













KANSAS!

75th Anniversary Celebration: The Freedom Issue

75th

Revisiting the Dream

A Celebrated Photo Series
Returns to Kansas



inside

features



PHOTOGRAPH Bri'loRee' Pusch-Zuniga

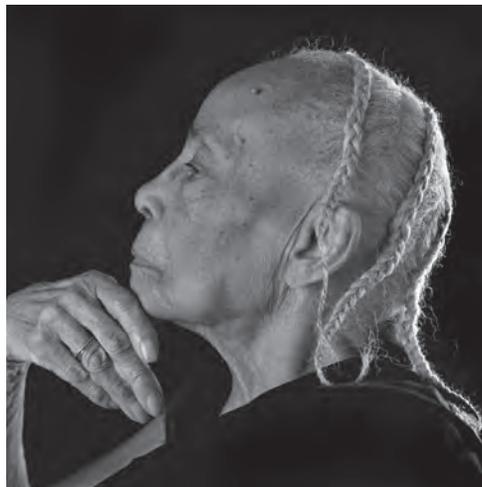
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THE RETURN OF A
**WORLD
DREAMED**

A Kansas museum brings home a landmark collection of photographs documenting the power and dignity of African American women

Septima Clark is featured on the cover of Lanker's book, *I Dream a World: Portraits of Black Women Who Changed America*. She worked with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and recruited hundreds of teachers who taught thousands to read, register to vote and stand up for their rights.



Eva Jessye was born in Coffeyville, Kansas, and was choral director for the first Broadway production of George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* in 1935. She was Kansas' Ambassador of the Arts for many years.

BY Martinez Hillard

PHOTOGRAPHY BY Brian Lanker (courtesy Mulvane Art Museum) and BriJoRae' Pusch-Zuniga with Patrice Jackson and Nick Krug



◀ Gwendolyn Brooks was born in Topeka and won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1950 for her book, *Annie Allen*—the first black writer to win the award.

“I felt the need to prevent these historical lives from being forgotten,” the late photojournalist Brian Lanker wrote in his preface to *I Dream A World: Portraits of Black Women who Changed America*.

It’s arguably the most celebrated collection of photographs from the expansive career of this award-winning Kansas photographer. The portraits from the book were originally shown in 1989 at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. At the time, C. Gerald Fraser of the *New York Times* offered that Lanker’s images demonstrated how the photographer “saw these women as few others saw them.”

Thirty years after this debut, the entire collection of photographs returns to Kansas to find a permanent home among the Mulvane Art Museum’s collection at Washburn University in Topeka. The Mulvane will celebrate the collection’s arrival with a grand opening set for February 14th at 5:00 pm.

Connie Gibbons, the director of Mulvane Art Museum, sees this exhibition’s permanent landing at Mulvane Art Museum as nothing short of a triumph.

“Lanker got his start here in Topeka and was awarded a Pulitzer Prize while he was here,” says Gibbons. “It seems so right that the circle closes and this work comes back to us in Topeka, Kansas.”

Gibbons also believes there is a synchronicity to be considered in the collection’s finding its way back to the Sunflower State at a time when conversations of race and personal aspirations are equally timely.

“The things that we’ve been committed to as a community and as a campus and certainly as a museum feel like it’s time for it to come back here,” she shares. “This becomes another tool for us to [have] the kinds of conversations and programming that we should be [having].”

Lanker, who died in 2011, spent a great portion of his early career in photojournalism at the *Topeka Capital-Journal*, where he quickly amassed numerous accolades for his work, twice awarded Newspaper Photographer of the Year as well as the Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography in 1973 for his photo series documenting natural childbirth. As he came of

age in the sixties and seventies, eras rife with social tumult, Lanker likened himself to many of his white male peers who were awakening to America’s bigotry as it unfolded across his television and in front of his camera lens.

Lanker began his research on *I Dream A World* by identifying three people he felt represented the under-recognized achievements and capabilities of Black American women. These women—civil rights leader and politician Barbara Jordan; poet and novelist Alice Walker; and domestic worker and family friend Priscilla Williams—collectively illustrated what Lanker intended to capture, a multi-dimensional examination of lives that had been marginalized or silenced yet had played essential roles in winning hard-fought rights, freedoms and dignity as Americans.

Lanker’s final photo series of 75 Black women was paired with essays that illuminated the wide-range of first-hand experience. Notables such as Toni Morrison, Oprah Winfrey, and Ruby Dee find space alongside other artists, college professors, social workers, politicians, journalists, and activists. These are lives that bridged historic Afrocentrism and contemporary Black Centrism in American culture. And they also delve deeply into the celebration of ancestry, the Black American experience of passing traditions down through storytelling. There’s immense talk of family and of mothers with little to offer but mountain-scaling empowerment. There are confrontations and gatekeepers, words of racism and sexism seared into psyches. There are lessons learned, taught, and reassessed from one generation to another.

