



# THE BALTIMORE TIMES

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28 DAYS  
OF BLACK  
FUTURES  
CYPHER

THE POWER OF ONE  




 powered by  
CLLCTIVLY



*28 Days of Black Futures, CLLCTIVLY's annual practice of advancing narrative power through creativity. Through the Black Futures Cypher, 28 local artists contribute original tracks under the creative direction of Von Vargas, forming a collective expression that unfolds throughout February. Each artist carries The Power of One in their own way, together forming a collective expression that unfolds across the campaign. (See article on page 6)*



## Dry January and Baltimore's Unhappy Hour Dilemma

By Michelle Petties

January invites reflection. Across Baltimore, many residents are setting intentions around health, finances, and balance. For a growing number, Dry January has become a meaningful pause — an opportunity to examine not just alcohol consumption, but the systems and social norms that quietly shape our habits.

### One of those norms is the after-work happy hour.

From downtown office corridors to neighborhood bars in Federal Hill, Hampden, and Harbor East, happy hour has long been woven into Baltimore's professional culture. It's often framed as harmless — a way to decompress, network, and build relationships after a demanding workday. But when we look closer, the true cost of this ritual tells a different story — one with real consequences for individual health, workplace productivity, and community well-being.

### The Hidden Health Toll

Happy hour menus across the city rarely prioritize health. Fried foods, oversized portions, and sugary cocktails dominate, encouraging overconsumption. Over time, these choices contribute to weight gain, inflammation, and chronic disease. In Baltimore City, where rates of obesity, diabetes, and heart disease already exceed national averages, the impact is not theoretical — it's personal.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, obesity-related healthcare costs reach \$147 billion annually nationwide. For Baltimore employers, those costs show up as higher insurance premiums, sick days, and reduced performance — burdens shared by businesses and workers alike.

### Alcohol Culture and Productivity Loss

Happy hours are designed to increase drinking — discounts, social pressure, and



**Michelle Petties**  
Courtesy photo

unspoken expectations make it hard to opt out without feeling excluded. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism estimates that excessive drinking costs the U.S. economy \$249 billion annually, largely due to lost productivity and healthcare expenses.

In a city where many residents already juggle long commutes, multiple jobs, and caregiving responsibilities, the physical toll of late nights and disrupted sleep is amplified. The National Sleep Foundation reports that alcohol before bed reduces sleep efficiency by about 9 percent, leading to fatigue, poor concentration, and slower decision-making the next day.

### Time Taken from Health and Family

Every hour spent at happy hour is an hour not spent walking Patterson Park, cooking a nourishing meal, attending a child's event, or simply resting. For Baltimore professionals working to break cycles of stress-related illness, alcohol-centered

socializing can quietly undermine progress.

The American Psychological Association reports that employees who engage in regular physical activity experience 27 percent lower absenteeism and greater productivity — benefits that extend beyond the workplace into families and neighborhoods.

### The Illusion of Connection

Happy hours are often defended as team builders, yet alcohol rarely creates deep or inclusive connections. Research from Harvard Business Review shows that teams bond more effectively through shared challenges and meaningful collaboration than through social drinking — resulting in stronger trust and communication.

For employees in recovery, managing health conditions, or simply choosing not to drink, happy hour culture can feel less like bonding and more like exclusion.

### What Businesses Rarely Calculate

Alcohol-related productivity losses cost U.S. businesses approximately \$33 billion each year, according to the Society for Human Resource Management. Presenteeism — showing up but functioning at a fraction of capacity — often outweighs absenteeism. Baltimore employers investing in wellness initiatives, mentoring, and inclusive team building consistently see higher engagement and retention.

### A Moment to Reimagine

Dry January offers more than a break from alcohol — it offers insight. It asks us to question which habits truly serve us and which ones we've inherited without reflection.

As someone who has spent years exploring the intersections of addiction, food, trauma, and behavior change, I've learned this: people don't struggle because they lack motivation. They struggle because environments, culture, and stress make unhealthy choices easier than healthy ones.

### The Bottom Line

If Baltimore wants a healthier, more productive workforce, we must look beyond individual willpower and examine the systems we normalize. Connection doesn't require cocktails. Community doesn't require compromise.

