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# State Spending \$4 Million To Set Up Private School Tax Credit Program

PAUL MONIES OKLAHOMA WATCH

The state is spending almost \$4 million with a contractor to set up and administer a new private school tax credit program. That’s four times what the Oklahoma Tax Commission estimated in the spring when lawmakers were finalizing the policy.

PRIVATE SCHOOL FUNDING cont. A3

# State Board of Education Denies Gender Record Changes In Two Districts

BENNETT BRINKMAN NONDOC

In a meeting that included 15 minutes of coordinated public comments about chromosomes, gametes and other biological concepts related to perceptions of the gender binary, Oklahoma State Board of Education members denied requests for record changes to reflect two students’ gender identities and suspended the teaching certificate of a former Wetumka teacher and coach.

GENDER RECORD CHANGES cont. A5

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STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION DENIES GENDER  
RECORD CHANGES IN TWO DISTRICTS

The record change request denials come after state board members’ controversial approval of emergency rule last month. A5

DEVIN FLETCHER PLEADS GUILTY IN TULSA  
PUBLIC SCHOOLS EMBEZZLEMENT CASE

After initially pleading not guilty to the charge against him, former TPS administrator Devin Fletcher changed his plea to guilty. A5



KAY JOHNSON taught her fifth graders math on Jan. 11, 2023, at Lawton Academy for Arts and Sciences, a private school in a warehouse district. PHOTO WHITNEY BRYEN/OKLAHOMA WATCH

Facing a compressed timeline,  
Commission must establish the program  
within a year

PRIVATE SCHOOL FUNDING from A1

The Parental Choice Tax Credit sets up a refundable income tax credit of up to \$7,500 per child for private school expenses. Lawmakers capped the overall cost of the program at \$150 million in tax year 2024, rising to \$250 million in tax year 2026. More than 32,000 students are in private elementary or secondary schools in Oklahoma.

Merit International Inc. will be responsible for working with schools and parents to educate them on claiming the tax credits. The application process will use Merit’s software platform. The company will train Tax Commission employees and school representatives to use the software.

The Tax Commission said it chose Merit because it had experience setting up similar educational programs in other states. It also faced a compressed timeline for implementation of House Bill 1934. The commission has a one-year, \$3.95 million contract with Merit, agency spokeswoman Emily Haxton said in an Oct. 31 email.

That expense is far beyond initial estimates. The Tax Commission estimated it would take \$1 million in administrative costs in the current fiscal year to set up the program, according to a fiscal impact statement the agency provided lawmakers in May. It estimated another \$706,000 in administrative costs for fiscal year 2025.

Daniel Seitz, a spokesman for House Speaker Charles McCall, R-Atoka, said lawmakers appropriated \$1 million to the Tax Commission for administrative costs. Any costs above that would have to be absorbed by the agency’s budget, Seitz said. They would not come out of the cap available for the private school tax credits.

Tax commissioners discussed the contract at their Sept. 12 meeting. Haxton said discussions are ongoing to see if the Tax Commission would be reimbursed for the agency portion of the contract.

Sen. Julia Kirt, D-Oklahoma City, said she remains concerned about transparency, fraud and accountability under the private school tax credit program.

“Are we going to have any view into this vendor on who’s authorizing them and how they’re authorizing them?” Kirt said. “There’s nothing in the legislation requiring a release of data other than the number of credits. I have big concerns about a third-party vendor and how they’re going to be held accountable. Will data be accessible through open records? Tax Commission data is generally not unless specifically authorized.”

Merit has contracts with Ohio and Kansas to administer education-related tax credits, vouchers and educational savings accounts. The Ohio Department of Education paid Merit \$2.25 million in fiscal year 2023 to administer an educational savings account program for after-school activities, according to Ohio purchasing documents.

Merit’s contract with the Oklahoma Tax Commission wasn’t bid out in a full purchasing proposal. Instead, the Tax Commission picked Merit from a list of approved contractors compiled by the Oklahoma Management and Enterprise Services under a statewide contract for IT deliverable-based services, Haxton said.

“Merit’s pricing structure is cost-effective and considers the judicious use of public funds,” the company said in its statement of work to the Tax Commission. “Merit delivers ‘Software with a Service’ (SwaS), not just software. This means our team will work to ensure program success, even as the goals evolve.”

The Tax Commission approved emergency rules for the private school tax credit program at its Oct. 24 meeting after receiving hundreds of public comments. Many commenters were concerned about the mismatch between taking the credit for a tax year, which mirrors the calendar year, and the school year. Commissioners recognized the problem but said the Legislature would have to resolve that issue.

“Throughout the process, we were trying to simplify the taxpayer experience and simplify the school experience, while still maintaining an adequate level of controls in place to make sure the money gets to where it needs to go to,” the agency’s executive director, Doug Linehan, told commissioners.

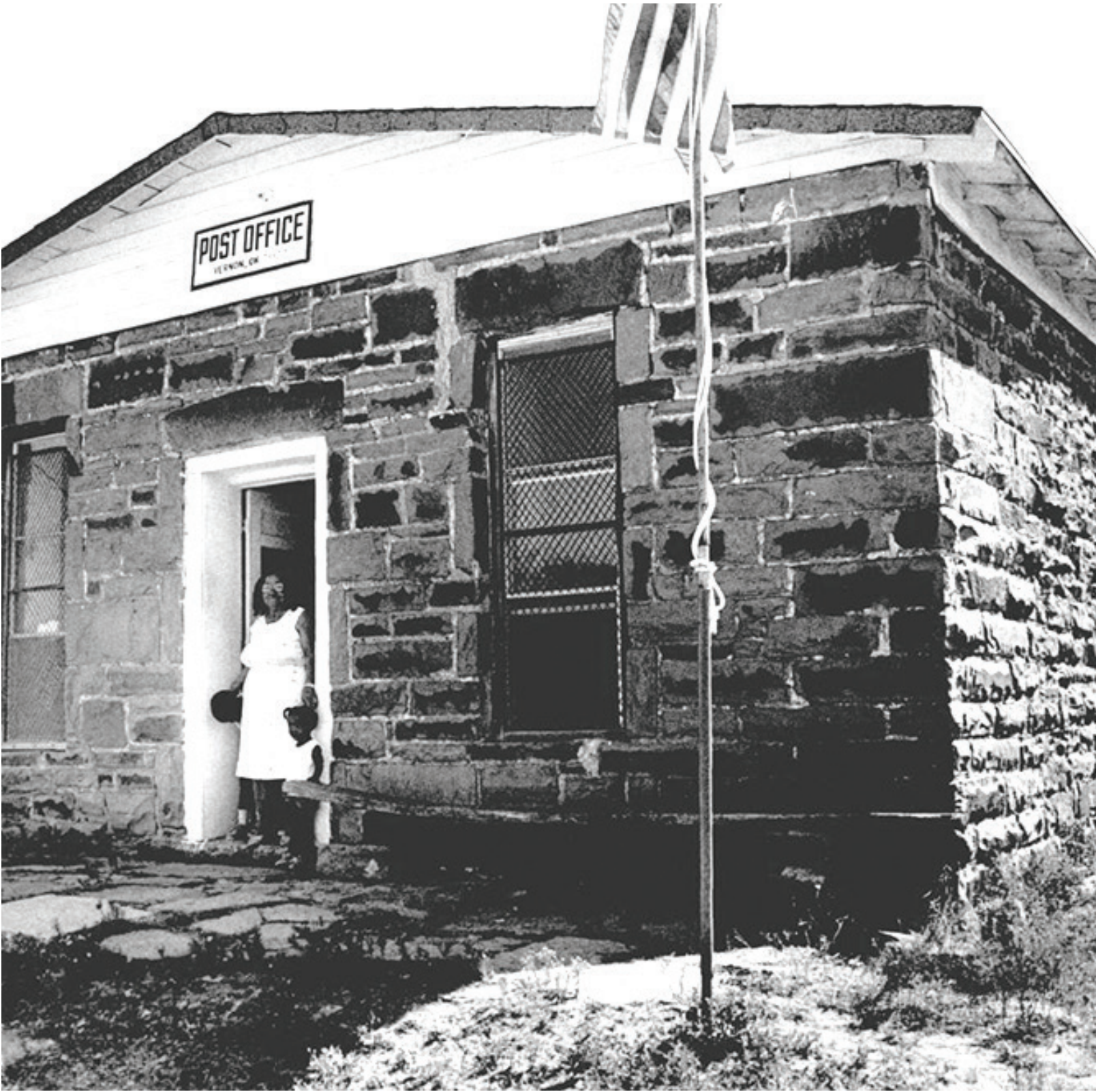
Another state vendor, PCG Scholar, administers the Lindsey Nicole Henry Scholarship, a voucher program for students with disabilities or other special needs. Lawmakers created that program in 2010, but it faced legal hurdles before reaching full implementation. The State Department of Education oversees the Lindsey Nicole Henry program, which served more than 1,350 students in the 2022-23 school year, according to the Education Department.

