

# The Oklahoma Eagle

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LOCAL & STATE  
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Resettlement Inequities**  
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NATION  
**Black Women and the  
March on Washington**  
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BLACK WOMEN, MARCH ON WASHINGTON  
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PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

A delegation of dozens of TPS supporters arrived from Tulsa in the early morning hours at the small meeting room at the Oliver Hodge Building in Oklahoma City to appeal on behalf of TPS

OSBE RENEWS ACCREDITATION from A1

The Oklahoma State Board of Education (OSBE) renewed Tulsa schools’ educational accreditation for the current academic year in a meeting on Aug. 24 in Oklahoma City. The decision followed an impassioned campaign launched by Tulsa Public Schools Board members and a groundswell of public support from Tulsa schools’ patrons for TPS to maintain its accreditation.

During the board meeting, representatives from the state and the Tulsa school district acknowledged that TPS, the largest school district in the state, has significant work to do to improve student learning and pledged to work in partnership to accomplish their goals.

While granting accreditation, the OSBE also imposed a rigorous action plan on the Tulsa school district to achieve “dramatic change” within the current academic year. The move came after State Superintendent for Public Instruction Ryan Walters insisted that TPS must make some changes.

A weeks-long push from Tulsa-based school officials, teachers, parents, and other supporters for OSBE to approve TPS’s accreditation continued into that day’s meeting. A delegation of dozens of TPS supporters arrived from Tulsa in the early morning hours at the small meeting room at the Oliver Hodge Building in Oklahoma City to appeal on behalf of TPS.

During the OSBE meeting, north Tulsa’s school board member Jennettie Marshall led the Tulsa delegation’s initial remarks by appealing to the state board to “show grace and give us the opportunity to turn things around.” While acknowledging the school district’s shortcomings, she lauded the new interim superintendent, Dr. Ebony Johnson, for a

While granting accreditation, the OSBE also imposed a rigorous action plan on the Tulsa school district to achieve “dramatic change” within the current academic year.

“remarkable record of accomplishment” at Tulsa Public Schools, acting as “a catalyst for change.”

Marshall told the board that Johnson was committed to full transparency and that “positive things are on the horizon,” likening Tulsa’s effort to a district “under construction.”

Tulsa school board member E’Lena Ashley and Board President Stacey Woolley supported Marshall. Ashley had earlier called for Superintendent

Gist’s resignation, which was tendered on Aug. 22. Ashley characterized the school system as on a “10-year downward trajectory for our students.” Yet, she agreed with Marshall’s request that the local school board could reverse the trend. Woolley defended Tulsa schools’ strategic plan and goals but pledged, “I want to accelerate that, and everyone in our district wants that.”

In remarks to the board, St. Rep. Regina Goodwin, Dist. 73, said she thinks it is completely unreasonable to simply demand progress in a matter of months with veiled threats.

“When you talk about Black and brown children in Tulsa, Oklahoma, there are issues that go on in larger cities that have to be addressed. You don’t just say, ‘You better perform better in three or four months!’ What kind of plan is that?”

Goodwin is a TPS alum and fervent advocate for the Tulsa public school system.

Walters presses for changes

Superintendent Walters doubled down in remarks throughout the meeting

OSBE RENEWS ACCREDITATION cont. A5





PHOTO THE OKLAHOMA EAGLE

# Gist Announced On Aug. 22 That She Was Stepping Down

By GARY LEE

## TPS LEADERSHIP CHANGE from AI

Tulsa, Okla. On Wednesday August 23, the Tulsa Public Schools Board unanimously approved Dr. Deborah Gist’s resignation as TPS superintendent. Following the vote, a crowd of parents, teachers, and TPS supporters, packed in the Selman Room at the Education Service Center, honored Gist with a standing ovation.

Gist announced Tuesday afternoon that she was stepping down after eight years at the helm of Oklahoma’s largest public school system. Her decision came less than two days before Thursday’s highly anticipated Oklahoma State Board of Education meeting in which members were scheduled to discuss the possible censure of TPS and the option of the state taking over the administration of Tulsa’s school system. By taking this action, Gist said she hoped to stave off threats of a state takeover.

“I am confident that my departure will help to keep our democratically-elected leadership and our team in charge of our schools–this week and in the future,” Gist said in a passionate statement released Tuesday afternoon. “So, I am stepping away.” Gist’s term as TPS administrator ends on Sept. 15.

**Johnson voted interim superintendent**

During Wednesday night’s meeting, the TPS board also approved the appointment of Dr. Ebony Johnson as interim superintendent of TPS. Johnson is a veritable institution in Tulsa schools. A native Tulsan, she attended Tulsa schools throughout her primary education and graduated from McLain High School in 1994. She started teaching at Monroe in 1999 and was later a TPS teacher, coach, and assistant principal. She became principal at Academy Central Elementary School, McLain High School, and Central High School. Johnson has been

“I am confident that my departure will help to keep our democratically-elected leadership and our team in charge of our schools–this week and in the future.”

- DR. DEBORAH GIST, former Tulsa Public Schools superintendent.

a TPS senior administrator since 2017. She is the second African American, following Dr. La Verne Ford Wimberly, to assume the role of interim chief administrator of TPS. In addition, John William Thompson, who is African American, served as TPS head administrator in the 1990s.

Board Vice President John Croissant gave Johnson a ringing endorsement during the meeting. “All I’ve seen is someone who has taken to heart what we’re doing as a board and district to change things for our students,” he said of Johnson. “We have to do it, and we can’t make excuses. Dr. Johnson understands that from the perspective of being a student, a mother, a parent, a teacher, an administrator, and, most importantly, a Tulsan.

“We must support her as we move forward and do what’s best for our kids.”

Emotions ran high at the TPS board meeting, a stark departure from the dry tone of most of their sessions. TPS Board Chair Stacey Woolley, who introduced the motion to accept Gist’s resignation, fought back tears several times during her remarks. Even in calling for a vote, she expressed regret about Gist’s departure. “This is not what I wish for,” she said. “This is not what I hear from the community.” The crowd also exuded the enthusiasm of the moment, frequently bursting into applause, particularly when speakers urged them to stand up for the independence of Tulsa schools.

School Board member Dr. Jennettie Marshall echoed Woolley’s sentiments. “We did not want to come to this juncture in the road like this,” she told the meeting room. Marshall represents District 3, which encompasses much of north Tulsa.

Gist also appeared heavy with emotions during the meeting. Earlier, she said she was stepping down “with a broken heart.” She added, “Making the decision to leave Team Tulsa is the hardest thing I have ever done.”

Board Member Jerry Griffin took the microphone to remind the crowd that not

all Tulsans are in line with the wide-scale support of Gist. “I see that not everyone is clapping,” he said. “So not everyone agrees.” Griffin is the sole board member who did not vote for Johnson as interim administrator. He said the appointment should not be made without a formal search.

Gist’s resignation comes on the heels of a barrage of attacks that State Superintendent for Public Instruction Ryan Walters has waged against her. Walters has blasted TPS for missteps and poor performance in a series of public statements. Directing much of his ire against Gist, he has called for her ouster and said that her departure is a condition for the reforms of TPS he deems necessary. Walters has said that all options are open, including not accrediting it or allowing the Oklahoma State Department of Education to take it over, similar to the efforts currently underway with the country’s eighth-largest public school system, the Houston Independent School District.

**“The truth will go forward.”**

Several board members used Gist’s dramatic departure as a rallying cry to fight for the administration of TPS to remain in the hands of local elected education officials and out of the hands of the state.

Marshall led the way. “I encourage you all to drive that 103 miles early in the morning and camp out if you have to in order to get in the room if able and let your presence be known,” Marshall said. “The truth will go forward, and each of us can stand tomorrow as drum majors of justice. That’s what it takes – a concerted effort of all people, standing on truth, to ensure that our district remains under the control of local elected officials.

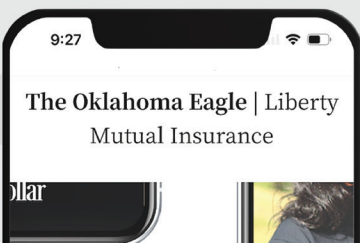
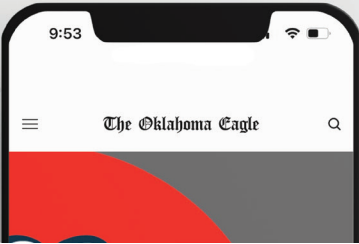
“Every one of you has been called out for a purpose tomorrow. ... Let the Oklahoma State Department of Education know that we will not accept any Trojan horses in our

TPS LEADERSHIP CHANGE cont. A3

The Oklahoma Eagle

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To amplify our core value of equity, through journalism and editorial” is the cornerstone of our continued success.





# Ralph Waldo Ellison: Novelist, Essayist

By GORDON O. TAYLOR, THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF OKLAHOMA HISTORY AND CULTURE



Born to Lewis Alfred and Ida Millsap Ellison on March 1, 1913, in Oklahoma City, then along with Kansas City a hotbed of musical creativity, Ralph Ellison showed at an early age the interest in jazz and other modern art forms that would be reflected throughout his life in literature. He attended the Frederick Douglass School in Oklahoma City, going on to the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama in 1933, pursuing studies in music but also encountering the work of T. S. Eliot and other Modernist writers.

Chafed by racial conditions in the Deep South, and by what he found to be the conservatism of Tuskegee, Ellison left in 1936, without a degree, for New York City. He was drawn there by cultural legacies of the Harlem Renaissance and by opportunities to meet such authors as Langston Hughes and Richard Wright. After an interval in Ohio due to the death of his mother in 1937 (a period during which he read widely and intensively), he returned to New York in 1938 with renewed determination to pursue a literary career. He obtained employment with the Federal Writers’ Project, which sustained him from 1938 to 1942 as he worked to establish himself as a writer. Having sailed in the Merchant Marine from 1943 to 1945, an alternative to service in the segregated U.S. military, Ellison married Fanny McConnell in 1946 (his second wife, an earlier marriage having ended

unhappily), and resettled in New York.