Dry January is an invitation — not to judge or eliminate joy — but to imagine healthier ways to gather, unwind, and belong. And perhaps, to build a workplace culture where well-being is not an afterthought, but a shared value worth protecting.

*Michelle Petties is a TEDx speaker, Food Story coach, and award-winning memoirist. After gaining and losing 700 pounds, Michelle discovered the secret to overcoming stress and emotional overeating. Her free workbook, Mind Over Meals, reveals her core principles for losing weight and keeping it off.*

# WORKSHOP

## Reflections of Love

2 WORKSHOPS SAME DAY

2 DIFFERENT VENUES

### ST. MATTHEWS NEW LIFE UMC

416 e. 23rd St Baltimore  
21218

### GOVANS - BOUNDARY UMC

5210 York Road  
Baltimore 21212

FEBRUARY

7

FEBRUARY

7

**TOPIC: SACRED OR  
SHAMEFUL?: SEX, FAITH, AND  
THE FEMALE FORM**

Reclaiming the sacredness of  
the body as God's creation.

**SATURDAY  
11AM - 12:30PM**

**MICHELLE PETTIES**

HOST

**TOPIC: RECLAIMING THE  
EROTIC: LESSONS FROM AUDRE  
LORDE**

Exploring divine energy and  
creativity as acts of worship and  
self-love.

**SATURDAY  
2:30PM - 4PM**

**LIVE**

**JOIN US AS WE BREAK GENERATIONAL PATTERNS AND AFFIRM  
THAT OUR BODIES WERE ALWAYS CREATED IN LOVE.**

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## Bring Back the Busy Signal: From Pet Peeves to Peace Treaty, Part 2

By Karen Clay

Clay Technology and Multimedia, L.L.C.

If Part 1 (“No More Silent Nights”) was the friendly reminder that our devices never sign off anymore, this article provides practical tips for minimizing the constant “noise” of always on communication. To recap, we said the overload isn’t just “too many messages.” There are **too many channels**, all competing to be “the urgent one.” We named the five friction points that fuel most adult communication pet peeves:

1. **Timing friction:** the message may be fine, but the *hour* is not.
2. **Urgency inflation:** everything sounds like a five-alarm fire.
3. **Channel mismatch:** the wrong tool for the job (novels via text; tiny emails with giant attachment energy).
4. **Clarity debt:** vague messages that make the receiver do detective work.
5. **Audience mistakes:** Reply-All storms, surprise group chats, the accidental “everyone” announcement.

We also discussed managing expectations regarding speed, formality, boundaries, and records. So, the good news is that a few shared signals can go a long way to remedying the communication overload you feel. Consider the following suggestions:

**#1: Adopt the one rule that prevents most drama: Assume messages are asynchronous unless the sender labels them urgent:** If you didn’t say it was time-sensitive, don’t be shocked when someone replies later. Consider these three labels for text, emails and chats

- **FYI** = no reply needed
- **Today** = reply when you can
- **Urgent** = call-worthy (and say why)

This one small habit eliminates a lot of mind-reading.

**#2: Pick the right tool:** Before you send a message, ask: “*What kind of communication is this?*”

- Need a record, details, longer explanation? Send an email.
- Need quick coordination? Text or chat will suffice.
- Sensitive, emotional, or complicated? A phone call is the best method of communication.
- Is it **truly** urgent? Then a phone call with a short follow-up message is probably best.

**#3: Five channels, five mini-protocols:** Think of these as common-sense “adult norms,” not strict laws.

### 1) Texts:

- Do:** Put the entire question in one message.
- Don’t:** Send “Hi” and wait like you’ve opened a portal.
- Do:** Respect late hours unless it’s urgent.
- Repair line:** “No rush; whenever you get a chance.”