PAUL MONIES has been a reporter with Oklahoma Watch since 2017 and covers state agencies and public health. Contact him at (571) 319-3289 or pmonies@oklahomawatch.org. Follow him on Twitter @pmonies.



# Vernon: Oklahoma Historic All-Black Town

By LARRY O’DELL, THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF OKLAHOMA HISTORY AND CULTURE



An All-Black town located in southwestern McIntosh County ten miles southeast of Dustin, Vernon was established in 1911 on the Tankard Ranch in the Creek Nation. Vernon is one of more than fifty All-Black towns of Oklahoma and is one of thirteen still existing. Thomas Haynes secured much of the land for the townsite and played a large part organizing the community. Its name honored Bishop W. T. Vernon of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The town received a postal designation in 1912, with Ella Woods as the

postmaster. Edward Woodard served as the town’s first president, but he did not long remain in office. Louise Wesley established the first school and church. The congregation conducted church under a tree; Wesley taught school in her home. In 1917 the community built the New Hope Baptist Church. When the Julius Rosenwald Fund provided money to help build a public school, Vernon became one of the first communities in Oklahoma to receive assistance from that philanthropic source.

The Vernon Rock Front Post Office is listed in the National Register of Historic Places (NR 84003152). Rock Hill School is listed in the Oklahoma Landmarks Inventory as a resource related to African American history. Like many rural towns of Oklahoma, Vernon suffered economic distress during the Great Depression. The exodus of many residents to urban centers after World War II added to the loss of residents. No population statistics are available.

**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.

**VERNON’S US POST OFFICE**, 1980 (2012.201. B1329.0529, by P. Howell, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, OHS).

## Featured Last Week



Funding Disparities: Historically Black Colleges & Universities



\$17.7 Million in GEER 2 Money Went to Six Projects



Scorsese’s ‘Killers of The Flower Moon’, A Tale of Greed, Richly Told

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GARRETT COULSON used a visual aid to give a biology lesson making the case for the existence of trans people during the public comments section of a State Board of Education meeting on Thursday, Oct. 26, 2023. PHOTO BENNETT BRINKMAN

GENDER RECORD CHANGES from A1

The record change request denials come after state board members’ controversial decision last month to approve an emergency rule requiring school districts to receive permission from the board before they change references in their records to reflect a student’s gender identity.

In today’s cases, two students in Cushing and Moore public schools each were said to have already obtained court orders from judges allowing them to change their gender designation on official documents. Records from neither court case are available online, although NonDoc downloaded a copy of the Cleveland County court order for the Moore Public Schools student before it was sealed.

The case number listed on Thursday’s meeting agenda for the Payne County court order does not appear to be connected to any existing case, according to Payne County Court Clerk employees.

Oklahoma State Department of Education general counsel Bryan Cleveland said the emergency rule passed in September was needed as a result of the court order authorizing the Moore Public Schools student to change their gender designation.

Cleveland and Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters both criticized the judges’ orders during the meeting.

“I believe we’ve got to continue to stand in line — stand in the way, I will say — of these radical, leftist, Biden judges that are sitting here trying to dictate this to our schools,” Walters told board members.

Cleveland suggested that the judges’ actions could be illegal and implied that they could be working together with other groups.

“The one from Payne County is interesting because it’s virtually a copy-paste of the text of the order from Cleveland County, which indicates to me that these sort of ex parte gender orders are being coordinated somewhere centrally, or there’s a network of affiliated people that are copy-pasting them intentionally, which I find curious,” Cleveland said.

**Board members revoke teacher certification, hire new counsel**

After a 30-minute executive session, board



PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

members voted to suspend the educator certificate of Wetumka community leader Brent McGee.

Although no charges have been filed against McGee, he has been accused of molesting at least one child over the course of his career as a teacher, coach, city councilman and mayor.

Former Noble Public Schools student Casey Yochum, 49, spoke during the public comment section of the meeting to share his allegations of abuse.

“I was molested by Brent McGee for years,” Yochum said. “He starts grooming these kids at 13, 14 years old.”

Walters said the board’s suspension of McGee’s teaching certification stemmed from reports given to OSDE.

“There were reports that were given to the agency that we dealt with in executive session and looked over,” Walters told reporters after the meeting. “Safety of our kids is always going to be a top priority for us.”

Board members also hired a new attorney to represent them after the executive session.

Before the vote to hire her, Cara Nicklas of the Edmond law firm McAlister, McAlister & Nicklas took questions from board members and stressed her litigation experience.

“I’m familiar with having to represent clients who are in the news,” Nicklas said.

Nicklas will take the position vacated by Travis Jett, who had been the board’s attorney before leaving the role after Walters took office. In an effort to avoid conflicts of interest, boards that govern agencies often consider it a best practice to have a separate attorney from an agency’s general counsel.

**Biology lesson, Tulsa update presented to board**

In accordance with the conditions of Tulsa Public Schools’ accreditation status, board members heard an update from the district during Thursday’s meeting.

Officials with TPS — including interim Superintendent Ebony Johnson, chief strategy and innovation officer Kathy Dodd, interim chief learning officer Erin Armstrong and director of data strategy Jonathan McIlroy — presented on the district’s implementation of science of reading-based practices in its literacy instruction.

