

# CELEBRATING ART & CULTURE

**Adequately honoring the contributions that cultural organizations led by people of color have made to enrich the fabric of a community is no easy task. That's why grants to 16 Black arts organizations as part of Pittsburgh's Cultural Treasures initiative is just the first step of a multistage recognition process. By Elwin Green**

In the fall of 2020, The Heinz Endowments announced its participation in America's Cultural Treasures, an initiative created by the Ford Foundation in response to both the COVID-19 pandemic and the global call for racial justice that arose in the wake of multiple police killings of unarmed Black citizens.

The national initiative was designed to shift the paradigm for arts philanthropy in two ways: first, by focusing on arts organizations within communities of color, and second, by providing long-term operating support rather than the short-term or program-oriented support that had been the norm.

In Pittsburgh, that meant developing a process for allocating a \$10 million fund — half from the Ford Foundation and half from the Endowments — to organizations that would be named “cultural treasures” as part of the regional Pittsburgh's Cultural Treasures program that was launched last summer.

Almost immediately, the process upended plans for the local initiative.

“Originally, there were going to be five to seven institutions,” said Shaunda McDill, the Endowments’ program officer for arts and culture. But that limitation

did not sit well with the members of the program’s steering committee.

“When you look at the number [of arts organizations] that have no prior relationship with philanthropy and when you look at the way that communities, particularly Black communities, work collectively and when you look at the need, particularly in Pittsburgh ... it was determined by the steering committee that this was not the way to go,” Ms. McDill said.

“Would one of those groups or all five [or more] of those groups have been, maybe, more sustainable over time?” she continued. “We don’t know.”

“What we do know from research completed by TDC — one of the nation’s oldest nonprofit management consulting and research firms — on behalf of the Endowments is that financial investment in large institutions over decades does not ensure stability.”

The decision to enlarge the number of recipients was pivotal. With patience and compromise, the steering committee produced a list of 165 Black-led organizations, from which it made recommendations to the Endowments. The Endowments then named 16 of the recommended organizations as “cultural treasures,” awarding them grants

totaling \$5.4 million in the program's first round of funding and completing the first phase of what Ms. McDill described as a three-phase process.

The current second phase will focus on helping Black-led arts organizations to build capacity in areas such as communications and administration. The Endowments also is working with the POISE Foundation in Pittsburgh, America's oldest Black community foundation, and the New York-based, minority/women-owned firm CJAM Consulting to create a map of all Black-led cultural assets in a 10-county Western Pennsylvania region (Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Butler, Fayette, Greene, Indiana, Lawrence, Washington and Westmoreland). The public can suggest additions to this map at [www.heinz.org/strategic-areas/creativity/pittsburghs-cultural-treasures](http://www.heinz.org/strategic-areas/creativity/pittsburghs-cultural-treasures).

The goal of the second phase, with a \$3 million budget, is to provide multiyear support for the organizations selected, with the understanding that for this phase, Ms. McDill said, "We will identify and fund organizations and artist collectives we've never worked with."

The final phase sets aside \$1 million for responding to unanticipated needs and opportunities as they arise. It will also include evaluating the entire process and its results, and developing strategies for future work. The remaining \$1 million will go toward administration, with a focus on engaging Black-led consultants and vendors.

"The biggest win is that it is an iterative process," Ms. McDill said. "This initiative, as amazing as it is, this is a seed."

### **PITTSBURGH'S CULTURAL TREASURES INITIATIVE: A THREE-STAGE PROCESS**

1

A steering committee produced a list of 165 Black-led organizations, from which it made recommendations to the Endowments for potential grant recipients. Endowments officials and staff selected 16 of the recommended organizations to become "cultural treasures," awarding them grants totaling \$5.4 million.

2

The Endowments will invest \$3 million to help local Black-led arts organizations, including those the foundation has not previously worked with, build their capacity in areas such as communications and administration. The Endowments will work with the POISE Foundation in Pittsburgh and the New York-based, minority/women-owned firm CJAM Consulting to create a map of all Black-led cultural assets in a 10-county Western Pennsylvania region. The public can suggest additions to this map at [www.heinz.org/strategic-areas/creativity/pittsburghs-cultural-treasures](http://www.heinz.org/strategic-areas/creativity/pittsburghs-cultural-treasures).