### 2) Email

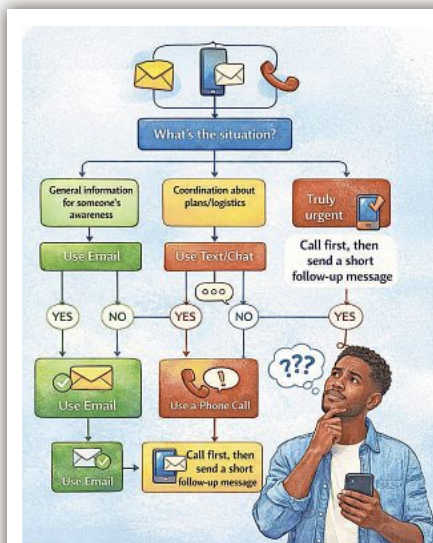
- Do:** Use subject lines that actually say what you need.
- Do:** Keep it readable; short paragraphs plus bullets.
- Don’t:** Reply All unless you truly mean all.
- Repair line:** “Reply All got me! Please ignore.”

### 3) Chats/DMs

- Do:** Ask the full question (not “You got a sec?” and then silence).
- Do:** Use reactions/quick confirmations to reduce extra messages.
- Don’t:** Treat chat like a 24/7 pager unless you’ve agreed on that.
- Repair line:** “This can wait; reply when you’re back.”

### 4) Voicemail/voice notes

- Do:** Start with your name and the reason. Then provide a callback number.
- Don’t:** Say “call me back” with no context as that can trigger panic.
- Do:** Keep it short. If it’s long, it probably



*Mismatched expectations can increase stress around communication. AI Generated Graphic*

should’ve been an email.

**Repair line:** Consider providing a quick summary with details if appropriate.

### 5) Phone calls

- Do:** Text first if it’s not urgent: “Free for a quick call today?”
- Don’t:** double-call unless it’s truly urgent.
- Do:** Leave a message with the reason (helpful, not mysterious).
- Repair line:** “Bad timing? Call when convenient.”

### #4: Bring back “sign-off hours” (your modern busy signal)

Pick a nightly window when your phone “goes off the air,” old-school style:

- Turn on Do Not Disturb
- Silence nonessential notifications
- Let true emergencies come through (for example, allow calls from Favorites)

### #5: Use one boundary sentence that keeps relationships intact

Consider using this script for your voice message:

**“If it’s urgent, please call. If it’s not,**



Karen Clay

Clay Technology and Multimedia, L.L.C.

**text is perfect and I’ll reply when I can.”**

That sentence is the modern busy signal: clear, polite, and blessedly drama-free.

**The Ultimate Goal is Sanity, Not Silence**

The purpose of a communication peace treaty isn’t to become unreachable or to shame people for their messaging habits. It’s to create sustainable communication patterns that serve your relationships rather than damage them. As we noted in Part 1, the goal isn’t silence—it’s sanity.

When you establish clear boundaries, respond within reasonable timeframes using appropriate channels, and model considerate communication practices, something remarkable happens: your relationships often improve. People know what to expect from you. The urgent-everything culture loses its grip. And those glowing screens on our nightstands return to being tools we control, not taskmasters we serve.

The communication technology that promised to connect us shouldn’t leave us feeling perpetually on-call and burned out. With intentional choices about when, how, and why we engage with these tools, we can finally get what we really wanted in the first place: meaningful connection without the constant noise.

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## Arts and Learning

# Blacktastic! Virtual Festival Returns to Celebrate Maryland's Black History and Culture

BALTIMORE, MD — This February, classrooms across Maryland will once again come alive with music, storytelling, and history as **Blacktastic! A Virtual Festival of Maryland Black History and Culture** returns for its sixth year.

Designed for schools seeking joyful, original, and accessible Black History Month programming, Blacktastic! is presented by Arts for Learning Maryland and invites students statewide to celebrate the richness of Maryland's Black history and cultural legacy. Last year alone, the virtual festival reached more than 55,000 students across the state.

The 1.5-hour virtual experience features curriculum-aligned performances and interactive content led by professional Maryland teaching artists. Through music, dance, storytelling, and virtual field trips to historic sites, students explore the lives and contributions of influential Black Marylanders in an engaging, age-appropriate format suitable for all grade levels.

“This [virtual] festival was an amazing opportunity for students and teachers alike to experience the power of the arts—a variety of forms and contents, all in one,” shared a Baltimore City teacher. “Can’t wait to see where this goes next year!”

