shape how West Virginia cares for its elders — and how government shows up for people most at risk of being overlooked.

Building Systems That Serve People

As deputy commissioner, Proctor manages programs designed to support seniors and others

served by the bureau, working in coordination with state and federal partners. The bureau's mission is clear: to be the premier advocate for in-home and community-based services in West Virginia. Under Proctor's leadership, that mission has remained centered on access, coordination, and accountability.

Her approach reflects a deep understanding that aging policy is not abstract — it directly affects whether people can remain in their homes, stay connected to their communities, and receive the care they need. Proctor's work bridges administration and advocacy, ensuring that programs are both functional and responsive to real-world conditions in rural and urban communities alike.

That systems-level understanding is informed by a diverse professional background. Proctor is a graduate of the University of Maryland, where she earned a bachelor's degree in radio, television, and film. She later completed the Developing Managers Program at Simmons Graduate School of Management and attended New York University, strengthening her leadership and organizational expertise.

A Career Rooted in Communication and Culture

Before her current role, Proctor served as Deputy Commissioner and Director of Communications for the West Virginia Division of Tourism, where she led public relations strategies and worked with journalists across the country to communicate the "Wild and Wonderful" brand of West Virginia.

She also served as Director of Communications for Governor Earl Ray Tomblin, joining the governor's senior staff and contributing to statewide messaging and public engagement. Earlier in her career, Proctor held leadership roles with the West Virginia Division of Culture and History, where she oversaw communications and marketing, and as General Manager of the Huntington Symphony Orchestra, managing business, financial, and production operations.

Her professional journey began in public broadcasting and network television, where she rose to become Director of Operations and New Media for Disney/ABC, followed by work as a communications consultant to executives focused on long-term strategy.

Leadership Beyond the Office

Proctor's impact extends well beyond government roles. She has consistently sought opportunities for community engagement, serving on the Board of Connectors for Create Huntington, where she hosted weekly "Chat and Chews" gatherings to support neighborhood-based initiatives.

Scan the QR code below to read the rest of the story at BBG online.





The Policy Architect Putting Black Appalachia Back on America's Environmental Justice Map

COMMUNITY & CULTURE
NOVEMBER 21, 2025

By Traci Phillips
Black By God – The West Virginian

Black Appalachia is almost never included in America's environmental justice story. Quenton King is changing that.

Across the country, national conversations highlight crises like Flint's water, Louisiana's Cancer Alley, and South L.A.'s pollution

corridors. These communities deserve attention. But there is another truth America continually overlooks: Black rural communities – especially in Appalachia – face the same environmental burdens without the national spotlight, resources, or investment.

In the heart of West Virginia, Quenton King is quietly rewriting that narrative. His work challenges the country to widen its view of where environmental injustice exists – and who deserves protection, resources, and representation in the fight for clean air, clean water, and climate resilience.

A National Leader Rooted in Local Truths

Born and raised in West Virginia's Eastern Panhandle, King represents

a new generation of Black rural leadership redefining what's possible in regions historically excluded from national policy tables.

Today, he serves as President of the West Virginia Environmental Council (WVEC) – a statewide coalition championing environmental protections in a climate where those protections are often under attack. His leadership includes shaping legislative strategy, educating residents, and pushing for accountability on issues that directly affect people's health and quality of life.

But King's impact stretches far beyond state borders.

As a Federal Legislative Specialist with Appalachian Voices, he navigates national climate dollars, federal agency processes, and complex environmental regulations. He helps rural towns – including Black, low-income, and historically excluded communities – understand how to access federal funds that could transform their futures.

In many communities, this type of "policy translation" is the difference between progress and continued neglect. King is one of the few ensuring that Appalachia – especially Black Appalachia – is not left behind in the nation's energy transition.

Expanding America's Environmental Justice Lens

Environmental justice issues in West Virginia are not abstract. They are lived realities: polluted streams, weakened regulations, extractive industries, and contaminated water systems. Yet these stories rarely

reach the national conversation.

King forces the country to pay attention.

He points out that rural Black communities experience the same environmental harms commonly associated with major EJ hotspots – but without philanthropic backing, national media coverage, or political urgency. The lack of recognition translates into a lack of investment.

Through his work as a reporter for Mountain State Spotlight, King documents these issues with data, community voices, and policy analysis. His stories connect the dots between:

- health disparities
- rural poverty
- environmental risk
- federal disinvestment
- and political neglect

His message is clear: If America wants an equitable climate future, rural Black communities must be at the center of the conversation – not an afterthought.

Scan the QR code below to read the rest of the story at BBG online.



Read our Prints!

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People Power Starts Local

Together we can build a stronger
future for our communities.

Organize with us at WVCAG.org



FARMER DONNIE HAIRSTON
MCDOWELL COUNTY, WV.





Some places feel like home as soon as you arrive. Here, you'll find exceptional dining experiences, comfortable lodging, diverse shops, ample attractions, and exciting recreational activities. Top it off with a touch of old-fashioned Southern hospitality, and it's easy to see how H-Town is redefining the traditional getaway.



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