His stories, essays, and articles from the later 1930s and early 1940s were partially rooted in materials stemming from his interviews with people in Harlem for the Writers’ Project. So too was his work toward a novel, *Invisible Man* (1952), which announced him as a major figure in American letters and won the National Book Award for 1953. This book also took shape, however, in counterpoint to Wright’s earlier *Native Son* (1940), which seemed to Ellison too fatalistically absolute in its determinism, and insufficiently representative of African American experience.

Response to *Invisible Man* was mixed; some black critics found the novel lacking in radical political perspectives on problems of race in America. But the book continues to be considered by many the first great novel by an African American writer that both fulfills and transcends its racial theme. It remains a landmark achievement in American, as well as African American, literary tradition, and in the broad movement of modernism. It may also be seen as a precursor to the postmodern, and it remains a highly “contemporary” text.

Ellison went on to publish *Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986), two influential volumes of essays on literature, music, and American culture. For years there were rumors of another novel in progress, about which little was

publicly revealed. Upon his death in New York on April 16, 1994, an unfinished manuscript was found and, with collaborative assistance, published in 1999 as *Juneteenth*. Its appearance was an important literary event, even if the first-person narrative of the unnamed protagonist in *Invisible Man* will always be the touchstone and cornerstone to his life’s work.

Named for Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ellison reflects throughout his work a lifelong engagement with Emersonian issues of personal and cultural autonomy and self-reliance, and with the problems and prospects of American—and African American—consciousness and identity. Such engagement could be argumentative, even adversarial, with respect to the unfulfillment or betrayal of American ideals (witness the destructive role of a character called “Emerson” in *Invisible Man*). The “double consciousness” famously posited by W. E. B. DuBois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) is both amplified and intensified, rather than resolved, in Ellison’s writing. But like the narrator of *Invisible Man*—particularly as epilogue reconnects with prologue “underground,” launching anew the cycle of retelling and rereading a classic American tale of self-discovery—Ellison’s example, now as always nourished by his Oklahoma roots, promises powerfully to “emerge.”

**THE OKLAHOMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY** is an agency of the government of Oklahoma dedicated to promotion and preservation of Oklahoma’s history and its people by collecting, interpreting, and disseminating knowledge and artifacts of Oklahoma.

**TAFT INDUSTRIAL SCHOOL**, 4071, Frederick S. Barde Collection, OHS.

## Featured Last Week



Tulsans Unite To Oppose Bid For Takeover Of TPS



TAKEOVER! What It Means For Tulsa Public Schools



State Board Poised To Take Over Tulsa Public Schools

## The Oklahoma Eagle

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# Several state board members acknowledged receiving numerous emails from Tulsa school patrons objecting to any action against TPS accreditation.

OSBE RENEWS ACCREDITATION *from A2*

that any concessions on accreditation would be short-term unless “significant changes are made within this year.” Walters also pressed OSBE to add a new deficiency to Tulsa’s record, bolstered by a memorandum from the Board’s general counsel, Bryan Cleveland. In that memo to the Board dated the same day as the meeting, Cleveland alleged that there were “inadequate financial disclosures to local [TPS] board members.”

Cleveland linked this lack of reporting “expenditure detail” to the 2022 embezzlement of school funds. He said the TPS school board had “no comprehensive plan to fix it” because the local Board had not been provided the “information that would allow for local board oversight of TPS.” He also claimed this “internal controls” shortcoming had been cited in three consecutive TPS independent audits. TPS Chief Financial and Operations Officer Jorge Robles has previously denied this claim.

State board member Donald Burdick, a Tulsan, responded positively to the Tulsa board members, saying this was a “wonderful opportunity to become partners” and create new “aspirational goals.” But Burdick added the new deficiency to the Board’s findings. Other state board members reacted favorably to the Tulsa board members’ remarks. Still, they told Burdick any accreditation motion he may make would require TPS to provide monthly updates to the state board.

Several state board members acknowledged receiving numerous emails from Tulsa school patrons objecting to any action against TPS accreditation and potential loss of local control. Burdick summarized these views by saying, “There has been pain on all sides.”

Board member Katie Quebedeaux also asked

03

OSBE accepted the finding of “Accreditation with Deficiencies.” then approved a series of new requirements for the Tulsa Public Schools system.

Woolley whether the local board ‘was willing to have tough conversations and make hard decisions.’

In an apparent reference to TPS Superintendent Deborah Gist’s resignation, announced on Aug. 22, Woolley responded positively.

“Absolutely,” she said. “The City of Tulsa would tell you they saw that demonstrated fully over the last few weeks.”

**Formal action**

After the dialogue, Superintendent Walters pressed the TPS Board for action. He told board members that he wanted to keep the Tulsa school board “on a very, very short rope.” Walters added he expected to see “processes and results in three to four months, certainly less than a year.”

Cleveland told the TPS Board it was incumbent on them to act based on the findings of three deficiencies. They included the previously reported deficiencies - lack of internal controls and late reporting and a finding of “lack of financial transparency to local board members.”

OSBE accepted the finding of “Accreditation with Deficiencies.” Burdick then read from a pre-prepared written motion that imposed the following requirements on the Tulsa Public Schools system:

- Provide a professional development program to train teachers on the science of reading.
- Develop a corrective action plan for all schools scoring “F” on the Oklahoma School Report Card.
- Publish and execute new internal controls to prevent embezzlement and provide more financial details to the local Board.

OSBE passed the motion unanimously. TPS

will commence monthly in-person reports to the state Board on the status of the requirements.

Tulsa Public Schools officials reacted positively to the OSBE’s decision. “We understand the urgency to address challenges in our educational outcomes,” TPS said in a written statement following the state Board meeting. “Today, the State Board of Education committed to working with our locally-elected school board to accelerate progress for students and ensure transparency in district operations. This work is underway in earnest, and we are focused on strengthening our efforts and plans in service of our students’ achievement.”

Members of the Tulsa community, who had rallied hard for TPS to maintain its accreditation, also reacted positively to the state Board’s decision.

“We are relieved that Tulsa Public Schools has been accredited, that a state takeover of the district has been averted, and that Tulsans will retain local control of the district,” Michael DuPont, director of Tulsa Grantmaking for the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies said in a statement. DuPont has been instrumental in mobilizing support for TPS.

“But this outcome does not wipe away the damage that has been done—the stress and anxiety experienced by our students, families and teachers, the disruption to the beginning of the school year, and now the loss of our superintendent,” DuPont added. “Now that this difficult chapter is behind us, we remain hopeful that we can move on from the distractions and get back to the important work—together as a community—of educating our kids and preparing them for the future. We appreciate that Dr. Ebony Johnson will serve as interim superintendent, and we stand ready to partner with her as she leads the way forward.”

# Black And Native Tulsans Praised Gist

TPS LEADERSHIP CHANGE *from A3*

camp.”

“I hope everyone in this room who doesn’t support this action will be present to talk to the man who demanded it,” TPS Board chair Woolley told the crowd.

Gist, appointed superintendent in 2015, has weathered several significant challenges during her tenure. Many teachers have left the Tulsa school system, citing poor pay and constant attacks from conservative political figures. The number of students attending TPS schools has also declined from 41,000 in 2015 to the current level of 34,000. Gist has also faced constant criticism from Gov. Kevin Stitt and other state officials. But Gist’s biggest hurdle was steering Tulsa schools through the three years of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Black and Native leaders praise Gist**

After Gist announced her departure, many of Tulsa’s African American and Native American leaders praised her leadership.

“I know she has always strived to put the children of Tulsa Public Schools first,” said St. Rep. Monroe Nichols, Dist. 72, andl a candidate



for Tulsa mayor. “Her decision to resign today in an effort to protect students amid unprecedented threats to their future is further evidence of her commitment to the Tulsa community.”

Chuck Hoskins, principal chief of the Cherokee Nation, went further.

“I continue to be frustrated by the attacks on Tulsa Public Schools,” he said. “I am deeply disappointed that this has led to the resignation of a great public servant and education leader in our state. Dr. Gist has shown courage in the face of unprecedented and unjustified political attacks on

the most extensive school system in our state. I am thankful for our partnership during her tenure to prioritize the needs of Native students and her leadership through the difficult days of the COVID-19 pandemic.”

In her resignation letter, Gist paid homage to the roles and history that Blacks and indigenous people have in Tulsa.

“Tulsa is a community on the reservations of the Cherokee, Muscogee, and Osage Nations and is home to descendants of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre,” she said. “Our collective history of unrepaid harms is shameful, and depriving Tulsans of their collective voice over their schools would only add insult to injury.”

Finally, Gist expressed a deep commitment to Tulsa. Making the decision to leave Team Tulsa is the hardest thing I have ever done. It has been a dream come true to serve and lead this team in the schools where I grew up, the schools that shaped me into an educator, a leader, and a human being. I’m proud of what we’ve done here, together, in the hometown that I love. My confidence in this team, in our plans and our work, and in the passion that I see throughout our schools is immeasurable. Even in the most challenging times that we have been through together, I have loved every minute of being part of this extraordinary team.”



# Education Watch: OPEN MEETING CASE AGAINST BILLINGS SCHOOL BOARD DISMISSED

By Yasmeen Saadi  
and Jennifer Palmer  
Oklahoma Watch

OPEN MEETINGS CASE *from AI*



PHOTO OKLAHOMA WATCH

The assistant district attorney in Noble County dismissed charges against four school board members in Billings accused of violating the Open Meeting Act. The members were arrested in November and accused of meeting multiple times outside of public meetings, including in June 2022 to hire a new superintendent, according to a court affidavit.

Assistant District Attorney Christopher Landes said he dropped the case because he determined the members did not “willfully violate” the act. “Willful violation” is a term used in the statute. He said it looked like the members attempted to follow a provision in the law that allows for the continuation of a regularly scheduled meeting.