Another educator from Prince George’s County echoed that enthusiasm: “My students were completely engrossed. Incorporating music and the arts into a history curriculum was excellent, and as a teacher I was very impressed and pleased.”

#### Honoring Maryland Legends

This year’s Blacktastic! program is a dynamic remix of audience favorites from the past five years, honoring



*Blacktastic Performers*

*Courtesy photo*

trailblazers who shaped Maryland’s cultural and civic landscape, including:

Verda Freeman Welcome, the first Black woman elected to the Maryland State Senate Chick Webb, legendary drummer and bandleader Denyce Graves, internationally renowned mezzo-soprano and living legend Lillie Carol Jackson, civil rights activist and organizer

The program is brought to classrooms by Arts for Learning teaching artists **Debra Mims, Baba Bomani, Jamaal Collier, Denyce Graves, and Quynn Johnson** of SOLE Defined, alongside students and special guest contributors.

#### More Than a Performance

Registration for Blacktastic! includes live access to the virtual festival on

February 26, a curriculum-aligned activity book to reinforce learning, and extended on-demand access to the program through the end of the school year—making it a lasting educational resource beyond Black History Month.

Arts for Learning Maryland is a nonprofit organization dedicated to enriching the education of Maryland’s youth through culturally diverse arts programs. By pairing professional teaching artists with classroom educators, the organization creates engaging lessons that blend the arts with core academic subjects.

For more information or to register, visit [www.artsforlearningmd.org/blacktastic](http://www.artsforlearningmd.org/blacktastic).



## The Power of One: Why This Moment Calls for Collective Action

By Jamye Wooten

Transformation rarely begins with scale. It begins with alignment.

We often measure impact by how many people we reach, how fast we move, or how widely our message spreads. But the most lasting change I have witnessed has come not from scaling wide, but from scaling deep—deepening relationships, strengthening trust, and rooting our practice in place.

Movements do not stall because people do not care. They stall because people believe their contribution is too small to matter. That belief is one of the most dangerous myths we carry.

The Power of One emerged as a response to that myth. Not as a celebration of individualism, but as an affirmation of collective responsibility. One voice, one choice, one act of care, when connected to others, can shift narratives, move resources, and strengthen community.

That understanding feels especially urgent right now.

We are living through a period of contradiction. Institutional giving is growing, yet support for communities of color and race-explicit work is shrinking. According to “Derailed,” a report from the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity, institutional giving increased 44 percent between 2019 and 2023. Yet the share reaching communities of color declined to just 6.8 percent. Funding for racial justice never exceeded 1.4 percent of total giving, and adjusted for inflation, support for communities of color dropped more than 22 percent between 2021 and 2023.

This pullback is not only about dollars. It is about narrative. Institutions are quietly retreating from race-explicit commitments made after 2020, favoring safer language that ultimately blunts impact. Research from Candid’s IssueLab

shows Black-led organizations being pressured to downplay their missions simply to survive.

As systems grow more cautious, resources consolidate upward rather than circulate outward. Commitments made in moments of crisis are being rolled back just as communities continue to navigate economic instability and systemic neglect.

This is where The Power of One becomes more than a message. It becomes a practice.

The question is not what is missing. It is what is already here. What is in your hand? Time. Skill. Story. Care. Resources. Presence. Transformation does not begin with abundance. It begins with participation.

When large systems retreat, participation becomes power. The Power of One is not a substitute for systemic investment, but it is a refusal to wait for permission. It affirms that alignment between values and action still matters, especially when conditions are difficult.

For generations, Black communities have relied on culture to survive, organize, and imagine freedom. Music, storytelling, and shared ritual have always been part of how we build trust and care for one another.

This understanding sits at the heart of **28 Days of Black Futures**, our annual practice of advancing narrative power through creativity. Through the Black Futures Cypher, 28 local artists contribute original tracks under the creative direction of Von Vargas, forming a collective expression that unfolds throughout February.

One voice alone may feel small. But one voice connected to others becomes a chorus. One action, repeated and shared, becomes momentum.