3

One million dollars will be used to evaluate the Cultural Treasures initiative and its results, develop strategies for future work, and respond to unanticipated needs and opportunities as they arise. Another \$1 million will go toward administration, with a focus on engaging Black-led consultants and vendors.

## **PITTSBURGH'S CULTURAL TREASURES GRANT RECIPIENTS**

### **FOLLOWING ARE THE ORGANIZATIONS NAMED AS "CULTURAL TREASURES" AND THE GRANT AMOUNTS THEY RECEIVED THROUGH THE PITTSBURGH'S CULTURAL TREASURES INITIATIVE.**

#### **1HOOD MEDIA (\$250,000)**

In 2018, 1Hood Media created 1Hood Artist Academy to train young people both in producing art and in practicing activism. The program never got off to its envisioned start, said 1Hood co-founder and CEO Jasiri X.

In its first two years, launch plans were laid aside to focus on responding to the killing of Antwon Rose II, then to the Tree of Life massacre.

"So, when we get to 2020, we said, 'All right, we're gonna finally do this thing right,'" he said. The second launch brought the rapper Rakim to Pittsburgh.

Then came COVID-19 and then the murder of George Floyd. Plan A for the academy had to yield again to a new Plan B.

This time, the Pittsburgh's Cultural Treasures award has emboldened Jasiri X to say, "Let's do the Artist Academy in the way that we intended to in the first place." And that could include the creation of a residency program.

#### **AFRIKA YETU (\$150,000)**

President and CEO Elie Kihonia describes the impact of the Cultural Treasures award in the starkest terms possible.

"When you're feeling you're about to give up or you're feeling like you're getting ready to be buried, on your way to the cemetery, and they give you life."

The year 2020 brought to a halt the live performances of African music and dance for which Afrika Yetu is most well known, as venues shut down in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. While seeking to keep the organization afloat, Mr. Kihonia contracted the virus himself.

He recovered, but Afrika Yetu continued declining through 2020 and 2021. The award marks a turnaround, and Afrika Yetu will return to live performances. The grant's unrestricted nature, he says, will allow him to do "shows that I have been dying for years to put out," of a quality comparable to the Chinese dance and music extravaganza Shen Yun, but "the African version."

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Jasiri X, co-founder and  
chief executive officer, 1Hood Media



Renee Rosensteel

**1HOOD MEDIA**

Nairobi, a poet and performance artist with 1Hood Media, sings at an early voting event in November 2020 in the Hill District. 1Hood Media, a Pittsburgh’s Cultural Treasures grant recipient, is a collective of socially conscious artists and activists who use art to raise awareness about social justice issues.

### AFRO-AMERICAN MUSIC INSTITUTE (\$500,000)

The co-founders of AAMI, Dr. James T. Johnson Jr. and his wife, Pamela, summed up their response to the news of the Institute being named a cultural treasure in one word: FINALLY.

The award comes after 40 years of, as Dr. Johnson put it, “doing whatever it takes to make it work.”

Deciding what to do with the funds will take time. The breadth of their operations — providing individualized instruction in Black music forms, managing a boys’ choir, maintaining a schedule of performance events, and taking care of the building that houses it all as well as planning an expansion — means that “we have to study how this money will be disbursed,” Dr. Johnson said.

One thing is certain: A chunk of it will go toward preparing and promoting a major AAMI event in September.

### AUGUST WILSON AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURAL CENTER (\$1 MILLION)

During Janis Burley Wilson’s tenure as president and CEO, the August Wilson Center has rebounded nicely from the threat of bankruptcy. For the past five years, she said, it has achieved its goal of having a small surplus at the end of each year.

That has kept it out of trouble but has not kept it safe. Being safe requires having a little something socked away, a financial safety net. The center has not had that. Now it will.

“The money isn’t spent. We don’t have plans to spend it,” Ms. Burley Wilson said. “We plan to have a safety net.

“So, when the bad times come, we have a safety net. When an opportunity comes, we have it available to us. We don’t have big plans to spend \$1 million. We are just thrilled to have a little bit of security.”