“Students’ success, of course, is our ultimate goal, and the work that we do pushes for student success,” Johnson told board members. “All the work is grounded in the science of reading.”

Walters and other board members praised district leaderships for their efforts to improve the district, but Walters also stressed his oft-repeated refrain.

“You are walking us through thought processes here, and it sounds really good, but we want to see the results. And so again, you know, when I’ve mentioned before not testing me and not having the district test me — what I mean by that is we want to see students successful,” Walters said. “And I’ve been very open about — I will do anything in my power to make sure Tulsa Public Schools is successful. There is nothing off limits for what I will do ensure that that happens.”

During the public comments section of the meeting, four people used their consecutive turns to give board members a 15-minute biology lesson making the case for the existence of transgender people, ostensibly to show their support for the two transgender students who wanted to change their student records.

While one person stood with a visual aid for each of the segments, the people discussed reproductive processes at the cellular level and chromosomes to make their case. When the board’s four-minute timer went off at the end of each speaker’s time, the next presenter picked up the lesson and continued.

Board members did not comment on the presentation, but much of the audience watching the meeting cheered each presenter.

“Not every individual is going to fit into that perfect definition of a word that we make up to describe a generalization,” said Garrett Coulson, the first presenter.

Coulson then held his large ream of paper for the next three presenters as they continued the biology discussion.

“It shouldn’t matter to you if a child is brown, black, white, male, female, trans,

**GENDER RECORD CHANGES** cont. A6

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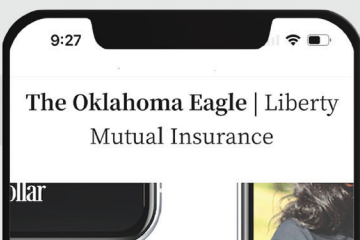
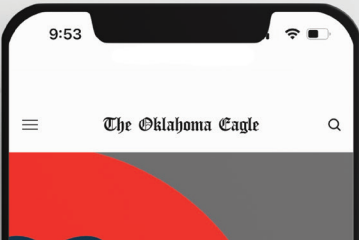






PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

# Equal Rights Protections and Alleged Communism

GENDER RECORD CHANGES from A5

Christian, Muslim because first of all, we have equal rights under the law — 14th Amendment. Secondly, as a Christian, we believe that all people were made by God and matter,” the second presenter said before picking up where Coulson left off. “What’s most interesting about the SRY gene doesn’t actually make you a male either. Everyone has the genes to produce both testes and ovaries.”

Lori Tuggle, a former Putnam City Public Schools Board candidate who has alleged that sex clubs exist at the district’s locations, pushed back on the four presenters’ biology discussion and said she has lived under a “Marxist” regime in Belarus.

*“We believe that all people were made by God and matter.”*

Garrett Coulson, presenter, Tulsa Public Schools Board Meeting

“You saw our pretty little biology presentation,” Tuggle said. “One of the Marxist plans to manipulate and control people is to make the individual nondescript, interchangeable where men can be women and women can be men. You could be a gorilla, you could be a dinosaur, you could be whatever you want as long as you do as we say. And the people who are used in this way are the first ones to be murdered when communism comes.”

Thursday’s meeting was the first for Zach Archer, a financial advisor and investor from Hammond. Archer is still listed on the Hammond Public Schools website as the vice president of the district’s board of education, although he must step down from that board to

serve on the state board.

Gov. Kevin Stitt appointed Archer and foreign policy consultant Alex Gray to the board Oct. 20. Gray did not attend Thursday’s meeting and has not yet been sworn into his seat on the board.

BENNETT BRINKMAN became NonDoc’s education reporter in August 2022 after completing a reporting internship. He holds a bachelor’s degree in journalism from the University of Oklahoma and is originally from Edmond. Email story tips and ideas to [bennett@nondoc.com](mailto:bennett@nondoc.com).



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# Fletcher *Plea Agreement* Filed In Federal Court

TPS EMBEZZLEMENT CASE from A1

After initially pleading not guilty to the charge against him, former Tulsa Public Schools administrator Devin Fletcher changed his plea to guilty this morning, admitting details in the conspiracy to commit wire fraud case brought against him in U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Oklahoma.

Fletcher was charged Sept. 18 after resigning more than a year earlier. TPS first announced the discovery of “contract irregularities” related to Fletcher’s embezzlement in June 2022, the same month Fletcher resigned.

As part of his plea agreement filed Monday in federal court, Fletcher agreed to pay at least \$378,992 in restitution to Tulsa Public Schools and \$225,000 to the TPS Foundation. Following his guilty plea, Fletcher will remain on bond until he is sentenced.

“Devin Darel Fletcher was permitted to remain on bond pending sentencing and will be sentenced at a later date,” according to a press release posted online by the U.S. Attorney’s office for the Northern District of Oklahoma. “He faces a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison. He also faces a period of supervised release, restitution and monetary penalties. A federal district court judge will determine any sentence after considering the U.S. sentencing guidelines and other statutory factors.”

According to the charging document for Fletcher, TPS hired him in August 2016 as the district’s chief academic officer and eventually promoted him to chief learning and talent officer.

Prosecutors allege that, while Fletcher worked for TPS, he caused the district to lose at least \$603,992 by fabricating purchase orders and invoices and inflating vendor costs. That amount equals the combined restitution to which Fletcher agreed Monday.

“Tulsa Public Schools is thankful for the excellent work of the United States Attorney’s Office and federal law enforcement in seeking justice for the students and families of our district,” Jana Burk, TPS general counsel, said in a statement. “We recognize the defendant’s admission of responsibility in today’s guilty plea and await the important sentencing phase of the matter. The financial security of the district is of the utmost importance. The success of our justice system and the additional financial safeguards put in place by the district will undoubtedly help deter any future financial misdealing.”

Fletcher’s attorney, Brett Swab, did not return a phone call seeking comment prior to publication of this article.



DEVIN FLETCHER, former Tulsa Public Schools administrator, pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit wire fraud on Monday, Oct. 30, 2023. PHOTO NONDOC

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
FOR THE NORTHERN DISTRICT OF OKLAHOMA

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,  
Plaintiff,  
v.  
DEVIN DAREL FLETCHER,  
Defendant.

Case No. 23-CR-302-JFH

Plea Agreement

The United States of America, by and through Clinton J. Johnson, United States Attorney for the Northern District of Oklahoma, and David D. Whipple, Assistant United States Attorney, and the defendant, DEVIN DAREL FLETCHER, in person and through counsel, Brett Swab, respectfully inform the Court that they have reached the following plea agreement.

1. Plea

The defendant agrees to enter a voluntary plea of guilty to the following:  
18 U.S.C. § 1349 – Conspiracy to Commit Wire Fraud

as set forth in the Information in the instant case, Northern District of Oklahoma, and admits to being in fact guilty as charged in the Information to which the defendant is pleading guilty.

## TPS continues to work with state board

In recent months, State Superintendent of Public Instruction

Ryan Walters has repeatedly referred to the embezzlement — which TPS leaders say the district self-reported — as reason to take a closer look at the district’s accreditation status.