The infrastructure is not coming later. It is being built now. That is the power this moment calls for. That is The Power of One.



Jamye Wooten  
*Courtesy photo*

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## Researchers Provide Platforms, Digital Resting Place for Black Women

By **Andrea Blackstone**

Topics such as the deadliness of Black women giving birth (<https://www.cnn.com/2026/01/10/us/janell-green-smith-midwife-death-cec>) and allegations of a former physician performing unnecessary surgeries (<https://atlantablackstar.com/2026/01/15/over-600-mostly-black-women-sterilized-and-cut-open-for-no-reason-lawsuit-claims-now-virginia-hospital-faces-6b-lawsuit/>) raise red flags about the need to better value Black women with more humanity. Black women still face scrutiny over everything from healthcare to their complexions and their worthiness to date a desirable partner. Online commentaries, and how stories are told about the lived experiences of Black women can help to protect or further threaten the emotional safety of Black women. Who will shape the authentic narratives of Black women in digital spaces?

### **A Space Dedicated to Black Women, Developed by Researchers, Writers**

Dr. DeLisha Tapscott and Dr. Nardos Ghebream, co-founders of Black Girl Narrative ([www.blackgirlnarrative.com](http://www.blackgirlnarrative.com)) in May 2025, as a culture production hub rooted in research, storytelling, advocacy, and community. The pair builds spaces that honor the lived experiences of Black women as cultural knowledge.

### **Prepared to Lead, Share Stories**

DeLisha Tapscott, Ed.D., co-founder and curator, researcher, writer and author possesses a background in education and organizational leadership. She currently serves as a Chief Operating Officer for an international justice nonprofit. Nardos Ghebream, Ph.D., co-founder and strategist, is also a writer, researcher, and scholar with a background in race, racism, and Black teachers' experiences in education systems. She advances

institution-level liberatory design and anti-racist pedagogy to create more just and inclusive spaces.

Prince George's County, Maryland-based Dr. Tapscott and Dr. Ghebream created Black Girl Narrative as a space for the narratives of Black women to exist without compromise, while being referenced, studied, contextualized, and protected. They archive and share Black women's stories on their own terms.

### **The Love We Code: Black Women, Digital Safe Havens, and Resistance**

Dr. Tapscott, stated that their research project, The Love We Code, (<https://www.blackgirlnarrative.com/research>), was started to understand how community, protection, and care are practiced among Black women, regardless of relationship status.

"We sought to focus less on credentials or hierarchy and more on how care is built through listening, believing, and showing up consistently. We also focused on how the protection of the spaces Black women create is often rooted in joy. What we found, as Black women, is what we have always known: that Black women are carving out space for themselves even amidst the chaos and sharing communal moments rooted in trust in each other rather than in a system," she added.

Additionally, The Love We Code approach self-love as a practice grounded in boundaries, choice, and self-advocacy rather than performance or perfection.

"Our work recognizes digital spaces as both sites of harm and powerful spaces for Black women. Online, we have seen how visibility can invite both surveillance and violence, but we also see how Black women code love through shared language, mutual recognition, and storytelling. We have seen healing emerge across platforms through small connections that blossom into beautiful, widespread relationships," Dr. Tapscott stated.



*Dr. Nardos Ghebream, an educator, researcher and DEI consultant, co-founded of Black Girl Narrative in May 2025. Courtesy photo*

### **Research Campaign Initiative and Storytelling Campaign Documents Black Women in Digital Spaces**

The upcoming short-form film, 'Dear Black Girl Who Stayed Online Anyway,' <https://www.instagram.com/p/DJ4PVBaNNcH/> was a project crafted to represent the beauty often created by Black women's presence in digital spaces. The initiative seeks to showcase Black women's joy, care and critiques of digital spaces.

"What was created as a love letter from Black women to Black women focuses on the ways in which we utilize our voices as advocates, where we create emotional safety within, and when we carve out literal spaces of care through group chats, curated communities, and through arts and culture, allowing us to add context and consent into our digital realities," Dr. Tapscott further stated.