### BALAFON WEST AFRICAN DANCE ENSEMBLE (\$150,000)

For Balafon, 2020 was a year of “serious ups and downs,” said Managing Director Linsey McDaniel. On the up side, the organization was working on a new project to have a group of artists go to Guinea to train. On the down side, the founder, Kadiatou Conte-Forte, was fighting a serious illness.

“It was beyond a relief” to learn of Balafon’s award, Ms. McDaniel said. “To kind of feel like, ‘OK, we have some means to keep things going in a space of uncertainty.’”

She plans to use some of the funds to continue preparing a new ballet to be produced later this year and to do so

### AFRO-AMERICAN MUSIC INSTITUTE

Irene Monteverde, center, gives keyboard lessons to Arionna Reed, right, during a class at the Afro-American Music Institute, a Cultural Treasures grantee. The institute, which is celebrating its 40th anniversary, promotes the arts through music education and a curriculum that offers instruction in a range of musical styles.



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with excellence, according to Ms. Conte-Forte’s maxim, “Don’t do it if it’s gonna look ugly.”

Otherwise, succession planning is a top priority. That will include hiring new staff. Before Ms. McDaniel’s hiring in 2020, Ms. Conte-Forte had been Balafon’s only paid staff since its founding in 1997.

### BOOM CONCEPTS (\$150,000)

Co-founders J. Thomas Agnew and D. S. Kinsel created BOOM in 2014 to share their workspace with other Black artists who needed a place to create. Since then, it has evolved with flexibility and fluidity.

“We listen to the community and try to figure out what the community needs, and we try to fill some of the voids,” Mr. Agnew said.

Filling voids has meant making the space available to non-Black minority artists and to LGBTQIA+ artists. It has meant letting the space become an exhibition space, an event space and a teaching space. It has meant collaborating with museums in and beyond Pittsburgh to connect them with Black artists.

### BOOM CONCEPTS

Dakarai Akil, far right, discusses his work on display at Boom Concepts with a visitor to the 2018 exhibit. Boom Concepts, another Pittsburgh’s Cultural Treasures award recipient, encourages the development of artistic and creative entrepreneurs representing marginalized voices by providing them studio and presentation space in various locations in Pittsburgh.



They don't know yet what that will mean regarding the Cultural Treasures award, but Mr. Agnew said, "Always the first thing in our thoughts is how we support the community. That's always what's important to us. How are we utilizing those funds, through BOOM Concepts, to support the community?"

### **HILL DANCE ACADEMY THEATRE (\$500,000)**

When the Cultural Treasures initiative was announced last summer, the Hill Dance Academy Theatre was busy buying the former St. Benedict the Moor school, a 27,000-square-foot building in Pittsburgh's Hill District neighborhood.

There, the organization will continue teaching dance to students between the ages of 3 and 18 in classes that run from September through June, with a four-week summer session also available. To do the work, the dance academy employs up to 20 faculty.

Regarding the use of the grant funds, CEO and Artistic Director Dr. Ayisha Morgan-Lee said in a written statement, "The award will be used for existing programs, and it will allow us to execute program ideas that we have not been able to do because of resources and people needed to make them come to fruition.

"It is a joy to know that the funds are unrestricted and that we can use the funds as we determine what our needs are."



### **KELLY STRAYHORN THEATER (\$750,000)**

"I was elated to receive a congratulations email from Shaunda McDill," recalled Kelly Strayhorn Theater Executive Director Joseph Hall. "It's a gift to receive affirmation of the work KST has done and is doing. Sometimes that's in the form of financial support from donors, and sometimes it's a message from an artist or community member expressing the impact KST has had on their lives.

"Receiving the email from Shaunda affirmed the work we've done as a community to craft a space we all deserve."

He did not specify how the funds would be used but said, "KST is focused on building wealth that will impact generations of culture creators and Black people who want to thrive where we live right here in East Liberty and beyond. The grant will aid us in delivering our mission as a home for creative experimentation, community dialogue and collective action rooted in the liberation of Black and queer people."