Walters implied in a press conference Aug. 7 that the amount TPS has lost owing to embezzlement could be closer to \$1 million, although district officials told media that they have not found evidence to that effect.

“The more layers are pulled back, the more issues are uncovered at TPS,” said Dan Isett, the Oklahoma State Department of Education’s director of communications. “That’s why Superintendent Walters has been so diligent in rooting out all of the issues that have led to failing schools in Tulsa. Our students deserve better than what they have

gotten.”

In August, after weeks of uncertainty, the State Board of Education voted to accredit TPS “with deficiencies” on the condition that TPS regularly update the state board on its progress toward better financial controls and improved academic output.

TPS officials have since given two updates to the state board on their progress, highlighting increased internal controls to help prevent future cases of embezzlement.

“I stand firm as the interim superintendent to say that we have an expectation that the dollars that come to Tulsa Public Schools will be used responsibly,” TPS interim Superintendent Ebony Johnson told board members Sept. 28. “Much of this work is already underway. Our finance team worked diligently to strengthen our internal controls to ensure that our process from the moment we select a vendor all the way through to when we pay an invoice will prevent an embezzlement issue from happening again.”

The TPS board met Monday evening to consider approval of a three-year renewal of its contract with Tulsa Honor Academy charter high school.

BENNETT BRINKMAN became NonDoc’s education reporter in August 2022 after completing a reporting internship. He holds a bachelor’s degree in journalism from the University of Oklahoma and is originally from Edmond. Email story tips and ideas to bennett@nondoc.com.

## Red River Dispute

Red River Dispute from A1

A TEXAS WATER DISTRICT has offered to pay attorneys, engineers and surveyors for advice to resolve a boundary dispute along the Red River at Lake Texoma.

The North Texas Municipal Water District could pay up to \$300,000 for the expert advice after Oklahoma’s Red River Boundary Commission approved the plan at a meeting Tuesday. It still must be approved by the Texas water district’s board of directors at its November meeting.

The dispute involves a water pumping station lying just a few feet on the Oklahoma side of the border. That discovery dates to 2009, when invasive zebra mussels in Lake Texoma caused officials to take a closer look at old survey maps and easements. Those maps wrongly placed the border when the pump station was built in 1989.

University of Oklahoma President Joseph Harroz Jr. presented the consultation plans to the five-member commission, which first met in April after being dormant for years.

“We believe these groups are the right ones to help us truly understand all of the issues where we need technical expertise so this commission can make fully educated and confident decisions,” said Harroz, a former dean of the OU College of Law. “There’s a reason this is taking so long. You don’t want to get these boundary issues wrong. You don’t want to get these species issues wrong.”

In April, officials with the water district proposed swapping equal parts of state territory near the water pumping station. The Oklahoma commission took no action on that

proposal and instead directed Harroz to come up with a plan.

“Those costs are robust, but this is an important water source for us,” David Kelly, the water district’s governmental affairs and special projects manager, said at Tuesday’s meeting. “We’re committed to this process, and we appreciate the state of Oklahoma helping with that process.”

The water district has continued to pump water from the lake under a 2014 memorandum of understanding between former Govs. Mary Fallin of Oklahoma and Rick Perry of Texas. The North Texas Municipal Water District is permitted to take up to 197,000 acre feet of water from the pumping station each year. That pumping station serves about 219,000 people in North Texas.

Without a resolution, the Texas water district estimated it would take at least \$50 million to build a new pumping station on the Texas side of the border.

Harroz said if the Texas water district approves the expert consultation costs, they could come back with recommendations before the Oklahoma Red River Boundary Commission in late February or March 2024.

“Whenever you’re moving state boundary lines, you don’t want to get it wrong a second time,” Harroz said. “It’s bad enough to get it wrong the first.”

PAUL MONIES has been a reporter with Oklahoma Watch since 2017 and covers state agencies and public health. Contact him at (571) 319-3289 or pmonies@oklahomawatch.org. Follow him on Twitter @pmonies.

## Detainee Deaths

Jail Investigator Promoted from A1

POTTAWATOMIE COUNTY jail officials covered up the deaths of detainees in their care. On Wednesday, the jail’s senior in command was promoted and given a bonus.

Capt. Bobby Thompson trains and supervises detention officers and conducts internal investigations when a detainee is injured or dies. The results of those investigations are turned over to jail administrator Breonna Thompson, Bobby Thompson’s boss and wife.

During a Wednesday meeting, the five members of the Pottawatomie County Public Safety Center Trust discussed Bobby Thompson’s annual review behind closed doors in executive session. Neither Thompson nor his wife were in the room. After reopening the meeting to the public, the trust voted unanimously to promote Capt. Bobby Thompson to Major, and approved a .50 per hour raise and \$7,500 bonus.

“Someone thank that young man for us,” Trust Chairman Rick Stiles said.

The praise follows a September investigation by Oklahoma Watch that revealed Pottawatomie County jail officials concealed information about the deaths of seven detainees who arrived at the jail in need of medical or mental health care.

One of those detainees was Ronald Given, a Kiowa man who died in 2019 as a result of an altercation with jailers. A sergeant who accompanied Given to the hospital after

the fatal struggle told state investigators that Bobby Thompson directed her to exclude bruises and swelling on Given’s face from her written report. No one has been prosecuted in Given’s death, which a state medical examiner ruled a homicide.

In the newest of three wrongful death lawsuits against the jail, Russell Gage filed a federal claim this month blaming the jail for the death of his father who was beaten to death by his cellmate last year.

Since Oklahoma Watch published its investigation, the jail’s attorneys complied with a court order to release video footage of Kellie Wright’s detention to her wife, who filed a federal lawsuit against the jail in July. Wright’s wife, Shelly Cailler, said when she arrived at the hospital, Wright was on life support and covered in unexplained bruises and broken bones. Wright, 50, died the day after she was booked into jail in 2021 from a brain injury caused by cardiac arrest, according to an autopsy report.

The investigation also prompted the jail’s attorneys to release to Oklahoma Watch some public records about the detainees who died. Other requests for public information remain unanswered.

Jail officials reported only two of the seven deaths to the State Health Department, which regulates the health and safety of detainees statewide. A jail inspector conducted an unannounced investigation

of the Pottawatomie County Public Safety Center in August after Oklahoma Watch provided its findings to the health department. The jail was found in compliance, according to the inspection report.

This month, Oklahoma Watch unearthed information about an eighth Pottawatomie County jail detainee that died under the Thompsons’ guard. On Sept. 2, 2021, Karl Schmeusser, 46, was transported from the jail to St. Anthony Hospital in Shawnee where he died of respiratory damage due to COVID-19, according to a state medical examiner report. Jail officials did not report his death to the health department.

Pottawatomie County prosecutor Adam Panter said Wednesday that an investigation into the jail’s handling of those deaths is ongoing.

Phil Bacharach, spokesman for the Attorney General’s office, said he could not confirm or deny the existence of an investigation into the Pottawatomie County jail.