While Lanker set out to ensure these influential women would be remembered, his project ultimately captured images and stories of ancestors and histories that were anything but forgotten. They were there, always, alive in the women who stood and sat in front of his camera—and now they are alive before us, in the images that have returned.

“We are building It”

Perhaps the most enduring legacy of *I Dream a World* is the cultural tapestry it weaves between generations. The themes raised in the book continue to resonate in industries and practices as diverse as women's health, suicide prevention, entrepreneurship, visual art, and photography—wherever contemporary Black women continue to achieve, advocate, and advance in unique and significant ways.

We sat down with a group of women to explore the themes Brian Lanker raised in the late 1980s and to examine their relevance to modern issues facing Black women in Kansas.

Like many who are marginalized in America's society, Black women in Kansas face a myriad of presumptions, stereotypes, and even physical danger as they navigate spaces in which they've long been invisible to the majority culture. Despite the obstacles they face, many Black women are aware that their successes open doors for others.

Entrepreneur Jasira Monique notes that, to this day, Black women “don't have the same access to funding, which would allow for more research, team development and growth. As an African American owner of a women's empowerment business, I think it's harder to gain buy-in and support from women who do not look like me. I want to speak to all women who need help achieving their dreams.”

“I often have to remind other non-Black professionals that ‘those people’ are my people, and I am theirs,” says licensed specialist clinical social worker Tara D. Wallace. “As a professional, I struggle when I witness Black women not being validated for their personal experiences and only recognized for how they choose to celebrate the fact that what was meant to kill them did not. If only people knew the hell they went through just to make it to that moment, they would probably celebrate with them. I know I do. High five, finger snaps or a hearty ‘Yaaaaaaas!’”

Monique describes a common scenario: “We are often ‘featured’ or ‘presented’ within roles and organizations when our presence benefits the overall perception of that particular cause or organization. However, Black women in America know the difference between tolerance and acceptance. We've [become] clearer in communicating that we no longer want to be the faces of organizations or entities

that tolerate our presence but don't reward our contributions with equity and equal treatment.”

“In some settings I was told that I was too ethnic,” visual artist Oshara Meesha recalls. “While at the same time I have many white clients who love and purchase both my ‘ethnic’ artwork and my jewelry.”

Photographer and Kansas native Patrice Jackson offers, “As long as there is an idea of ‘acceptable blackness’ and colorism within our own community, we can never truly move forward. As a light-skinned Black woman I know that I have certain privileges compared to other Black women. I know that is something that both advances me and holds me back because I feel like I am not accepted among my peers. We need to destroy ‘acceptable blackness’ and start being viewed by the content of our character and the work we make.”

Though *I Dream a World* was published in 1989, one theme that persists today is that the work of Black women remains deeply personal, often nurtured by elders and mentors.

Glenda Washington, senior vice president of entrepreneurial and minority business development for GoTopeka, describes how her career path was guided by generations before her.

“My grandmother was from a large family. There were 6 girls and 5 boys and they all had an inkling to be entrepreneurs,” says Washington. “Every Sunday we came together and talked about what we wanted and how we could get it. It was visioning. Our village was very strong.”

Accomplished health and wellness advocate Chris Omni attributes her ceaseless motivation to her mother's journey.

“Mama moved in with us in February 2016,” she begins. “She took her final breath on March 31, 2016, at 10:20 am. I was the only one in the room and in the house when this life-altering moment occurred. She watched me take my first breath and she gave me the honor of watching her take her final breath. During this sacred exchange, I knew my life would never be the same. Her oncologist shared 10 days earlier, ‘Clara fought cancer [for 26] years because of her faith and her fitness. Those [words] would be the seeds that would grow into greatness.’”

“As Black women, individually, we are overcomers who have the power to change the lives of our families and those around us,” concludes Wallace. “We no longer have to dream a world. Collectively, we are building it.” **KM**