### KENTE ARTS ALLIANCE (\$250,000)

Since its founding in 2007, the Kente Arts Alliance has fulfilled its mission “to present high-quality art of the African Diaspora” by bringing to Pittsburgh such artists as Grammy Award winners (and National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Masters) Roy Haynes and Pharoah Sanders. And Kente Arts Alliance has done so without ever running a deficit.

During the height — or depth — of the pandemic, the organization was reluctant to move its programming online, Managing Director Gail Austin said.

Once Kente Arts Alliance finally did, it established a partnership with City of Asylum to do hybrid events under the banner Kente At Home. The next thing Ms. Austin knew, the organization had done seven of them.

Continuing Kente At Home is part of what Kente Arts Alliance wants to do with its Cultural Treasures award. The organization also has resumed live programming and plans a three-concert series of events in the fall at its home venue, the New Hazlett Theater. And Kente Arts Alliance also wants to expand its youth program.

But the primary use that Ms. Austin sees for the funds has nothing to do with programming.

“The main emphasis for this coming year is to establish a formal administrative structure,” she said. “We need much more personnel. We need them to be salaried; we can’t have an organization that’s run by volunteers. We need office space.”

### LEGACY ARTS PROJECT (\$250,000)

The news of having been named as a cultural treasure came three months after Legacy Arts had completed a three-year strategic plan. That process had been made possible by a grant from Arts Equity Reimagined, a philanthropic consortium of which the Endowments is a member.

So, for Erin Perry, Legacy Arts’ executive director, the first answer to the question of what to do with the award money comes quickly: [The grant could lead to] “having a space of our own, whether that is finding a building, or imagining the development of a property.”

“I’m excited about models such as the Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild,” she said, referring to that Pittsburgh nonprofit’s building and its physical presence in a neighborhood, “and ways that art is made accessible to people throughout the community.”

Having a cousin who attended Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild and who has built a career as a ceramics practitioner and teacher, Ms. Perry says she knows the profound impact that such programs can have on someone’s life.

“And when you know, you’re responsible, so make that happen!”

### MANCHESTER BIDWELL CORPORATION (\$500,000)

Because of its belief in the power of the arts, the staff at Manchester Bidwell — parent organization of several arts and trades groups, including the Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild — had already been brainstorming a “what if” wish list before the agency was named a cultural treasure, said President and Chief Executive Officer Kevin Jenkins.

A top item was establishing an artist-in-residence program, and the organization had an artist in mind. Marcè Nixon-Washington has been named as the inaugural William E. Strickland Jr. Fellow at the Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild, an honor named after the guild’s founder. Ms. Nixon-Washington, who graduated from West Virginia University last year with a B.F.A. in ceramics, is an alumna of the Guild. Now, she’ll spend a year there.

“The gift was very timely in allowing us to bring her in, allowing her to continue to hone her craft,” Mr. Jenkins said, “but also to be with us for an extended period of time, where she can work with the young people here and talk about her journey and about her love of the arts.”

### NEW HORIZON THEATER (\$250,000)

When Board President Joyce Meggerson-Moore first read the award letter from the Endowments, she thought the email was a prank, then suspected that it was a mistake.

“Did they put a comma in the wrong place?” she recalled with a laugh. “Did they put an extra zero on it?”

She said the Cultural Treasures award means, first, that she won’t have to “pull out all of my hair” next season to figure out how to pay the actors, technicians and others who work on each production.

The second thing it means is that New Horizon can consider the possibility of acquiring its own space, having always rented venues for its productions with locations ranging from the Byham Theater in Downtown to the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh–Homewood, a neighborhood in the eastern part of the city. But ownership would bring its own challenges, including the need to market the space for others to use between productions.

“Those are the kinds of things we have to think about and discuss. Is it going to be worth it?” she said. “But we at least have some possibilities.”

### LEGACY ARTS PROJECT

Master drummer Fode Lavia Camara, center, instructs Rachel Gross, left, and Darlene Stewart on drumming techniques as part of an African drum class in April offered by the Legacy Arts Project, another Pittsburgh’s Cultural Treasures grantee. Legacy Arts provides activities, performances and events designed to present the artistic traditions of Africa and the African diaspora.