The Protection of Truthful Storytelling and Community for Black Women

Dr. Ghebream mentioned that colorism, featurism, and hair politics continue to determine who is seen as respectable, desirable, or professional.

"Lighter skin, straighter hair, and



*Dr. DeLisha Tapscott, a nonprofit leader and researcher, co-founder of Black Girl Narrative, amplifies Black women's narratives in digital spaces.*

*Kevina Mae Photography*

slim body shapes are still rewarded with access and protection, while others are policed and disregarded. The hierarchies within these elements shape Black women's experiences, from professional opportunities to romantic desirability to the grace we are afforded when we aren't showing up as our best selves," she stated.

However, Dr. Ghebream and Dr. Tapscott want to normalize the level of community we surround ourselves with as Black women.

"I would not choose to be anything other than a Black woman. Even as I constantly decide how to show up in external spaces, I seek out other Black women who support me in prioritizing my rest, my emotional capacity, and my joy," she stated.

Find @blkgirlnarrative <https://www.instagram.com/blkgirlnarrative> on Instagram. Sign up to read essays, reflections, and cultural commentary rooted in care via <https://blkgirlnarrative.substack.com>.



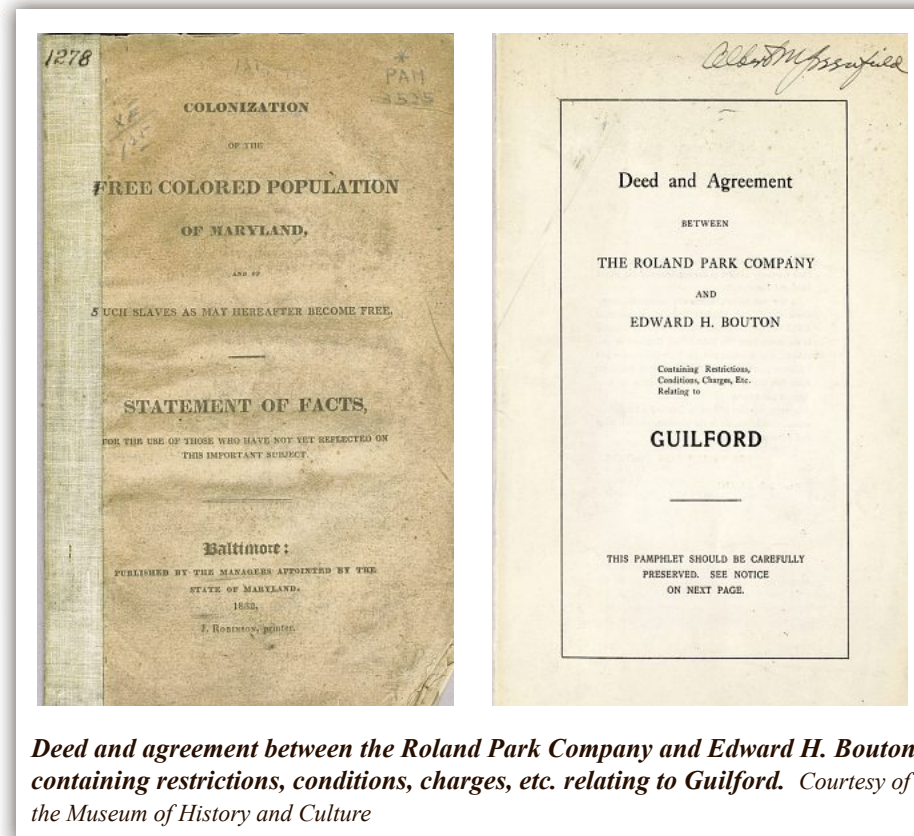
# A City of Neighborhoods

By Dr. S. Rasheem

It was Imam Earl El Amin who first described Baltimore to me as a city of neighborhoods in a Baltimore Legacy Project interview. The phrase lingered, not as a slogan but as a fact. Baltimore's civic identity has long been organized not around a singular downtown gravity, but around its blocks, its stoops and its schools. Neighborhoods here are not merely places to live; they are inheritances. Each carries its own culture, its own codes, its own pride—often extending as far as one's high school allegiance.