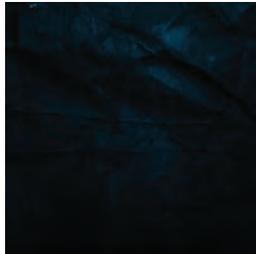
CHRIS OMNI

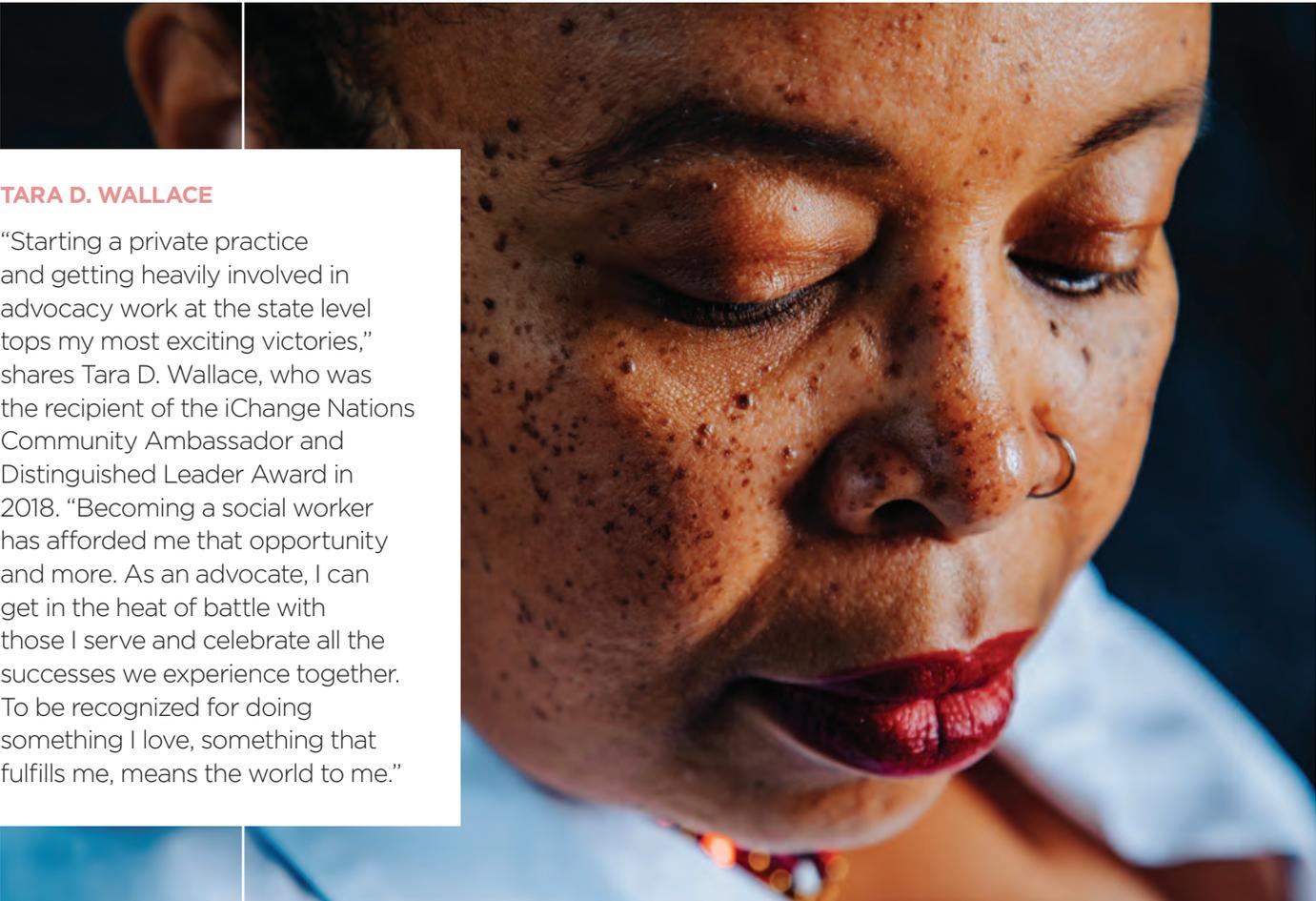
“I am sharing the compassion that [my mother] shared with me for over four decades. I am living her legacy,” summarizes Omni. “I love Black women and I need them to know that. I need them to see themselves positively reflected in my work. I need them to know that they are not alone in this struggle. I need them to know that their voices are heard and will be shared.”



JASIRA MONIQUE

“I truly want to see women believe in themselves, like my great-grandmother did,” recalls Monique. “She was an entrepreneur in a sense, but she never worked for a corporation in her life. She only worked for private families and was able to turn her earnings into property and higher education for her son. I want to build where she left off, creating something sustainable for our family’s legacy.”



A close-up, low-angle portrait of Tara D. Wallace. She has her eyes closed and a serene expression. Her skin is dark with visible freckles. She is wearing a nose ring and red lipstick. The lighting is soft and directional, highlighting the texture of her skin.

TARA D. WALLACE

“Starting a private practice and getting heavily involved in advocacy work at the state level tops my most exciting victories,” shares Tara D. Wallace, who was the recipient of the iChange Nations Community Ambassador and Distinguished Leader Award in 2018. “Becoming a social worker has afforded me that opportunity and more. As an advocate, I can get in the heat of battle with those I serve and celebrate all the successes we experience together. To be recognized for doing something I love, something that fulfills me, means the world to me.”

A full-body portrait of Oshara Meesha sitting on a colorful, patterned armchair. She is wearing a patterned top, a grey jacket with a fur collar, and a headwrap. She has a large afro and is looking off to the side with a thoughtful expression. The background is a bright, indoor space with plants.

OSHARA MEESHA

“I am driven by my desire that others will be touched in some way by what I do. I want my art to do the healing and moving in this world. I spent so many years afraid to do anything or even think that I could do anything. I held myself back because of trauma. I now realize I deserve to be healed and my art brings me healing and I believe it brings healing to others.”