### NEW HORIZON THEATER

Karla Payne and Sam Lothard perform in the play “The Green Book,” a February production of Pittsburgh’s Cultural Treasures grantee New Horizon Theater. The community theater company presents cultural events that reflect African American points of view and provides professional development opportunities for ethnic writers and performers.



“

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Erin Perry, executive director,  
Legacy Arts Project

Kipp Madison



Richena Brockinson

### PEARLARTS STUDIOS (\$150,000)

Staycee Pearl was in a hospital waiting room, idly scrolling through her email, when she saw the one that said PearlArts had been named a cultural treasure.

“I just started screaming,” the organization’s co-artistic director said. “Everybody looked at me like I was completely nuts.”

Ms. Pearl and her husband, Herman, also a PearlArts co-artistic director, have not yet decided how to use the new funds.

“We’re like a household that is paycheck to paycheck right now,” she said.

They were already working on a capital campaign to secure new space in Braddock Borough, east of Pittsburgh. Beyond that, “the first thing I thought of was to continue to pay our dancers,” Ms. Pearl said. “Herman and I don’t get paid much; we could use a bump in our salary. And we’ll have to hire people when we move into the new space.”

So, the new funding is well spoken for, even if it has not been specifically allocated. But she also wants to establish “a cushion, some kind of savings” to sustain the organization through lean times.

### PITTSBURGH PLAYWRIGHTS THEATRE COMPANY (\$250,000)

PPT founder and Executive Director Mark Clayton Southers said that his organization will use the Cultural Treasures award to hire “maybe two more staff members.”

Beyond that, “we don’t have plans to just start writing checks,” he said. “We’re staying the course and trying to operate and function in a manner that is not wasteful, in keeping with our way of supporting playwrights in their work and encouraging people to write.

“We know there’s going to be a lot of new stuff coming out of this.”

The company’s upcoming schedule of live performances includes the return of the Theatre Festival in Black and White as part of the Three Rivers Arts Festival in June, and a co-production with the August Wilson House of the late Pittsburgh native’s play “Jitney” in August and September.



**WE CAN PROBABLY  
[COMPLETE] SOME  
THINGS NOW AND  
TIGHTEN THEM UP.”**

**Christine Bethea,**  
president, Women of Visions



Jared Wickerham

#### **WOMEN OF VISIONS**

Artist LaVerne Kemp explains her fiber tree artwork during a Women of Visions show in October 2020 at the Frick Fine Arts Building on the University of Pittsburgh campus. A Cultural Treasures grant recipient, Women of Visions is one of the country's longest-running collectives of Black women visual artists.

#### **UJAMAA COLLECTIVE (\$150,000)**

For Executive Director LaKeisha Wolf, Ujamaa's selection as a cultural treasure provided long-overdue affirmation, not for herself or even just for Ujamaa, but for Black women who “have been doing work for centuries that is highly unseen and invisible to the dominant culture, to mainstream eyes.”

The award will help Ujamaa to continue moving forward with the implementation phase of a strategic plan created with assistance of the Program to Aid Citizen Enterprises. Even before the Cultural Treasures grant, “we knew that we were at a precipice of growth,” Ms. Wolf said.

The Collective had already launched a new membership campaign last fall. Now, to better serve its growing membership, the organization plans to either expand its current space or to acquire a new building. Doing so will fulfill a long-held dream of providing members with spaces where they can engage in light manufacturing.

#### **WOMEN OF VISIONS (\$150,000)**

The grant to Women of Visions, one of the nation's earliest Black femme artist collectives, is particularly notable because of how outsized the funding is compared to the group's annual budget. President Christine Bethea said that WOV has only recently hit the \$50,000 budget mark, but that over its 40-year history, the average budget has been closer to \$20,000.

The question of how to use it will be taken up at a retreat in June, where members will put together a five-year plan. Ms. Bethea said that, in general, “We can probably [complete] some things now and tighten them up. But a lot of it will be for new projects and go toward professional development, which we desperately need.”

The group has already achieved a breakthrough that comes to fruition this year: As a result of Women of Visions' negotiations, the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh presented a collective exhibition of work by Black women, the first in the museum's 126-year history. The exhibit, which opened May 28, ran for two weeks. **h**