WHITNEY BRYEN is an investigative reporter at Oklahoma Watch covering vulnerable populations. Her recent investigations focus on mental health and substance abuse, criminal justice, domestic violence and nursing homes. Contact her at (405) 201-6057 or wbryen@oklahomawatch.org. Follow her on Twitter @SoonerReporter



# Tulsans take the stage in 'Reflections'

By SAM LEVRAULT

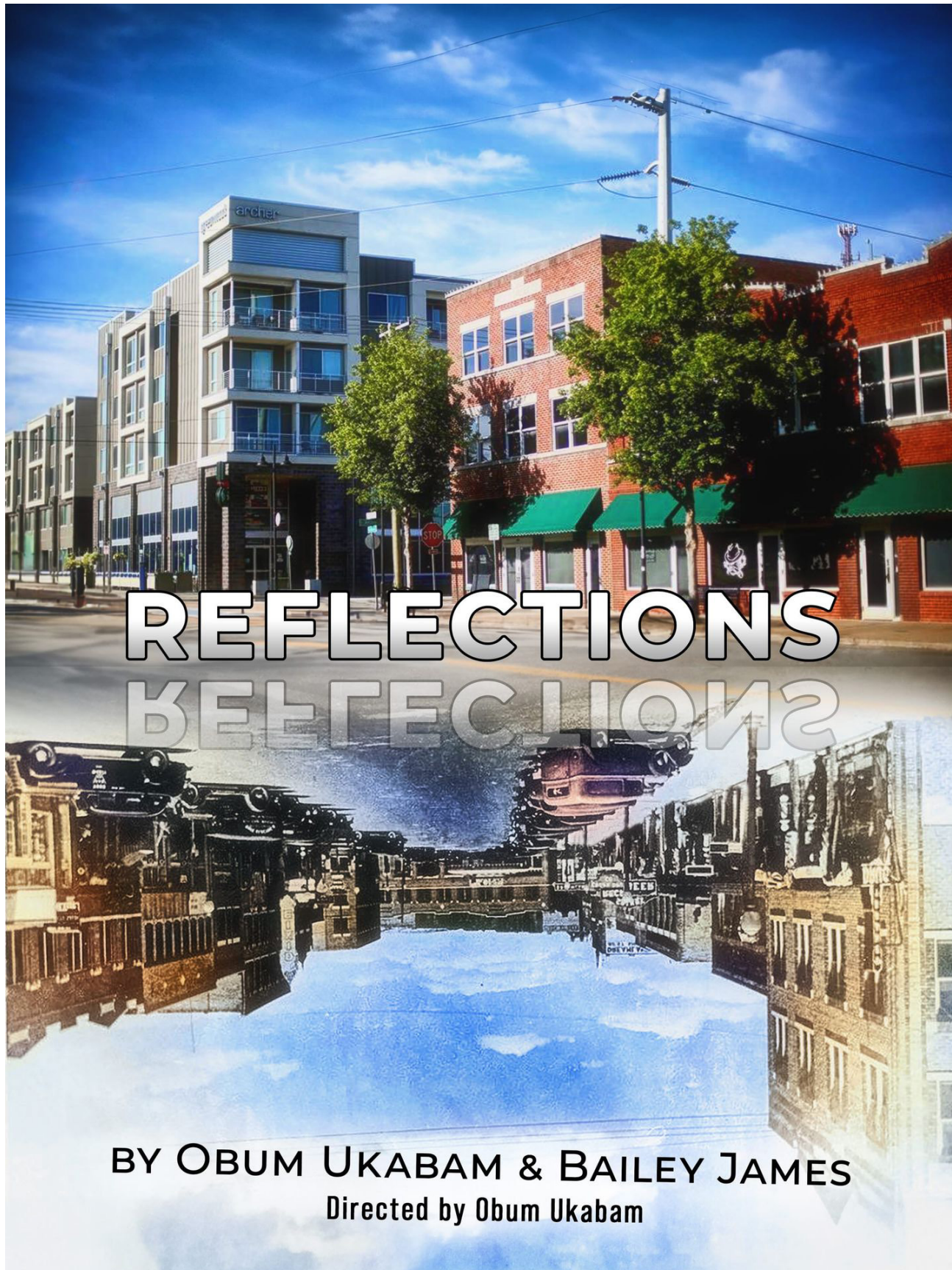


IMAGE WORLD STAGE THEATRE COMPANY

In 1921, the resilient citizens of Greenwood, an all-Black community in Tulsa, face a devastating racial conflict that escalates into an unstoppable tragedy. In the present day, the people of Tulsa confront a new challenge: how to comprehend and impart our history to future generations. Delving into the depths of prejudice and humanity, the characters grapple with complex choices, exploring themes of salvation, compassion, and personal beliefs. Back by popular demand, the show received critical success and audience acclaim in 2020.

## About the production:

Ukabam first brought the idea of Reflections to James in the fall of 2019 after acting in a short piece she wrote at Second Sunday Serials. Already having several ideas for scenes that could be part of the play, James then contributed some of her ideas as well. After a few months of research and collaborative writing in which both members of the pair worked extensively on each scene, the script was produced and performed to multiple sold-out audiences in March 2020 just before the COVID-19 pandemic shut everything down. The original cast had 54 performers and no roles were doubled.

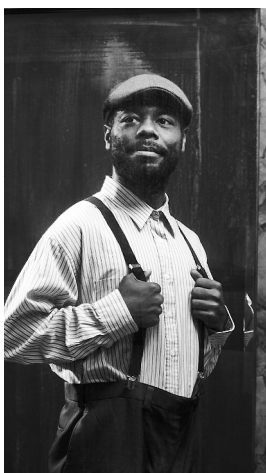
This new version of Reflections was heavily rewritten with the aim to tighten and improve existing scenes and introduce even more contemporary topics to the show. A central concept we've wanted to have in place since the show was first conceived was able to be executed: every actor in this piece plays both a historical role and a modern role, underscoring the irrevocable relationship between the past and present as a city and as citizens. A total of 38 performers all are doubling parts in the 2023 run.

## Tickets & More Information:

The production runs Oct 20 - Oct 29 over a total of nine shows.

For full ticket information, [tulsapac.com](https://tulsapac.com) or the Tulsa Performing Arts Center box office Monday - Friday, 10:30 am to 5:30 pm plus two hours prior to showtime.

## Meet the Cast: Reflections



### Christian Stubblefield

Hometown - Tulsa, OK

Experience - Derek (original production of Reflections), Martin Luther King (Divine Resigns), Mercutio (Twisted Shakez)

What do you hope audiences take from your performance?

"I hope the audience sees the gray area between what happened between Sarah and Dick Rowland. I think there's a lot of things that weren't spoken about and were very taboo and that this play will shed some light on what really happened."

Dream Role - Fred Hampton from the Black Panther Movie

What most excites you about this production?

"The care and work that the cast and crew have been doing. They make me feel very comfortable, especially dealing with a lot of heavy scenes. Having a lot of people around who are funny, smart, and willing to help makes me feel safe in a way."



### Emily Peterson

Hometown - Houston, TX - moved to Tulsa to attend TU

Experience - Emily (Heroes of the Fourth Turning), Hermia (A Midsummer Night's Dream), Cordelia (Falsettos), Josiah Bartlett (1776)

What do you hope audiences take from your performance?

