

# Stories of the Pittsburgh's Cultural Treasures Initiative

*These stories were posted on this page as a continuation of the program's goal to celebrate the contributions these groups have made to Western Pennsylvania. The articles in the series reflect the importance of recognizing the organizations' work and that of others like them. Photos by Brian Cook/Golden Sky Media.*

---

## The Treasures



### 16 Black-led cultural organizations

Ervin Dyer is not sure when he first came to know of “A Great Day in Harlem,” the inspired 1958 black-and-white photograph of 57 jazz musicians gathered in the New York neighborhood once known as the capital of Black America.

But since he was a teenager, studying Harlem when he saw the image, he’s never forgotten it. The assembly of those jazz musicians – in their suits and ties and fancy dresses, and those grand but frayed brownstones in the background – made for a memorable photograph.

The freelance photographer Art Kane, working for Esquire magazine, gathered the musicians – and the neighborhood children who spontaneously joined in – on the morning of Aug. 12, at 17 East 126th Street between Fifth and Madison avenues. The photograph’s sepia beauty impressed Mr. Dyer, as did its powerful representation of Harlem as a home of Black ideas, culture, arts, music, and performance to shape identity and pride. So, for Mr. Dyer, the thought of having all of those contributors to Black arts and culture gathered at one place made it an enchanting moment – and one worth replicating in Pittsburgh.

In the spring of 2022, the Pittsburgh Black Media Federation (PBMF) was given a grant to help coordinate a project that would document the first cohort of Pittsburgh's Cultural Treasures, 16 Black-led cultural organizations in the Pittsburgh region that champion Africana arts and heritage. The groups also are part of America's Cultural Treasures, a Ford Foundation initiative created in response to both the COVID-19 pandemic and the urgent need to support underfunded arts organizations led by people of color. The Heinz Endowments was invited to participate in the initiative in the fall of 2020 and the following summer launched the \$10 million Pittsburgh's Cultural Treasures, a program jointly funded by Ford and developed in partnership with the Pittsburgh-based POISE Foundation, America's oldest Black community foundation.

Mr. Dyer, a member of PBMF, was later asked to lead a multimedia project documenting the contributions of these cultural organizations to the region. Their stories and images will appear here on the Endowments' website and on Medium, the online social publishing platform.

As he began working on shaping the project, Mr. Dyer's first thought was that it would be special to gather the artists, directors, and innovators – and the writers who tell their stories – and re-create, as much as possible, the spirit and technique of Mr. Kane's historic image.

Mr. Dyer then asked a collective of Black scholars, writers, journalists, and photographers to help to profile the 16 creatives – the dancers, actors, directors, singers, visual artists, and nonprofit leaders.

"We set out to understand and highlight the work they currently do," he said, "and to show how their work is connected to a long legacy of Black thought and engagement of African arts, culture and ideas that foster community empowerment and self-development. I was excited to bring these artists together."

The group gathered at 2:30 p.m. on a Saturday afternoon to "best capture the autumn sun," said photographer Brian Cook, of Golden Sky Media.

They gathered in the historic Hill District, the Pittsburgh equivalent of Black Harlem, and a neighborhood once described as the Crossroads of the World, for the wave of musicians and artists who would wash through on the way from Chicago to New York.

They gathered in the center of the Hill, on the steps of the former Irene Kauffman Settlement House, an institution that in the 1900s offered services to immigrants and Black migrants from the South to help them begin a new life in urban Pittsburgh.

They gathered under the sunny skies, and the [16 treasures and writers](#) climbed the stairs and stood in front of the building's bold columns and smiled.

The photographer clicked his camera. The rest, as they say, is history.

This project has been transformative for Mr. Dyer, allowing him to revisit a magical photograph from his childhood. In the same way, he's hoping that this project, these images and the stories will transform and inspire readers.

“For people of African descent, connecting to their African heritage continues to be a way to be made whole,” he said. “For others, it is a way to begin to understand the vast humanity and innovation that flows, like a river, out of the continent and across Africa’s global diaspora.”

Even if that connection begins on the steps of an old settlement house in Pittsburgh’s Hill District.

*Ervin Dyer is a writer, editor, and sociologist who focuses on telling stories of the African community. Twitter: @eedyerson1*

## August Wilson Center



*Janis Burley Wilson, President and CEO of August Wilson African American Cultural Center*

[The Writer's Landscape by Tim Grant](#)

## 1Hood Media



*A dynamic Pittsburgh collective uses the arts and activism to promote social justice and help liberate individuals and the community.*

[1Hood Media by LaMont Jones Jr.](#)

## Playwrights Theatre



*Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre puts the development of actors and writers center stage.*  
[A Matter of Faith by Tawanda W. Johnson](#)

## Legacy Arts



*The Legacy Arts Project celebrates the long lineage and wisdom of African dance and music.*  
[Past is Present by Yven Destin](#)

## BOOM Concepts



*The creatives behind Pittsburgh's Black-owned gallery space, BOOM Concepts, help artists and the community to blossom.*  
[BOOM Times by Deborah M. Todd](#)



## Afrika Yetu



*Afrika Yetu shares the music, dance of the continent – and gets immigrants settled.*  
[Crossing Cultures by Jordan Snowden](#)

## Hill Dance Academy Theatre



*Hill Dance Academy Theatre, moving in the right direction to teach and promote Black art and culture.*  
[Dance Lessons by Kara Henderson](#)

## New Horizon Theater



*For more than 30 years, New Horizon Theater has put the spotlight on African American stories.*  
[Putting Black Life Center Stage by LaMont Jones Jr.](#)

## PearlArts



*Trailblazing artist uses performance to preserve Black dance and culture in Pittsburgh and beyond.*

[PearlArts: Black Art Reinvented by Marcia Liggett](#)

## Kente Arts



*Kente Arts Alliance uses jazz and diverse African and Black American art forms to weave together cultural presentations, lessons.*

[A Cultural Quilt by Donovan Harrell](#)

## Women of Visions



*Women of Visions elevates the work and history of Pittsburgh's female visual artists.*

[A Union of Sisterhood and Art by B. Denise Hawkins](#)

## Balafon West African Dance Ensemble



*Guinea native restarts Balafon West African Dance Ensemble in Pittsburgh to train a new generation of performers.*

[Mama Kadiatou's Legacy by Kara Henderson](#)

## Manchester Bidwell



*Using the arts, jobs training, and dignity, Pittsburgh nonprofit gives adults and youth the tools to transform their lives.*

[Miracles at Manchester Bidwell by Tim Grant](#)

## Ujamaa Collective



*Ujamaa Collective uplifts Africana women using cooperative economics and a fair-trade marketplace for cultural, artistic exchange.*

[Cultural Bazaar by B. Denise Hawkins](#)



## Kelly Strayhorn Theater



*The Pittsburgh theater proudly uses the tradition of network building and diverse arts as platforms for liberation.*

[The Soul of Kelly Strayhorn by Liberty Ferda](#)