“It was probably not the best way (for the board members) to handle it, but I believe there was an attempt to handle it in what they felt was the right way,” Landes said.

All elected and appointed school board members are required to attend training, including on open meeting laws. Landes said the members agreed to do an additional training session on the Open Meeting Act. The attorney for the defendants, Clint Claypole, declined to comment.

The Open Meeting Act exists to encourage an informed citizenry and to ensure the public understands the problems and processes of the government. Under the act, a majority

of a public body, or quorum, can’t discuss public business outside of a public meeting. Violating the Open Meeting Act is a misdemeanor punishable by up to one year in jail and a fine of \$500. It’s rarely enforced with criminal charges.

Willful violation is not defined in state law. However, Oklahoma courts have said a public official does not need to show bad faith or harmful intent to be prosecuted; blatant or deliberate disregard of the law is enough. A willful violation includes public meeting notices that are vague or misleading.

Transparency experts said the Open Meeting Act is not strictly enforced and there aren’t strict provisions in how the law is written.

Oklahoma State University professor Joey Senat researches freedom of information laws. Senat said it falls on district attorneys to enforce the law.

“The public relies on the district attorneys to enforce this statute as a criminal statute,” Senat said. “And I consider violations of the statute to be a form of public corruption. I mean, the statute exists for a reason, it’s an important reason. It exists so the public can see the decision-making process of its elected officials.”

# ‘Intentional Collaboration’: Growth a top topic at Edmond’s State of the City By Joe Tomlinson NonDoc

INTENTIONAL COLLABORATION *from AI*

Mayor Darrell Davis said the city needs to prepare for incoming growth over the next 20 to 30 years, highlighting planned improvements and ideas to accommodate current and new residents during the 2023 State of the City today at the Edmond Conference Center.

Early in his remarks, Davis, who has served as the city’s mayor since 2019 and first served on a city board in 1996, said he looked in the mirror recently and asked, “Why are you still doing it?”

“Well, because I want to help the next generation stay and be a part of Edmond — to live, work and play, raise a family, just like many of us have in Edmond,” Davis said.

Among a number of topics Davis addressed, he spoke to the estimated increase in population Oklahoma’s fifth-largest city is expected to incur over the next few decades and has experienced since its founding.

“We’ve been growing since the land run,” Davis said. “I’m sorry. Some of you might not like to hear this, but the business people here are probably going to love it — we’re going to continue to grow.”

Davis called the city’s ongoing challenges a “positive opportunity,” stating that community members need to work together to find solutions.

“So, let’s look into the future. I don’t have a crystal ball, but we’re going to look — how are we going to meet the expectations of our community? I’m challenging you today that we need to have intentional collaboration,” Davis said. “That is the theme of the day — intentional collaboration.”

**‘We’re changing the landscape for downtown’**

Among other topics discussed at Thursday’s luncheon, hosted by the Edmond Chamber of Commerce, Davis spoke to the city’s housing assessment completed by Development Strategies. The study estimated that Edmond needs to add 8,900 homes over the next 10 years to meet the community’s housing demand.

“When I moved here 36 years ago, I was a GS-9 at Tinker Air Force Base,” Davis said. “I don’t think a GS-9 at Tinker Air Force Base can afford to live out here. I had three kids. The salary’s not enough.”

With construction of the city center complex — estimated to be completed in March 2025 — Davis said city leadership is planning for growth in downtown.

“We’re changing the landscape of downtown,” Davis said. “We’re creating the opportunity for economic growth in Edmond.”

Davis said the Edmond Mobility Commission is seeking to make downtown more walkable and safer for pedestrians.

“Sometimes it’s difficult just to walk downtown. We’re looking at how can we improve that,” Davis said. “You all travel on summer vacations. I had someone tell me, ‘We didn’t take our car. We didn’t use our car, we used the moped, we used the bikes.’ Well, why can’t we have those same opportunities here?”

As Edmond’s population increases and the city’s infrastructure needs increase, Davis said city leaders are searching for different revenue sources.

“Over the last 20 years, we’ve spent nearly 50 percent of that money generated in our two [Capital Improvement Projects] funds for our transportation needs — roughly \$146 million of the \$327 million,” Davis said. “This is just one example that clearly shows that our needs are exceeding our funding.”

In recent months, members of the Edmond City Council have floated an election to authorize general obligation bonds to fund road improvement projects.

“Every year during the budget — and I’ve been up on City Council since 2011, and we’ve said it every time — we just can’t continue to live off of our sales tax and use tax,” Davis said. “I’m telling you today, it’s time for us to determine a solution.”

Edmond’s other City Council members attended Thursday’s annual event and listened to Davis’ remarks.

“I thought the mayor did a wonderful job today with his State of the City address. We have so very much to be proud of in Edmond,” Christin Mugg, Ward 3 Edmond City Council member, said after the speech. “He did point out that our current sources of revenue — primarily sales and use tax — are not sufficient to meet the needs of the city, especially considering the anticipated population growth.”

Mugg said discussions need to intensify with residents and stakeholders regarding “various options to increase revenue.”

“Some examples are development impact fees, general obligation bonds, additional sales tax and potentially others,” Mugg said. “We can also meet some of the city’s needs through our partnerships. For example, the metropolitan library system, the Edmond Public Schools, UCO and others.”

Edmond Police Chief J.D. Younger, who also attended Thursday’s event, praised the working relationship he and other city leaders have in keeping public safety paramount.

“I highly value the collaboration between elected city officials, city staff, and community stakeholders to keep Edmond a great place to live, work and visit. Edmond is definitely a growing community with high expectations for safe neighborhoods and quality-of-life activities,” Younger said.

Younger said continuing those partnerships with residents and stakeholders will be key to maintaining a safe community as the population increases.

“While staffing, technology, and innovation will be key components in maintaining Edmond’s safe environment, the partnership between Edmond’s residents and their public servants is the foundation for achieving any public safety goals. I am excited to see all that Edmond’s residents and City staff, including the Police Department staff, accomplish in the coming years,” Younger said.

During his speech, Davis said he wants Edmondites to “get out of their comfort zone.”

“We want to receive community input. We want to understand who wants to get out of their comfort zone and collaborate for the betterment of the community,” Davis said.

In a statement, Ward 1 Edmond City Council member Tom Robins said all sides of the city need to come together as the city grows.

“I agree that we need to break down silos and have collaboration among all our stakeholders,” Robins said. “We need to then give Edmond voters the opportunity to vote up or down dedicated funding to support the best transportation, education, recreation, public safety and public services for its residents.”

Toward the end of his remarks, Davis said he wants to reach beyond the status quo.

“I don’t have the answers today, but I know that this council and staff are willing to sit in a room with stakeholders to address our needs. If we don’t do that, you’re telling me that you’re satisfied with the status quo,” Davis said. “I’m not.”

(Update: This article was updated at 6:19 p.m. to include a statement from Edmond Police Chief J.D. Younger. This article was updated again at 6:34 p.m. to include a statement from Ward 1 Edmond City Council member Tom Robins.)



# AFGHAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT

## Highlights Inequities for All Vulnerable Oklahomans

AFGHAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT *from A1*

Oklahoma was preparing for 1,800 Afghan refugees. Jeff and Christine Poyner were eager to help. The Yukon residents saw news reports stating that nonprofits leading the resettlement needed volunteers and wasted no time finding out how they could contribute.

The moment they contacted Catholic Charities Archdiocese of Oklahoma City and agreed to help an Afghan family of 11 locate housing, access healthcare, obtain driver’s licenses and enroll their children in school, they didn’t know they’d signed up for a front-row seat to a display of systemic inequities in Oklahoma that plague vulnerable, low-income families across the state. It was a display they would be called on to testify about two years later during a review of the resettlement operation by state lawmakers.

“When we first met the Mamond family at the airport, they’re a large family, so we broke them up into two cars and took them to the hotel,” Poyner said. “We noticed they didn’t have very many belongings. Come to find out their luggage was misplaced in Qatar, one of the countries on the way here.”

The first order of business was to take the family to Walmart and buy them clothes. Each family member got two outfits, underwear and socks. They asked where hijabs and the rest of the traditional Islamic clothing items were in the sea of colorful racks before them.

As sponsors, or Oklahomans who volunteered to help one or more Afghan families find a home and furnish it on their own dime or with donations, the Poyners chose to walk along the path of a revelatory journey that encompassed much more frustration, heartache and selflessness than what Catholic Charities first led them to expect.

After three months of living in a hotel with hundreds of other Afghan refugees, the Mamonds, with the help of the Poyners and pandemic rent and utility assistance, moved into a three-bedroom apartment in northwest Oklahoma City’s Lakewood Estates. That day, the Mamonds welcomed a baby girl to their family, which they’d been expecting since before they left home. Instantly, accessing healthcare became a top priority.

Their Catholic Charities caseworkers helped the refugee family enroll in Sooner Care, but getting them to the hospital and the following doctor’s appointments was up to the Poyners.

“Early on there were just a lot of medical appointments,” Poyner said, explaining that beyond maternity care, most of the family needed lots of dental work. “It was nonstop. We were back and forth to the dentist.”

By this time, the Poyners had already agreed to sponsor another family of 11, the Khpalwaks, who were related to the Mamonds by marriage and couldn’t get their SNAP benefits activated. A lack of Social Security Cards and accurate identification documents for family members made it impossible for them to qualify, Poyner said.

Between doctor’s appointments, trips to food banks and social welfare and nonprofit offices, it wasn’t long before the Poyners realized that those capable of driving in each family would need to get their driver’s licenses. Not only would they be able to get themselves around the city, but they would have state identification cards that facilitate the attainment of some forms of government assistance. With that need, another challenge arose: driver’s license tests in Oklahoma can only be taken in English, which most Afghan refugees don’t speak well enough to converse, much less take a written exam.

At the same time, the families were hoping to enroll their children in school, which was also complicated by identification document issues and the fact that the leases for the apartments were under Catholic Charities. The Mamonds, Khpalwaks and the 13 other families that eventually landed at Lakewood Estates didn’t technically have their own residences, so couldn’t prove they lived in the school district.