"I just want it to reinforce the ideas of the entire piece - I want people to learn something new."

Dream Role - Would love to be in a production of Heathers or Casey in First Date

What most excites you about this production?

"How much talent I've seen come out of people and getting to work with all these people I've seen and heard about in the Tulsa theatre scene but never worked with directly."



### Tyrie Overton

Hometown - Tulsa, OK

Experience - This is my first play!

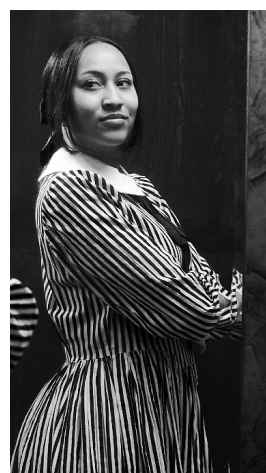
What do you hope audiences take from your performance?

Entertainment and information, especially about the Tulsa Race Massacre, which a lot of people still don't know about. Also hope - hoping to do better.

Dream Role - Something in Marvel or a military experience role

What most excites you about this production?

"That all the actors are from here so there's a really good community that loves theatre and we get to put this show on in the city that we live in."



### Ellé Evans

Hometown - Broken Arrow, OK

Experience - Pumpkin (Paradise Blue)

What do you hope audiences take from your performance?

"I hope that they don't take it personally but that they want to make a change - that they receive what's being told and want to make a difference."

Dream Role - "To be in film - I would love to play a villain, an assassin, or a superhero, or be in a horror film - like the weird stuff A24 does."

What most excites you about this production?

"The truth - the realness of what's being told about the past and in the modern scenes. I feel like we're finally exposing something that's been in plain sight."



# Meet the Cast: Reflections



**Aniya Ordonez**  
**Hometown** - Tulsa, OK  
**Experience** - Dorothy (The Wiz), Young Lola (Kinky Boots), The Witch (Into The Woods Jr.), Lavender (Matilda)  
**What do you hope audiences take from your performance?**  
“I hope they realize the impact that this event had on people and not only that it ruined a lot of people’s lives, but that they rebuilt after that.”  
**Dream Role** - Jenna in Waitress.  
**What most excites you about this production?**  
“Definitely making the audience cry.”

**Justin Daniels**  
**Hometown** - Tulsa, OK  
**Experience** - Mr. Mushnik (Little Shop of Horrors)  
**What do you hope audiences take from your performance?**  
“Dignity. A reminder that the people of Greenwood possessed a great amount of dignity. And I hope that they’re challenged”  
**Dream Role** - The Genie in Aladdin  
**What most excites you about this production?**  
“Being a direct descendant of massacre survivors excites me - being able to connect what’s lived in my head with a tangible way, to connect the world that my grandmother who was born in 1921 used to talk about when she was born in Lawton and her family escaped - to connect that world and my world. And it’s been therapeutic in some ways.”

**Ed Dill**  
**Hometown** - Valley, NB  
**Experience** - Father (Life with Father), Lee (Patient A), Pulver (Mr. Roberts), Colonel Mustard (Clue the Musical), Danny (Sexual Perversity in Chicago)  
**What do you hope audiences take from your performance?**  
“I hope they take the need to communicate and the need to understand, and if something is wrong or you disagree, that there is a need to talk it out.”  
**Dream Role** - “I like doing original stuff, so it probably hasn’t been written yet - but I hope to find it soon!”  
**What most excites you about this production?**  
“Too many things - I love the ensemble cast and working with this group, it’s very well-written and very well-directed, and I think that it has a message that’s very important to get out. Theatre at its best does more than entertain - it educates and can stimulate conversation, and I think that’s what this particular show does very well.”

**Quinn Blakely**  
**Hometown** - Durham, NC  
**Experience** - Ernest Berghart (The Deaths of Sybil Bolton), Benedick (Much Ado About Nothing), Petruccio (Taming of the Shrew)  
**What do you hope audiences take from your performance?**  
“I hope they come away from this feeling challenged. It’s great to see a play and feel fuzzy feelings and feel like a better person for having seen it, but I think people should walk away from this show feeling like they have to work on themselves. It still has humorous elements and feel-good moments but people who have children should come away from this show thinking that they agree with what the play is saying or that they need to re-evaluate.”  
**Dream Role** - “Mr. Peel in The Minutes - that’s another show that I think is important in the same way as Reflections. I’d also love to play Hamlet before I get too old to do it.”  
**What most excites you about this production?**  
“The fact that it’s an original show. I think that more original work should be produced in Tulsa, especially original work that’s lifting up people. This show is about people who have been disenfranchised and outright physically attacked by what is essentially the city of Tulsa, and to see an original work lifting up actors and writers and producers to the level of the PAC where everyone can see a giant sign reading “Reflections.” This show is taking people who have been buried in the past and bringing them to light.”

**Cosette Davi Allen-Lawrence**  
**Hometown** - Tulsa, OK  
**Experience** - Annie (Terminus), Evilene (The Wiz Jr.)  
**What do you hope audiences take from your performance?**  
“I hope they think it was great and that all the actors were amazing.”  
**Dream Role** - Hermione in Harry Potter - or Harry Potter himself!  
**What most excites you about this production?**  
“That I’m learning about the Tulsa Race Massacre.”

**Machele Miller Dill**  
**Hometown** - Corning, AR  
**Experience** - “Listen To My Heart: The Songs Of David Friedman. David was Alan Menken’s animator - music director for Beauty and the Beast on Broadway - we toured with that show. I’ve also toured Israel with a new show!”  
**What do you hope audiences take from your performance?**  
“I hope that they want to make friends with somebody who is different than them and that the whole show inspires them to go out and do their own research on what really happened.”  
**Dream Role** - “The Mother in The Light In the Piazza. Dream dream role is any that I originate.”  
**What most excites you about this production?**  
“Challenging myself, working with my husband, and providing thought-provoking high-quality theatre for audiences that make them really think differently than how they think right now.”

**Eriyon Tecson**  
**Hometown** - Tulsa, OK  
**Experience** - Doing a commercial - the lead role for a college campaign for her university.  
**What do you hope audiences take from your performance?**  
“I hope they take away the feeling or the need to want to do better.”  
**Dream Role** - “Everything - doing a TV series, a supernatural movie, combat and fight scenes, horror, sitcoms, old-time Renaissance-era characters - I want to do it all.”  
**What most excites you about this production?**  
“Performing - getting onstage and being in the moment of it.”

**Everett LeViness**  
**Hometown** - Born in Baton Rouge, LA but grew up in Tulsa, OK  
**Experience** - Theatre Tulsa’s American Son, Heller Theatre Company’s Hellerween: Shorts to Scare You Shortsless 2022, Heller Theatre Company’s Second Sunday Serials writer and actor; background in standup comedy  
**What do you hope audiences take from your performance?**  
“I hope white audience members think about if they are doing enough in their day-to-day lives to improve Tulsa and the lives of people around them.”  
**Dream Role** - A classic obnoxious noir detective  
**What most excites you about this production?**  
“I’m excited about how dynamic the script is and that as actors we get so much range to play with, being multiple roles in different scenes.”