These and other issues came to light during a review of the resettlement operation by Sen. Carri Hicks and lawmakers in the Senate Veterans and Military Affairs Committee Aug. 15. The aim of the interim study was to find out where the process of welcoming Afghans into Oklahoma was a success, where it failed, and what can be done to ensure future refugees who land here experience a smoother transition into American life.

More than 50 people consisting of faith group members, sponsors of Afghan families and other stakeholders crowded the committee meeting room to listen to the presentation on resettlement efforts by leadership of Catholic Charities of Oklahoma City,

The Spero Project and the Council on American-Islamic Relations Oklahoma Chapter. Two volunteer sponsors — the Poyners and Stefani Nachalito, a representative for the Jewish community — also shared their experiences aiding Afghan families.

The study revealed how existing inequities in Oklahoma related to housing, employment and means of accessing government assistance programs exacerbated the challenges of resettling Afghans when they began arriving in September 2021.

The primary issue raised by speakers was the lack of livable and affordable housing. Patrick Raglow is the executive director of Catholic Charities Oklahoma City, the state’s only federally designated refugee resettlement agency.

He said Afghan refugees, because of their large number and the frequency of their arrivals, faced immediate housing crises when they touched down at Will Rogers and Tulsa International Airports.

“There was not enough housing then, and there is still not enough housing, and the quality of that housing that is available is not worthy,” Raglow said.

The solution was to help Afghans apply for federal pandemic emergency rent and utility assistance and use some of that money to pay local hotels

AFGHAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT *cont. A8*

More than 80,000 Oklahomans across the state needed rental and utility assistance over the course of the pandemic.



PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES





PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

AFGHAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT *from A7*

to house them.

The average length of stay in hotels for families was five months, Raglow said, and once families did start finding apartments and homes to live in, most of the places were too small, poorly maintained, pest infested and prone to sewage back-ups and unreliable air conditioning.

For those living conditions, families paid \$750 to \$3,500 per month for one- to three-bedroom apartments or homes.

While Afghans were struggling to find homes, Oklahomans across the state were losing theirs.

More than 80,000 Oklahomans across the state needed rental and utility assistance over the course of the pandemic, and many were being evicted from their homes as they waited for help. With housing assistance only being available for up to 15 months, including back-payments for missed bills, many Afghans face the same fate today because they can't afford to sustain themselves and their families with one or two incomes of \$15 an hour.

"Our most pressing ongoing concerns are the cost of housing exacerbated by the large sizes of families and the fact that many are one-income families with no assistance," Nachalito, who helps coordinate refugee assistance for the Jewish community, said.

"There is simply no way for our families to provide housing for themselves," she said.

Members of the Temple B'nai Israel, Emanuel Synagogue, Jewish Federation and other Jewish groups sponsored 12 refugee families — a total of 67 people.

Two other issues raised were the need for the state to facilitate the obtainment of state identification documents like driver's licenses and birth certificates and recognize the professional certifications held by refugees who are educated and worked in their home country as interpreters, nurses, doctors and engineers, and other jobs.

Over the course of six months, the Poyners helped more than 50 Afghan fathers get their driver's licenses and 75 children enroll in Putnam City Schools.

"It started with the two families that we sponsor," Poyner said, "But within this community, once the word gets out about something, it spreads very quickly."

He said he discovered that in Oklahoma there is a way to bypass the written driver's test if a person takes a 10-hour class and participates in 6 hours of hands-on training. Poyner reached out to a local driving school asking if they would provide the course if he could find someone to translate the material.

"They said their only requirement is to hit at least 10 people in the class," he said. "We partnered with The Spero Project who provided translators and ended up hitting 20 in the first class and then 25 in the second, and then subsequent smaller classes."

Poyner would not only drop the men off at driving school, but also take them to Department of Public Safety offices to get their permits, sometimes waiting for hours.

The Spero Project is a nonprofit that fosters a long-term sense of community for refugees who arrive in Oklahoma. Kim Bandy, the organization's director, focused part of her presentation on the plethora of professional certifications held by Afghans that are not recognized by the state.

"Many of our neighbors have come with professional experience that we believe could and should transfer into the city and be recognized and leveraged," Bandy said, as she showed a slide listing more than 40

examples of degrees — from bachelors to doctorates — and previous work experiences held by Afghans.

Veronica Laizure, an attorney who serves as Council on American-Islamic Relations deputy director, said many of the professional skills and experiences Afghans brought to Oklahoma could bolster the state workforce.

"Without the ability to transfer that education here into Oklahoma, they're instead forced into these low-wage jobs that aren't sufficient for their needs," Laizure said.

The problem for Afghans is exacerbated by the fact that many of them left their homes with nothing but their families in tow, and are living here on humanitarian parole, a temporary immigration status that will expire Sept. 30, she said. They arrived with No IDs, no certificates, no bags, no proof that they planned on leaving their home, just in case they were stopped by the Taliban during their escape.

Laizure provided policy recommendations to lawmakers in the Veterans and Military Affairs committee. They include ensuring the availability of quality affordable housing and better protections for tenants, a better system for cooperation between charitable organizations, the state and the federal government and facilitating the obtainment of state identification documents and professional certificates, while also recognizing them from other countries, such as Afghanistan.

"The charitable sector can't do everything," Laizure said. "We can't build housing, we can't change the driver's test, and we can't make state welfare benefits available to the newcomers who need it."

Laizure suggested the state construct a website she described as a state bank of resources that contains information

about navigating housing, healthcare and employment in the state. The resource should be available to all Oklahomans, she said.

"We think that some common-sense policies at the state level could help alleviate these concerns, not only for our current Afghan families, not only for any future refugees who might find their way to Oklahoma, but for all struggling and marginalized and vulnerable Oklahomans who are also experiencing so many of these challenges," Laizure said.

But in order for any changes to state law that would benefit refugees and other vulnerable Oklahomans to occur, there needs to exist the political will in lawmakers to write the legislation and fight for it in the House and Senate chambers of the Capitol. Patrick Raglow said he is under no illusions that will happen.

"There are some things we can do as the state of Oklahoma, and anytime you can increase understanding, that's always good," Raglow said. "I don't mean to be too cynical, but the fact is this isn't the first time Oklahoma's legislature has heard about the challenges in affordable housing or the quality of housing. We've had that conversation going back since before I started this work in the city."

"Will this study make the legislature fix everything?" Raglow said. "No. Will it advance what needs to be done? Yes, I think so."

Ed. Note: This story was updated on 8/22/2023 to correct the spelling of Jeff and Christine Poyner's surname.

**LIONEL RAMOS** is a Report for America corps member who covers race and equity issues for Oklahoma Watch. Contact him at 405-905-9953 or lramos@oklahomawatch.org. Follow him on Twitter at @LionelRamos\_.





PHOTOS ADOBE IMAGES

SEXUAL HARASSMENT from A1

WHEN STATE AUDITORS VISITED THE CAMPUS OF THE OKLAHOMA SCHOOL OF SCIENCE AND MATHEMATICS FOR A ROUTINE REVIEW OF ITS FINANCES FOUR YEARS AGO, FEMALE STAFF MEMBERS SAW AN OPENING. THEY SEIZED THE OPPORTUNITY TO DESCRIBE AN ADMINISTRATOR WHOSE AUTOCRATIC LEADERSHIP STYLE GRIPPED THE CAMPUS OF THE PUBLIC BOARDING SCHOOL FOR YEARS.



**LYNN MORGAN**, the vice president of administrative services, had sex with women in his office, according to public records and interviews with former employees

Women he found attractive received more favorable office space, workloads, and compensation, people who worked with him claimed. He screamed at staff, contractors and even students, the records showed.

With the auditor’s ear, the staff felt like someone was finally listening. In an unusual move, the audit’s top finding addressed the culture: “A harmful tone at the top of the agency.” School board chairman, Dan Little, and board member Lance Benham gathered faculty and staff in the school’s auditorium and promised the culture would change. Employees had hope that conditions at the Oklahoma City school for academically gifted juniors and seniors would finally improve.

Morgan retired. But the harassment didn’t stop. An investigation by Oklahoma Watch found that women continued, for years, to report sexual harassment by other male staff at the school. One of the women filed a lawsuit in June. Oklahoma Watch talked to her and seven other current and former female employees who described a toxic and misogynistic culture at the school. Oklahoma Watch also reviewed hundreds of pages of public records and a federal employment complaint.

Sexual harassment is illegal and, according to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, even teasing and offhand comments are illegal when it creates a hostile work environment or leads to an adverse employment decision, such as being fired or demoted.

The Lawsuit

According to the lawsuit, between 2016 and 2022:

- Five female employees raised concerns about Bill Kuehl, a male administrator who made explicit comments about their bodies and sent a student inappropriate text messages. A mother complained after she went to Kuehl’s Venmo account to pay for a graduation cord and saw payments with the message “sexual favors.” He wasn’t fired, but quit last year to take a job out of state.
- School leaders hired Jonathan Triplett, who court records show was accused of domestic violence by two ex-girlfriends and had been charged with driving under the influence. On staff, he threatened a female employee and a parent. He resigned last month.
- Following a summer camp for high school math and science teachers, some reported that Mark Li, the professor who led the camp, made sexual comments.
- Kurt Bachmann, a professor at the school, spoke sexually toward students, faculty and staff, and in particular asked female staff about their breast sizes multiple times. He drew concerns from parents and alumni for his comments. In records not in the lawsuit but obtained by Oklahoma Watch, a student’s father enclosed a note with a donation to the school’s foundation, asking the school to make sure the teacher retires “before he gets OSSM sued and/or completely embarrassed in the media.”
- After the audit, school leaders hired a human resources specialist to address complaints but eliminated the position in 2021.
- Two women received settlements from the school. Both were in leadership positions and were replaced by male employees.

Keli Pueblo, who worked at OSSM for nearly seven years, filed the lawsuit against the school and the state, alleging gender discrimination, sex-based stereotypes, a hostile work environment and retaliation.

She said that after the audit the culture never changed. Male faculty and staff were publicly celebrated, even after complaints of impropriety. And when they did leave, it was usually voluntarily, she said. The human resources specialist whose position was eliminated in 2021 said she was intimidated into not pursuing complaints.

Little, the chairman, said the school worked diligently to address the problems over the years and, in some cases, hired an outside investigator to assist them.

“It took longer than I hoped to address the problems, but the problems were addressed,” said Little, 80, an attorney whose storied Democratic family includes son-in-law Paul Ryan, former U.S. House Speaker. The school’s residence hall, where students live in supervised dorm rooms, is named for Little, and his family is a top donor.

The state Legislature established the school in 1983 as a state agency with a 25-member governing board, independent of the state’s public school system. Little is the first and only chairman and has held the post for 37 years under six governors.

Little negotiated Morgan’s departure following the audit. Morgan was allowed to retire with benefits.

The school, in its initial response to the lawsuit, denied female employees were treated disparately and said it’s untrue the men accused of harassment were not disciplined or fired.

In 2022, the school’s interim president, Edna Manning, demoted Pueblo to secretary and then fired her, despite exceptional performance reviews. Pueblo said she was on approved leave at the time; the school said she resigned by not showing up.

“I’ve been wronged,” Pueblo told Oklahoma Watch. “It ruined my life.”

At least nine other women have either resigned due to the working conditions or been fired in recent years, according to Pueblo’s lawsuit and interviews with seven of the women, some of whom asked not to be identified because they fear they will lose their jobs. One said she signed a non-disclosure agreement with the school and could not comment.

An Elite School

Tucked behind a gate on 32 tree-studded acres just south of the Capitol, the Oklahoma School of Science and Mathematics draws high-achieving 11th and 12th graders with rigorous courses like calculus and microbiology and organic chemistry. The class of 2023 scored an average 30.6 on the ACT out of a possible 36, about the 94th percentile, a datapoint that helps vault the school to the top of online rankings.

But even one of the school’s most touted achievements — a top ranking on the Niche website, this year at 18th best public high school in the U.S.,



out of 20,000 schools — is sullied by harassment allegations. An anonymous review on the site written by a senior in 2022 reads: “OSSM also lacks proper channels for reporting harassment from administration/professors; student complaints are rarely taken seriously.”

It’s free for Oklahoma students to attend because it’s publicly funded. The school received \$6.5 million from the state for 2023–24. Ninety-five students attended that year, according to a school profile, a taxpayer expense of more than \$68,000 per student that includes room and board.

Student enrollment is well below what lawmakers envisioned; the inaugural class had 58 students but school leaders expected a future student body of 300, according to an undated brochure provided by the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Its public funding is supplemented by donations from the Oklahoma School of Science and Mathematics Foundation, which in 2021 was worth more than \$17 million, tax records show. The foundation’s donors include philanthropists, private foundations, and alumni, many of whom are doctors and scientists.

Lawmakers in the 1980s surmounted opposition to create the prestigious high school for advanced learning, similar to one in North Carolina. Old newspaper articles show public school leaders and others feared it would cost too much and rob high schools of their best students.

The Troubles at the Top

In recent years, the face of the school has been Frank Wang, a mathematician who was named the school’s president in 2012. Wang, who holds a PhD from the Massachusetts Institute for Technology, often visited the Capitol, wearing a bowtie, pocket protector, and a smile. Wang reluctantly accepted the president position after the school’s first president and founder said she’d delay her retirement until he was ready to accept.

As president, staff complained to Wang about vice president for administrative services Lynn Morgan’s inappropriate behavior. But Wang told Oklahoma Watch he didn’t feel like he had the authority to fire Morgan, the school’s first employee under former president, Edna Manning.

Morgan smoked cigarettes outside on school grounds for six years after he announced the school’s no-smoking policy, public records show.

Once, when Morgan’s daughter was a student at the school, Morgan fired a teacher who took the girl’s phone away in class, multiple former staff members confirmed. The teacher lived on campus and had to move out immediately over the Thanksgiving break.

Morgan had affairs with at least three women who worked for him, according to the lawsuit. Those women received special treatment, like higher pay and nicer office space, the plaintiff alleged. Once, after a staffer ended a romantic relationship with him, he delayed her access to a needed piece of software for nearly two years, according to auditors’ notes obtained through the Open Records Act.

On Pueblo’s first day on the job, she recalled, a woman visited Morgan in his office and he closed the door. She later smelled Irish Spring; his office space included a private shower. The incident was confirmed by multiple sources.

An employee in 2018 pleaded with auditors: “If you have any power to intervene, I beg you to. If that level of intervention is beyond your purview, I ask that you reach out to whatever external agency is in charge of executive-level abusers.”

The top audit finding was a “harmful tone at the top of the agency” perpetuated by Morgan. School administrators placed Morgan on leave and hired an investigator.

But Wang, who was president at the time, had a non-confrontational management style.

“I was not the type of boss that was a very authoritarian type of boss,” Wang said. “I tended to do it more by counseling.”

When a student reported to Wang that his teacher was in love with him, Wang said he confronted the teacher, drove him to the airport and bought him a plane ticket out of Oklahoma. Wang said he only fired two people during his tenure; that teacher was one.

Oklahoma Watch could not find contact information for the teacher.

Wang said he approached inappropriate behavior gently and tried to nudge those staffers to move on, but made it clear that if the behavior repeated, they would be out of a job.

Along with his conflict avoidance, Wang was generous, and staff liked working for him. Multiple people described times when Wang



SEXUAL HARASSMENT from A9

“IF YOU HAVE ANY POWER TO INTERVENE, I BEG YOU TO. IF THAT LEVEL OF INTERVENTION IS BEYOND YOUR PURVIEW, I ASK THAT YOU REACH OUT TO WHATEVER EXTERNAL AGENCY IS IN CHARGE OF EXECUTIVE-LEVEL ABUSERS.”

2018 EMPLOYEE, OKLAHOMA SCHOOL OF SCIENCE AND MATHEMATICS

opened his wallet to cover expenses on behalf of the school, or to reward good work, or to smooth over a conflict. When an ice storm knocked out power at the school, he put the students in a Hilton hotel for a week, Pueblo said.

“He’d do Oprah stuff,” Pueblo said. “Like he’d be in a staff meeting and he’s like, everyone’s getting hundreds, he’s passing them out. Like it was crazy stuff with Dr. Wang, but what a wonderful guy to work with.”

As an example of disparate employment decisions, Pueblo’s lawsuit points to a residence hall director hired in 2021. When Pueblo was asked to check the background of one of the candidates, Jonathan Triplett, she found two emergency victim protective orders by former girlfriends, accusing him of domestic violence in 2012 and 2013.

Court records also showed a ticket for driving more than 40 miles per hour over the speed limit and a misdemeanor DUI.

Pueblo told administrators he was not a good candidate for the job overseeing students, that there were a lot of red flags. The school hired Triplett despite her concerns.

Once, Triplett threatened a female employee after she left his name off a graduation program, which the school admitted in its lawsuit response. Triplett is also accused of regularly calling Wang a “(expletive) faggot” in front of students, parents, employees and the public, and threatened a parent, both claims the school denies.

Wang said he required Triplett to take an online anger management course.

In May, Triplett pleaded guilty to the DUI charge and received a deferred sentence. The school promoted him to dean of students. He resigned at the end of July, according to an attorney representing him, who said he submitted a notice to sue the school over his departure.

One of the main fixes the school agreed to make following the 2019 audit was to create a human resources position to address staff complaints and implement new policies to improve the workplace. Wang hired Kari Kuykendall in 2020. She said she was intimidated and retaliated against for pursuing harassment complaints.

“I intend to be HR, not be the appearance of HR,” Kuykendall wrote in an Oct. 2020 email to Wang outlining difficulties she was experiencing implementing reforms at the school.

The next year, school leaders eliminated the human resources position and let Kuykendall go. Little, the board chair, said having a human resources specialist “didn’t seem to

solve any problems.”

School board agendas from June and July include an item to discuss employee demand letters and internal investigations. The July meeting was never called to order because the agenda was not made public at least 24 hours in advance, as required by law.

The dozen or so board members from across the state still gathered in a room where they listened to a presentation about how to create a strategic plan for the school.

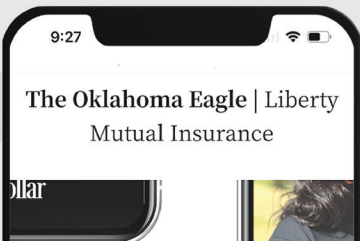
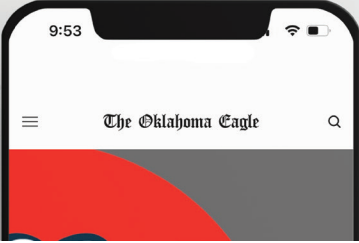
The board appointed a new president this year. Tony Cornforth, who started teaching math at the school in 2002 and has also led the school’s regional center in Wayne, did not agree to an interview on the advice of the attorney general’s office.

He provided this written statement in an August 16 email: “Please be assured, however, that as we begin our new third chapter, I know that I, as the new President, am absolutely committed to continuing a professional, positive, and healthy workplace at OSSM and that I have the full support of the OSSM Governing Board in doing so. OSSM has always and will always set and meet the highest workplace standards.”

Pueblo said when the school fired her, she lost her health insurance right away, and had to cancel a scheduled surgery. She spent 26 weeks on unemployment and just this summer found work again.

“There is a closet full of skeletons at OSSM and it remains a dangerous place for women to work and students to live and attend,” she said.

JENNIFER PALMER has been a reporter with Oklahoma Watch since 2016 and covers education. Contact her at (405) 761-0093 or jpalmer@oklahomawatch.org. Follow her on Twitter @jpalmerOKC.