**Steve Barker**  
**Hometown** - Florence, AL  
**Experience** - Hadley (Shawshank Redemption), Denny (The Deaths of Sybil Bolton), Lenny (Of Mice and Men), Tom Jones (The Grapes of Wrath), Hortensio (Taming of the Shrew), Jonathan Brewster (Arsenic and Old Lace), Teach (American Buffalo)  
**What do you hope audiences take from your performance?**  
“Knowledge, empathy, and love for one another.”  
**Dream Role** - Iago in Othello  
**What most excites you about this production?**  
“The wide range of ages/experience levels of the performers, the subject matter, and the production crew. “

## Full Cast of ‘Reflections’

Alex Isaak	Ed Dill	Ibrahim Buyckes	Mareo Johnson	Paula Scheider
Andy Axewell	Ellé Evans	Isabella Luttrell	Michael Hamilton	Quinn Blakely
Aniya Ordonez	Emily Peterson	Jason Chunu	Michelle Cullom	Steve Barker
Christian Stubblefield	Eriyon Tecson	Justin Daniels	Milena Hope	Tyrie Overton
Cosette Davi Allen-Lawrence	Eva Soler	Kay Shaughnessy	Nick Bushta	Zero Steiert
D’mi Johnson	Everett LeViness	Kimberly Martin	Nick Devlin	
Dara Allen-Lawrence	Hannah Chunu	Machele Miller Dill	Paris Simone Sherra	
David Harris	Harriet Harris	Mallory Sepulveda	Parker Gelsthorpe	



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1559 E Reading St. Tulsa OK  
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Minister RJ Smith

Sunday school - 9:30am  
Sunday Worship - 10:45am  
Monday Worship - 6:00pm  
Wednesday Bible Study - 5:00pm

## CAPERNAUM MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH

1962 N. Sheridan Rd.  
(918) 834-4747

Pastor Ruthie I. Howard

Sunday School  
10:00 a.m.  
Morning Worship  
11:00 a.m.

Bible Study & Prayer Wednesday 7:00 p.m.  
For Transportation (918) 402-6027

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Worship 11 a.m.

Bible Study  
Wednesday  
7 p.m.



Rev. Emanuel L. Collier, Sr.  
Pastor

## Gethsemane Baptist Church

727 East 56th St. North  
(918) 425-6613

Dr. W. T. Lauderdale

Sunday School  
9:00 a.m.

Church Services  
11:00 a.m.

## Zoe' Life Church of Tulsa

Rudisill Regional Library  
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Tulsa OK 74106  
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Pastor Richard and Cher Lyons

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Wed- Healing School: 6:30p - 8p

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Pastor Rick Bruner

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Sunday Morning  
Worship - 10:45

Sunday Evening Prayer - 7 pm  
Sunday Worship - 7:30 pm  
Wednesday Prayer - 7:30 pm  
Wednesday worship - 8pm

Rev. John W. Anderson

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F: 918-587-0642

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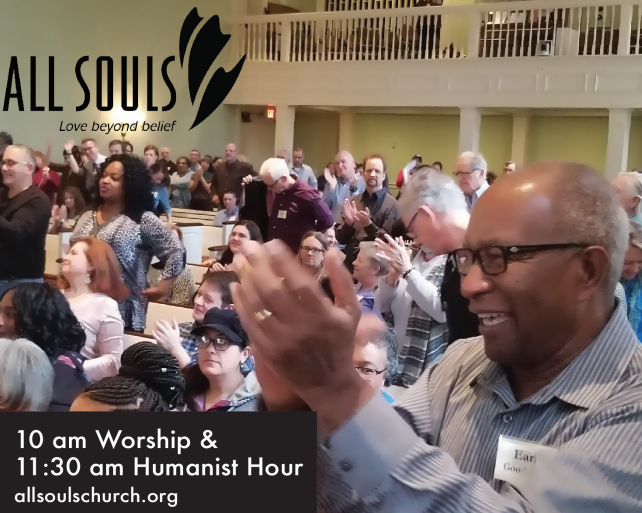
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# 3 Programs That Support Youth With Incarcerated Parents

Aziah Siid Word In Black



CHILDREN OF PROMISE, NYC VOLUNTEERS. PHOTO COURTESY CHILDREN OF PROMISE

Millions of children in the United States have experienced the incarceration of a parent. These organizations do their part to help.

The holiday season can be a time of healing and hope as family members come together in celebration. It can also be a time of grief and loss as you mourn a loved one who isn't there in the flesh to enjoy the festivities. It can also be a time of emptiness, especially for youth who are partaking in the holidays with one or both of their parents absent due to being incarcerated.

Multiple studies show having incarcerated parents impacts kids' physical and mental health, as well as their cognitive abilities. Students with an incarcerated parent are more likely to be suspended or expelled and less likely to go to college.

Approximately 10 million children had a parent imprisoned at some point in their lives. A 2022 analysis of federal data by the Prison Policy Initiative found that roughly "half (47%) of the approximately 1.25 million people in state prison are parents of minor children, and about 1 in 5 (19%) of those children is age 4 or younger."

The initiative found that "69% of people in state prison report having one or more children of any age, and 69% of those have a child under 18."

And race, as with everything in the United States, is a factor. Data from the National Institutes of Health shows Black children are 7.5 times more likely than white children to have a parent in prison.

Ky-Asha Holiday, 24, dealt with parental incarceration throughout her childhood and adult life. Her father comes home from his latest stint in prison in less than five days. It's been eight years since he's had his freedom.

"He was so far away from me, and traveling would

always take two days," Holiday tells Word In Black. "The processing procedure when you get to the facility was also a headache. I honestly feel like it affected both of us because he had to watch me grow up over the phone and over the few visits when we got to see each other."

Although a big part of her life was attached to the prison system, at age 24, she can't recall a single organization that supported her through the journey.

"I can't remember it ever being any programs to help me cope with my dad being incarcerated. I received the help from my family and friends," Holiday says. "I was super grateful that he kept in touch and still did what he could for me when he could, and I'll never take that away from him."

Even though nearly 10 million children had an imprisoned parent in their lifetime, students in the past and present can agree they may not have had the proper support channels outside of their loved ones. Here are three that can help:

### 1. Children of Promise, NYC

Children of Promise, NYC is an organization leading the charge in protecting, supporting, and providing resources to youth with caregivers in prison. The community-centered organization partners with children and families impacted by mass incarceration to help dismantle stigmas and help heal from the trauma plaguing Black and Brown communities.

The organization is the "only agency in NYC that seamlessly provides access to therapeutic empowerment services, one-on-one mentoring, after-school programming, and family engagement," according to its website.

In November, they hosted their annual Thanksgiving Drive for nearly 100 students, which was sponsored and supported by the likes of rapper Fetty Wap, rap group 41 The Movement, and entertainer Lala Anthony.

### 2. Angel Tree

The organization Angel Tree is a direct link from church to families.

It equips churches to strengthen relationships between incarcerated parents and their children and support the families of prisoners all year round. The hope is to help children know they are treasured and loved.