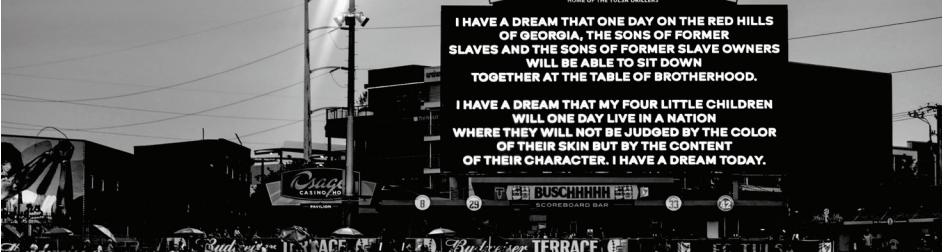


**FC Tulsa hosted Birmingham Legion FC**, the city in which Dr. King was jailed on April 12, 1962 and where he penned his infamous “Letter from Birmingham Jail.”

**Children from the Tulsa Dream Center** served as walkout kids leading up to the match.

**FC Tulsa Hosted Record-Breaking “I Have a Dream” Speech Recitation on Greenwood Night August 23, 2023**

# I Am A Dreamer



**I AM A DREAMER** event attendees celebrating the 60th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, March on Washington, 1963, speech at ONEOK Field during FC Tulsa Greenwood Night, Aug. 23, 2023.  
PHOTOS **SAM LEVRAULT MEDIA**

8.23.2023

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# Tulsa Paris Epps Wins Tiny Miss Princess of America – First African American Crowned



PHOTO PAGAENT MEDIA

Paris Epps, a seven-year-old student from Tulsa, received the national title of Tiny Miss Princess of America.

She is the first African American to receive the title. She is the daughter of Dr. Shavonda Pannell and Willis Epps and the granddaughter of Anthony and Valonda Pannell. Epps is also the great granddaughter of “King Arthur” Pannell, a pioneering businessman, restaurateur, and beloved mentor. The National Princess of America Pageant was held in Branson, Mo., July 23-29.

She also won divisional titles for Casual Wear and Active Wear, and second runner-up for Photogenic. Additionally, the judges awarded her as a Top 10 Superstar finalist, and winner in the following categories: Best Interview, Best Smile, and Miss Personality. The Princess of America Organization is a national pageant system based on the development of confidence and leadership skills for

girls, ages 4-24. The growth of each participant is enhanced by friendships fostered across the United States. The pageant places an emphasis on its contestants participating in community service and giving back to their communities to make a positive difference. For more information, visit [www.princessofamerica.com](http://www.princessofamerica.com)

By DR. JERRY GOODWIN

# Melody Drew Receives National Award From Paralegal Association

Melody Drew, a certification manager and an Institute for Credentialing Excellence (I.C.E.) credentialing specialist with the National Association of Legal Assistants (NALA), received the Founders’ Award at NALA’s convention. The convention was held in Boston, July 12-14. NALA represents paralegals from across the country. The conference was held both virtually and in-person, with approximately 1,000 attendees. The Founders’ Award is given in recognition of extraordinary and outstanding contributions to the growth and future of the paralegal profession that impacted or affected the paralegal profession in a positive manner for a significant period of time. In addition to Drew’s recognition, the organization honored others with national awards at its annual membership, conference, and expo.

“I am still astonished, but I am grateful for the support from my loving family, awesome NALA teammates, wonderful Certifying Board (past and present), inspiring predecessors, and of course, the amazing NALA paralegal community,” said Drew. In her position at NALA, Drew offers support to paralegals across the world in all areas of NALA certifications. She has been a member of the staff for 10 years. NALA is the nation’s leading professional association for paralegals. Founded in 1975, it represents over 17,000 paralegals through its individual membership and NALA affiliated associations. As a nonprofit organization, NALA provides continuing education, professional certification, and professional development programs for paralegals. You can find more information about NALA’s offerings and contributions to the paralegal profession at [nala.org](http://nala.org).

By DR. JERRY GOODWIN



PHOTO PROVIDED

# Seitz-Williams (Ferguson) To Host Family Reunion, Labor Day Weekend

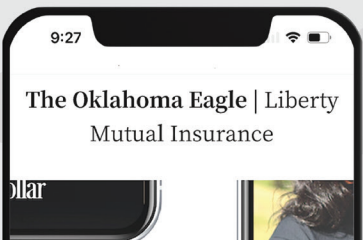
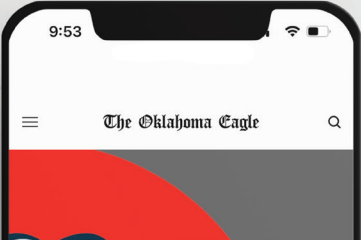
Descendants of a noted 1800s-era Tulsa resident, Lula Seitz-Ferguson, plan to host the family’s first-ever reunion this year in Tulsa, Sept. 1-3, 2023. The families’ roots in Oklahoma originate from the Trail of Tears (1830-1850). Members of the family are expecting to arrive from Texas, Washington, Alabama, Arizona, and Oklahoma. The families plan to celebrate during the Labor Day weekend. The Seitz-Williams (Ferguson) families will honor posthumously their great-grandmother Seitz-Ferguson, her daughters, Georgia and Jessie, and her son, James, who was a fraternal twin of Jessie. Additionally, her grandchildren, Luis Billy, Virginia Sue, and Beverly Ann Williams will be honored retrospectively during the reunion activities.

Seitz-Ferguson, a Chickasaw freed(wo)man, is quoted in the book, “What Blood Won’t Tell: A History of Race on Trial in America” by Ariela J. Gross. The book was published by Harvard University Press. Seitz-Ferguson testified before the Dawes Commission about her and others’ lineage to the Chickasaw tribe. “The next generations...including great and great-great-grandchildren are determined to use this reunion to keep our family’s history and Tulsa roots alive for many generations to come,” said Sudonna Williams-Ward. The family’s slogan will be “Cream of the Crop! Best of the Stock!”

By DR. JERRY GOODWIN



PHOTO PROVIDED







**NEW BLACK EDUCATORS**  
despite ongoing challenges like low pay and lack of support, Black teachers remain motivated by their passion for empowering and believing in students — and the positive impact they make on Black students is undeniable. **A16**



# BLACK WOMEN and the March on Washington – They Never Missed a Beat

By GWEN MCKINNEY, WORD IN BLACK

MARCH ON WASHINGTON from A1

“Foot soldiers of the civil rights movement nationally and from the ground, their toil and service were massive.”

**SIX** decades ago, the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom was a pivotal moment in the sustained march to full citizenship. With little credit or spotlight, Black women fueled the campaigns that led up to one of the largest mass gatherings in our nation’s history.

They coordinated volunteers; conducted fundraising, reserved buses and hotels; prepared food and managed virtually every logistical element that delivered an estimated 250,000 people to the Lincoln Memorial. Still, they were relegated to second-class citizenship. Denied a voice at the podium, they were even sidelined and segregated to a secondary procession route (the men marched to the Lincoln Memorial via the camera-lined Constitution Ave. and the women were directed to gather and proceed from Independence Ave.).

Although history recorded August 28, 1963, as a glorious day for a surging movement, Black women and their essential role were erased. Twelve men were featured in prominent speaking roles and as they basked in the successful aftermath of the march, 10 leaders — no women among them — were invited to meet with then President John Kennedy.

Key decision makers were part of an all-male leadership group dubbed “the Big Six.” Anna Arnold Hedgeman, a forceful self-affirmed feminist who wedged her way into that inner circle, insisted that women speakers be enlisted. Joined by Dorothy Height, of the National Council of Negro Women, the two met resistance with the rationale that too many speakers were already slated.

Even recruitment of a single woman speaker would be problematic. The organizers reasoned that selection would spur a “cat fight” among her competitors.

Eventually the men relented and selected Myrlie Evers, wife of slain Mississippi activist Medgar Evers. Confronted with travel complications on the morning of the march, her replacement was Little Rock NAACP



CIVIL RIGHTS MARCH ON WASHINGTON, D.C.  
Four young marchers singing.  
PHOTO U.S. INFORMATION AGENCY. PRESS AND PUBLICATIONS SERVICE. (CA. 1953 - CA. 1978)

head Daisy Bates. She was asked to deliver a speech written by a male organizer that ran barely one minute.

In a show of rebellion, Maryland activist Gloria Richardson approached the podium to greet the masses. Reportedly rebuffed and the microphone yanked away, all she could utter was “Hello.”

As a concessionary olive branch, labor leader and march commandant A. Phillip Randolph paid tribute to six of the women leaders, stumbling over names and requiring coaching from the rear. The accolades went to Daisy Bates, Myrlie Evers, Prince Lee, Diane Nash, Rosa Parks, and Gloria Richardson.

Each of them, giants for their historical contribution, were stand-ins for sister leaders shunned or forgotten. To name a few: Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, Constance Baker Motley, Eleanor Holmes Norton, Judy Richardson and Aileen Hernandez.

Contributions from legions of Black women were invisible but indelible. Foot soldiers of the civil rights movement nationally and from the ground, their toil and service were massive. Despite marginalization, Black women never missed a beat in their sustained march to be seen, heard and unerased.

Fast forward 20 years — change on the horizon. The commemorative March on Washington II, August 27, 1983, was shaped by the vision of Coretta Scott King and other prominent women including rising young activist Donna Brazile. Tapped as the March director, she oversaw every aspect of the event which drew an even larger crowd than the 1963 March.

“How can I forget the 20th Anniversary march,” commented Brazile recently. Then a 24-year-old activist, she is now a seasoned political consultant and media analyst. She credits the 20th Anniversary march as a springboard into the successful campaign to mark M.L. King’s birthday as a federal holiday.

Gwen McKinney is the creator of Unerased | Black Women Speak and is the founder of McKinney & Associates, the first African American and woman-owned communications firm in the nation’s capital that expressly promotes social justice public policy.

HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS descended on Washington, D.C.’s, Lincoln Memorial Aug. 28, 1963. It was from the steps of the memorial that King delivered his famous I Have a Dream speech. King’s many speeches and nonviolent actions were instrumental in shaping the nation’s outlook on equality.  
PHOTO 28 AUGUST 1963





# New Black EDUCATORS

## TELL WHY THEY CHOSE TEACHING

By MAYA POTTIGER, WORD IN BLACK | **NEW BLACK EDUCATORS** from BI

The fact  
remains,  
though, that  
public school  
teachers in the  
United States  
are far less  
diverse than the  
student body,  
according  
to Pew  
Research  
Center  
findings.

### FROM LOW WAGES

to being caught in the political crossfire over book bans, to challenges with student mental health and behavior, teachers are going through it.

And, since the pandemic virtual learning years, we’ve seen a mass exodus from the profession, leading to ongoing teacher shortages, especially in schools attended predominantly by students of color.

But despite ongoing challenges like low pay and lack of support, Black teachers remain motivated by their passion for empowering and believing in students — and the positive impact they make on Black students is undeniable.

The fact remains, though, that public school teachers in the United States are far less diverse than the student body, according to Pew Research Center findings.

Using the most recent data available, which was taken between 2017-2019, about 79% of public school teachers were white, while only 47% of students were white. And there were about twice as many Black students as Black teachers, at 15% and 7%, respectively.

But the biggest gaps in the student-teacher ratio were among Hispanic and AAPI people, where it was about a 3-to-1 ratio of students to teachers.

Tre’Shawn Terry spent the summer in Philadelphia working with the Center for Black Educator Development’s Freedom School Literacy Academy, which offers training and experience to prospective teachers. He says a recurring fear that came up among young teaching apprentices was “feeling inadequate, and feeling like they’re able to show up as themselves in education, particularly among the young Black men.”

Terry says if we want to boost student achievement, districts need teachers of color to show up “as their full selves.”

And sending the message to teachers of color that districts are “wanting their culture, wanting their language, wanting their speech or their brilliance and all the ways in which you could show up in the classroom” could help with recruitment and retention.

But, despite all of the challenges, what is still drawing people to the profession? Word In Black spoke with four early-career teachers about why they were motivated to enter the classroom. The teachers are:

- Tyler Cook, 24, Philadelphia, second-year eighth-grade math teacher
- Shadae Hamilton, 28, Philadelphia, sixth-year Algebra I teacher
- Tre’Shawn Terry, 27, Las Vegas, first-year eighth-grade English/Language Arts teacher
- Chaquevia Dumas, 30, New York City, first-year sixth-grade science teacher

Here’s what they had to say.

**WORD IN BLACK:** Have you always wanted to be a teacher?

**COOK:** No, I did not always want to be a teacher. I always was on the medical track, not sure what I wanted to do — be a doctor or a nurse or a scientist, anything like that — but I knew I had a passion for medicine. All throughout high school, I did internships at three different hospitals in Philadelphia. I probably changed my major five times in college, and three of those majors were definitely in the STEM fields. What really did it for me was, my junior year of college, I had a professor who was a very powerful professor in her presence and her knowledge. She was the first Black English professor that I had at the school. The way I felt in her classroom — how safe I felt, how I wanted to be there, how I wanted to learn, the relationship that we built in the classroom with her — I knew.

**HAMILTON:** Ever since I was younger, I did. My mom had gotten me a whiteboard, and I used to come home and teach whatever I’d learned that day. But, growing up, I got deferred from that a little bit. I’m from an immigrant background, my family’s from the Caribbean, so they always say, ‘Oh, teachers don’t make no money.’ So I explored around. They wanted me to be

the typical doctor, lawyer, those things. But I remember being in college, and it was my last semester, and I remember feeling stressed out. I’m like, ‘What is this one job that I know I can work in the next six months to a year that I will feel satisfied?’ And I remembered teaching was always something that I wanted to do. I was a part of Teach For America for two years, and I fell in love with it.

**TERRY:** No, not necessarily. I played basketball. What success looked like for me was going to be playing basketball in some type of fashion or form. And I didn’t put much thought into anything beyond that. But I was exposed to two elementary, Black women teachers, who really exposed to me some of the greatest qualities of masterful teaching. At Virginia State University, I met incredible professors. I was in awe of the fact that I was able to speak to and chop it up with people who were part of the Black Power Movement, and who are organizing in this way and still committed to Black folks and their liberation and freedom. It was 2016 when I really started doing community organizing, and the [two professors] poured into me, ‘We love what you’re doing in communities, and we need you to teach because your dedication, your determination, and your appreciation and love for Black folks needs to be in the classroom.’ So they really gave me the green light.

**DUMAS:** No, no, no, no, no. My mom’s always said that I should be a teacher, but I haven’t always wanted to be a teacher. I was exploring, trying to figure out what I wanted, who I was, and then what I wanted to do with what I found. I had gotten accepted and declined the offer to attend the Savannah College of Art and

Design because it didn’t feel right. And when I was laying in bed, and I was like, ‘Okay, well, what am I gonna do now?’ And it was what Oprah would call an ‘aha moment.’ That sounds so cheesy, but it really was. It was like, why don’t you teach? And I’m like, that just makes so much sense, so much peace to my soul.

**WIB:** Why are you still motivated despite the public challenges in the profession?

**COOK:** It’s so funny. I came in as an assistant dean, and [the dean] looked at it as the opportunity to take a break to write her dissertation. So I ended up being the full-time dean. And I appreciated the opportunity. It was amazing. I got to work with so many different kids. But that three-month window, I knew that I wanted to transfer into a classroom. I have a personality that’s all about joy and humor and fun and learning, and deans can be all of those things, but when it comes down to it, they have to deal with the discipline and the structure. And that can take a toll on your mental, and I knew that being a teacher would create more of a safe haven for me. What really motivated me to become a teacher is that I come from a really big family, and we always support and take care of each other, from the oldest to the youngest. I always looked at how hard it was navigating through my own identity and my own challenges, being a Black queer man in this society. So I always think about how difficult it might be for a child, somebody who doesn’t have that much autonomy or who’s still trying to find their voice, and what they might feel like and what support they might need. Because I got so much support from my family, from my friends, even from teachers growing up, I knew that I had an obligation to give that back when I chose to be a teacher.

**HAMILTON:** Simply put: My students. No matter how disruptive my day gets, or I’m frustrated about something that got published in the news, or something that happened in our community, my students always keep me grounded. They are my reason why. They could say one thing, do one action, and that reminds me why I’m doing this and able to show up for them in different spaces. Not just in math, because it goes beyond me teaching Algebra I, that’s just the content. But there’s so many other aspects to the relationships that I’m building with them to help them go in whatever direction they want to when they start to explore their career choices.

**TERRY:** As far as Black folks, we are the reason that public education exists in the way in which it does. It was formerly enslaved Africans who were coming through the Civil War who were like, ‘We need education for our people, and we’ll foot the bill for it.’ So, through my studies and in conversation with my OG educators, they reminded me there’s no greater thing that you can do for yourself and for your community than to teach them, to learn with them, to stay

**NEW BLACK EDUCATORS cont. A17**



NEW BLACK EDUCATORS from AIG

committed to them.

I love learning and learning about young people — how they think, why they think that way, what has them inspired, what are the hard things that they’re going through. I also see it as an opportunity for me to model what it’s like to be intentional about healing as a young Black man. In those classrooms, I get to have a certain privilege to be in there with those young people talking about things that maybe other teachers may not be comfortable talking to them about.

And, on a more personal side, through being the oldest of five brothers, I was able to experience the different ways we had interactions with the school system and how it treated us. One of my brothers passed away back in 2018. He had a tumultuous experience with our local school district. He was a genius, but the school district didn’t know how to honor that. He didn’t have enough teachers who were able to be intentional about, like, ‘I see him hurting. How do I make sure he has the support he needs? To be able to see the fruits of his labor come to fruition?’ So when he when he passed away due to suicide, it really like shook me to my core and reminded me you’ve got to get in this classroom with these young people and you got to do that work.

**DUMAS:** That’s a twofold question. I do absolutely believe in the value of education. But I don’t think I am cut out to be a classroom teacher. I am still going on this journey because I give my all to anything that I put my hand to. But I want this experience because I think it’s kind of like a serving job. It’s that kind of job that I think everyone should do and have an experience in. Because it just brings the best out of you. It’s the best way that serves humanity and your purpose as a global citizen. So I don’t know if teaching long term is for me, but I know that I absolutely want to be in education because I really do value education. I might go into research or policy or something, but I will actually always be in education. It’s necessary.

**WIB:** What do you think your biggest challenge will be, and how do you plan to navigate it?

**COOK:** For me, being a teacher and teaching math, truly is to teach it in a way to keep the kids actively engaged. Being such a young teacher, I always thought that I had amazing student engagement because I never really had issues in the classroom. But when I started to think about it, when I started to look at more of the data and the test scores, I realized, do I have student engagement, or do my students just really think I’m cool?

For this school year, I’m going in completely different. I’m still going to be the same fun, positive teacher, but I’m going in with goals in mind, with data trackers, with all these different things to push my students and do it in a way where they want to come into the class and learn the math. I’m currently getting a masters of arts in teaching. This has really helped me get more confident and intentional as a teacher, from learning about consistent routines in the classroom to how to structure my own lessons and set different standards of where students’ different learning goals are. I feel like I need to do more positive narration, not to say that I’m like a mean teacher, but give those micro moments to shout out the little positive things. And then also relying on my assistant principal, when something doesn’t work or when I really need help, not being afraid to say anything. That’s how I’m best gonna be able to serve the students I teach.

**HAMILTON:** This past year was my hardest. I became a mom. [I

“I really want to be in a position where I have students that look at what I do and think that they can do it, too.”

TYLER COOK, 24, Philadelphia, second-year eighth-grade math teacher

was always told] when we started having kids, that’s when it became difficult. I never took a step back to think how many hours I put in, and how much I pushed myself into my career until I had to step back. And now I have this person in front of me who is requiring all of my energy and all of my time. So it was OK if I left work at 7, I’ll just make up for it in different ways. But now I know, when 4 o’clock comes, I have to leave. That was difficult for me.