Angel Tree Christmas gives incarcerated parents a way to provide both a Christmas gift and a personal message that is delivered by local volunteers.

Every Angel Tree family is also given access to a free, easy-to-read copy of the Bible and access to the church, with the hope that prisoners' families may continue to minister to the family all throughout the year.

### 3. WE GOT US NOW

Founded in 2018 by Ebony Underwood, WE GOT US NOW, is a nonprofit that advocates for the well-being of children and young adults with incarcerated parents. They are set on creating awareness about children in this situation by focusing on engaging, educating, elevating, and empowering.

With a community made up of folks directly impacted by mass incarceration and those who seek criminal justice reform, they work to move the needle in the direction of equity and, eventually, to the end to the mass trafficking of bodies into the jail and prison system.

"We apply our guiding principles through public education, narrative change, technical advisement, civic engagement, leadership development, well-being and policy reform," the organization's website says.





PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

# Black Travel: *How to Get Involved*

Travel is proven to relieve stress, enhance creativity, and boost happiness — but barriers to access often leave Black folks missing out on the benefits.

Nadira Jamerson Word In Black

The beginning of James Baldwin’s love affair with Paris goes like this: In 1948 he bought a one-way ticket to the French capital, and only had \$40 in his pocket. That’s how badly he needed to get out of the United States and get away from racism. Fast forward to 2023, Ron DeSantis’ Stop W.O.K.E. campaign was part of efforts to create a hostile environment for Black people in Florida, and the NAACP ended up issuing a travel advisory in the state due to racism.

So even though travel has been proven to relieve stress, enhance creativity, and boost happiness — barriers to access often leave Black folks missing out on the benefits.

Travel is often seen “as quite inaccessible,” says Anita Francois, founder of Black Travel Summit, an organization dedicated to fostering opportunities within the Black travel community. It “has always been seen as a luxury that Black people were just not allowed to enjoy.”

## Less Than Half of Black Folks Have Traveled Internationally

According to data released in 2021 by Pew Research Center, “Black Americans are much less likely to have ever traveled abroad.” Only 49% have done so compared to 73% of Hispanic Americans and 75% of white people. Pew also found only 13% of Black adults had been to five or more countries compared to 15% of Hispanic and 30% of white adults.

Pew’s data revealed having a college degree makes Americans more likely to travel internationally. But even in college, it turns out only 5% of students who study abroad are Black.

Francois took her first international trip from London to Miami at age 7. Since then, she developed a strong passion for traveling and working to ensure that all Black folks get the opportunity to explore the world we live in.

“My love for traveling and my love for highlighting the cultural contributions of the African diaspora are what led me ultimately to creating the Black Travel Summit,” she says.

While travel costs are part of the problem — and the racial wealth gap doesn’t help in that regard — Francois says a lack of Black representation in the travel space keeps many Black folks from believing that travel is possible.

“When you look at marketing campaigns, when you see billboards of these amazing holiday experiences on a cruise line or in another country on the beach, oftentimes, who

do you see? You don’t see people who look like you, so automatically, your mind makes it up for you that traveling is not for you,” she says.

## The Historical Impact of Overt Racism on Black Travel

There’s also the historical context of Black travel — Black people were not welcome in many places across the United States. There were only “certain hotels that Black people could enjoy, or clubs, or lounges,” Francois says.

As journalist Farai Chideya wrote in The New York Times in 2014, racial “segregation meant substandard seats and service on public transportation; and finding lodging on the road if you were black, in particular, was a challenge, especially in the South.”

That led to the creation of The Negro Traveler’s Green Book, which was published in 1964. Francois says that racism’s lasting impact leaves many Black travelers still wondering where they can travel safely.

## How to Get More Black People Traveling

What’s the key to getting more Black people traveling? Francois says connecting the community to other Black folks who are making their travel dreams a reality can make all the difference. She also urges to build community online with brands that are focused on the Black travel experience. She recommends checking out Black Travel Club, Black Travel Alliance, and Traveling Black Women’s Network.

“One of the most important things, especially within the Black community, is community building, Francois says. “We can connect with other people who have experienced a particular destination or hotel themselves and can advise us.”

And, with the climate crisis threatening to erase natural wonders across the globe, there has never been a more important time to travel and see the world. If you’ve been thinking of becoming a Black traveler, Francois says to take the leap of faith because you won’t be disappointed.

“I believe that traveling is extremely important, not only for Black travelers but for the soul. It’s nourishment. It’s food. It’s education. It’s experience,” she says. “It’s life’s greatest teacher, and it’s something we can use as a tool to know more about the world and our place in it.”



THE CREATIVE COLLECTIVE NYC’S MINI-DOCUMENTARY, “CULTURE CON: THE NEXT CHAPTER.” screen shot. PHOTO YOUTUBE

# CultureCon, A Black Creative’s Paradise

Ariyana Griffin Word In Black

The annual event is the place to be for Black creators and artists looking to network, build a community with other creatives, show off their fashion flair, be inspired and learn.

The Creative Collective NYC’s highly anticipated conference, CultureCon, is making its way to New York Oct. 7-8. The two-day event is the last to close out the year; in previous months it was hosted in Los Angeles and Atlanta.

Billed as the “Biggest Creative Homecoming,” the annual event is the place to be for Black creators and artists looking to network, build a community with other creatives, show off their fashion flair, be inspired and learn.

“When I was dreaming of CultureCon, it really was because I didn’t see it in the world. And I just thought, ‘How can there be so many spaces and yet none of them truly represent the world that I see, the talent that I see, the collaboration that I see?’” said Imani Ellis, founder and CEO of

CultureCon in the mini-documentary, “Culture Con: The Next Chapter.”

“It’s high time that creatives of color have a space where they feel welcomed, where they feel they can be themselves, where they feel they can be heard and seen,” said Michael Oloyede, digital strategy lead for CultureCon.

Each year, panelists such as entertainers Tracie Ellis Ross, Nicole Ari Parker and Jay Ellis grace the stage to have meaningful conversations about the entertainment industry, their creative processes, mental health and so much more.

In the upcoming conference, attendees can expect to hear from artists such as Tinashe, Teyana Taylor and Lola Brooke as well as media personalities, entrepreneurs and media pioneers. A contingent of social media influencers also will be in the building, including Aaliyah Jay, De’arra Taylor and Deandre Brown.

CultureCon is so much more than just sit-down conversations with favorite celebrities or influencers,

though, there will be many workshops and activities to motivate and inspire the next generation of creatives while providing them with resources and tools to do so.

There will be a job fair where people can network and connect with recruiters and possibly land a job in their dream profession. Workshops on various topics such as how to build a team, marketing and other business essentials will be provided throughout the weekend.

CultureCon is presented in partnership with Max, the streaming service. Other major partners include American Express, SheaMoisture, Prime Video and Freevee, Clinique, Google, CÎROC, Bulleit, Seedlip, Patreon, Paramount, Kickstarter, NBCUniversal, Spotify, Walmart, Tubi, Adidas, Ben & Jerry’s, Coca-Cola, Smart Water and more.

To learn more about CultureCon you can follow them on Instagram @Culturecon or visit their website, <https://theccnyc.com>.



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