And providing students with the necessary services. We have a large special education students statistic at our school. So, when students come on board, knowing all of their backgrounds, knowing how to support them. The most difficult part is the background that nobody really knows about. We’re just making sure that these students have all of the tools that they need for their toolbox in order to succeed.

**TERRY:** My biggest challenge is being intentional about listening to the young people in my classroom and having the courage to ask questions in a genuine and sincere manner as far as not playing into the game of power and roles of authority that you can default to or don’t even recognize because you’re in it. When I first came into education, my challenges were definitely different. I had the insecurities around imposter syndrome and stuff like that, but through the work with CBED, through continuing to reach out to my community of educators, the insecurities around imposter syndrome are few to none. And then also making sure that I am committed to building with young people and their families. It takes a village. I want to have the courage to listen to what is actually going on and to ask the questions.

**WIB:** What kind of impact do you want to make?

**COOK:** I really want to be in a position where I have students that look at what I do and think that they can do it, too. I want to get away from this myth of how teaching is not a good job, and it’s a struggling job. But I think more kids need to be able to see teachers like me, or see teachers that look like them in this role so that they know that they can do it. I tell my students this all the time. Yes, we know doctors and people in health care save lives. But teachers save lives, too. We really shape the future generation. So if I can be in a position as a teacher where I can get one of the students in front of me to



that says for administrators is you didn’t meet expectations. It’s not really a clear cut blueprint. Getting a different group of students who are socially, culturally, cognitively all different all to pass this certain metric is really hard.

If people who were once teachers who are now in administrative roles can remember that feeling of frustration, and if we can have a system that extends a little grace — maybe we need to start going back to the drawing board to simply say what do our students need to know to be functioning, independent human beings in society? We need to start raising those types of questions because teacher burnout comes from teachers having passions, having motivation, and wanting to do their best but feeling like they don’t have the support, don’t have the recognition, and don’t feel like they are valued.

**HAMILTON:** As far as recruiting, I remember vividly a few Black teachers that I had, and I still communicate with this day. I want to be that person for somebody. Just safe. It doesn’t have to be in the classroom. It could be in the education system. It could be wherever. Just continuing that cycle and hopefully continuing to disrupt these systems.

As far as retaining, value us a little bit more. A lot of times we’re used for disciplinary things, but we’re so much more than that. And providing leadership opportunities for Black educators and hosting different workshops. When I was part of TFA, we went to Memphis and had a Black educator workshop, and I’ve never felt so good in my teaching career. While we have all these Black teachers across the nation, and it’s not just me at my school in my room, you still feel isolated at times. I have to be the strong one on my team, or I have to speak up, and sometimes I don’t feel like speaking up. And it just felt good when I was a part of that workshop to see different Black educators across the nation coming together, and to know that what I’m doing in my classroom is also happening in California, is also happening in Texas. Those are important. It starts the dialogue.

**TERRY:** There’s a push for districts to actually create space for young people to come into the field of education and want to be there because they’re being acknowledged as who they are. And I definitely think the Center has a proven system right around making sure there’s culturally responsive professional development, maintaining connections with the new teachers, making sure that people have a sufficient wage or salary to sustain themselves within the district and wherever they’re at. And then I think also tapping into young people who are in high school, middle school, having apprenticeships. There’s this cohort of young people who have shown they have some great qualities of a potential educator, how do we nurture that? And what does it look like, as a program, across the district or the nation?

**DUMAS:** The first thing that came to mind was there has to be a little bit more soul. I don’t like to make generalizations, but I’m going to right now: As Black people, we can spot inauthenticity from a mile away. And I think we have to get away from the performative nature of a lot of our systems and actually do the work. And I think that will attract the Black people and Black men and women — everyone who wants to contribute to the Black youth of our nation, for sure.

want to do what I do, I help shape the next doctors, lawyers, preachers, and teachers. I’m here to do all of those things.

**HAMILTON:** I want students to leave my classroom and know that the world is out there and they can become anything that they want to, and not what somebody tells them that they have to be — and believing that, as well. I tell them that I love them. Even if I have to reprimand you about something, it’s all out of love. I try to spread that amongst them because they need that. My toughest students, all they want to know is that you love them. And it just looks differently for everybody. It doesn’t have to be touchy feely, it could just be ‘Hey, how are you?’ So I try to just be as positive as possible for them. Even when we have run-ins, I always follow up, and I apologize if I offended them. It’s not a teacher versus student type of thing. We’re a team, and I try to pour that into them. Wherever you want to go, it doesn’t have to be college, whatever you want to do, I am here for you. I just want them to know that I believe in them, and not just about math.

**TERRY:** It’s funny because, years ago, I would have had a list of things. Now, my teaching philosophy is I am not here to be a voice for the unspoken. My priority is modeling what it’s like for young people to honor yourself, to honor your culture, and to honor your community, to commit to evolving in every way, and continuing to heal and be able to be an example of what it’s like to be healing as a Black person, as a Black man, as a Black man in education, and so on.

**DUMAS:** Everybody deserves empowerment. But, specifically, I want to empower young Black girls and show them that, if you have options in this world, even though it’s set up against you, you can do anything as long as you never tell yourself no. You are good.

**WIB:** How do you think districts could do a better job recruiting and retaining Black teachers?

**COOK:** I’m gonna skip over the funding piece because we already know that we need more funding. But I do think that administrations are so particular on data. And that’s what messes up schools and really is what creates teacher burnout. That data will really make or break you. You can feel like you were the most phenomenal teacher and did your best, but if you get data and it says only 30% of your kids met mastery, what

MIDDLE LEFT. TRE'SHAWN TERRY, MIDDLE RIGHT. TYLER COOK, BOTTOM LEFT. SHADAE HAMILTON, BOTTOM RIGHT. CHAQUEVIA DUMAS. PHOTO WORD IN BLACK



TELLING  
OUR STORIES  
AFROS, CORNROWS, AND MORE  
WHETHER IT BE A  
VOLUMINOUS AFRO,  
SENEGALESE TWISTS,  
WAIST LENGTH LOCS  
OR A HIGH TOP,  
BLACK FASHION  
HAS BEEN USED  
FOR YEARS TO TELL  
STORIES.

Aria Brent  
Word In Black

**TELLING OUR STORIES**  
**The Black community has truly mastered the art of storytelling. Using art as a form of communication and documentation is nothing new. We tell our stories with the written word, songs, dance— and yes, even via the very hair on our heads.**

Whether it be a voluminous Afro, Senegalese twists, waist length locs or a high top, Black fashion has been used for years to tell stories. “We weren’t given much, but we used what we had and it became trendy and iconic,” said Alexis Noble, a Mississippi native and creative director who has witnessed the influence of Black fashion first-hand. “[Black fashion] has become the go-to source for what we’re seeing in society today.” With a degree in fashion merchandising from Hinds Community College in Jackson, Miss., she’s been able to actually live and study the stories told through Black hair and clothing. “I’m very connected to the seventies and eighties. I seem to pull a lot of inspiration for my set designs and trends from that era. I feel like that was a rebellious time. People were free and exploring and living in their true selves. Fashion during those times was a way of escaping,” stated Noble. Believing that Black fashion and the story it tells is rooted in survival, Noble said that clothing and hair have been used for centuries to make a statement and carry on the stories of our ancestors. “We have definitely used clothing as a symbol and we’ve done it with graphic tees, earrings, tote bags, even shoes,” said Noble. “We’re making it known what we stand for [and] what we don’t care for! It’s being verbally communicated through our accessories and our apparel.”

Tinde van Andel is an ethnobotanist for the Naturalis Biodiversity Center, Leiden and Wageningen University in the Netherlands and has done a series of research projects about the Maroon people and how they used hair braiding to preserve themselves, and their culture. During the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, braided hairstyles doubled as a way of storing rice granules so the enslaved could eat them throughout their journey. Once on land, braids continued to help slaves survive, as they were sometimes used to create maps that led to freedom.

Although braids are now used as a protective hairstyle and viewed as something to be worn for fashion purposes, a fresh set of cornrows still boosts Black self-esteem and culture. April Dudley, CEO of CoverTheChaos, discussed the resurgence of braids within the last decade. “Braids are economical,” said Dudley. “For families who have a lot of children, they’re ideal because of how long they last. You can wear braids for a few weeks up to a month or two and that really helps.” However, braids allow Black people to do so much more than just survive. They’ve provided a space for self expression and creativity through both everyday wear and events such as hair shows. Events such as the Bronner Brothers Hair Convention have created a space for Black people in the fashion industry to showcase their talents, express their creativity and tell stories through hair. The daring hairstyles created at these events can be considered a form of resistance against White beauty standards. The afro has long been a symbol of Black people liberating themselves. Prior to the Black Power Movement, many Black people weren’t wearing their natural hair. When they began to do so it represented the demand for respect and civil rights that was beginning to happen saidEulanda Sanders, a professor of textiles and clothing,and chair of the Department of Apparel, Events, and Hospitality Management at Iowa State University. Sanders is focused on symbolic meanings of Black appearance. “When the afro came around it showed that we as Black people can also wear our natural hair despite how it might look to White people,” said Dudley. “It gave an image that is constantly associated with what it means to be Black.” Jayden Ward, a senior fashion merchandising major at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio., commented on just how rebellious Black fashion can be. She spoke with the AFRO about recent fashion trends that have allowed Black women to reclaim their femininity. “Black women oftentimes have this masculine energy forced onto them but things like the luxury and soft girl aesthetics have helped us showcase ourselves as feminine. We’re taking charge of our own identity,” Ward said.

JENNIFER PALMER has been a reporter with Oklahoma Watch since 2016 and covers education. Contact her at (405) 761-0093 or jpalmer@oklahomawatch.org. Follow her on Twitter @jpalmerOKC.



PHOTO GIFT HABESHAW/UNSPLASH