Baltimore was not always narrated through the vocabulary of “The Corner, Homicide”; “The Wire”; or “We Own This City.” Pastor Ebony Harvin's family was one of the first families to move to Cherry Hill right after World War II and remembers a Baltimore in which community life was intact and visible—when stoops were scrubbed clean and children moved freely through the day. “I didn't even know it was the projects,” she recalls, “because it was always clean.” James Timpson—who attended school in Park Heights, echoes that memory with characteristic plainness: “People really had a sense of pride in their blocks.”

Others describe a similar ecology of care. Erricka Bridgeford, whose parents were from Cherry Hill and Park Heights, recalls the dense social fabric of an era when responsibility for children was shared and belonging was assumed. “Everybody's parents were everybody's parents in the neighborhood,” she says. Vernon Horton—was also born and raised in Baltimore City and remembers, “We could go outside and just play all day long... the community kept watch over us.”



*Deed and agreement between the Roland Park Company and Edward H. Bouton containing restrictions, conditions, charges, etc. relating to Guilford. Courtesy of the Museum of History and Culture*

If there is one thing Baltimore has never been, it is singular. As the artist Earnest Shaw puts it, “There has never, ever been one Baltimore.” Yet this multiplicity has rarely been a source of anxiety for those who live here. Community care—improvised, durable, and deeply local—has traveled across blocks and generations. Ray Kelly—lived on both Druid Hill Ave and then North Avenue as a child and shares “Every community is different, but the care, the culture... is the same throughout Baltimore.”

Baltimoreans will tell you that the problem has never been the difference between neighborhoods. The problem is inequity. The central question is whether they are treated with dignity, fairness,

and equal opportunity. On that count, the historical answer is a resounding no.

Disinvestment in Baltimore is not a recent failure of will or policy; it is designed, deliberate, and generational. Segregation laws, restrictive covenants, redlining, and the infamous Highway to Nowhere systematically confined Black Baltimoreans to certain areas while stripping those same areas of resources and opportunities for wealth-building. Entire African American neighborhoods in Old West Baltimore—Upton, Sandtown-Winchester, Harlem Park—were not incidental outcomes of history but products of policy.

Decades of disinvestment produced deteriorating housing, shuttered businesses, food deserts, and unequal access to public

resources. While whiter and wealthier neighborhoods received consistent investment, majority-Black neighborhoods were left to manage scarcity as a condition of daily life. Libraries, grocery stores, recreation centers—each absence compounded the last.

A 2020 Urban Institute study found that majority-Black neighborhoods in Baltimore received three times less investment than white neighborhoods between 2004 and 2016. The *Washington Post* later reported that “the Baltimore Families cornered into subprime loans descended from the same families who'd been denied homeownership—and the chance to build wealth—two generations earlier.”

These communities were targeted, not inherently broken.

There is a direct and well-documented connection between systemic neglect and crime and violence. As Seymour Chambers, historian at the Prince Hall Masonic Lodge in Baltimore, put it succinctly: “People don't just wake up and say, I'm gonna commit crimes.” Crime is not a spontaneous moral failure but a response to sustained structural abandonment.

Popular television narratives about Baltimore rarely focus on the conditions that created the crime, drugs and poverty. These shows focus more on sensationalizing the effect than on highlighting the cause. They tend to excise the conditions that produced them, offering instead a version of Baltimore that is consumable, dramatic, and misleading. In doing so, they substitute context with pathology—transforming systemic harm into personal defect and rendering Black communities responsible for injuries long inflicted upon them.

Beyond the headlines. This is y-OUR Baltimore. This is y-OUR Legacy.



## Baltimorean Makes It Her Business to Uncover the Truth

By Andrea Blackstone

Devin Morgan, co-founder and CEO of Reliant Polygraph Services (RPS), is a Baltimore, Maryland, native with more than 18 years of federal government service in deception detection. Additionally, RPS, her polygraph business, aims to transform the polygraph experience by adopting a more approachable methodology and educating communities about the advantages of polygraph tests and the diverse career opportunities available in this field.

“A polygraph (often called a lie detector) is an instrument used to monitor and record physiological responses by measuring respiration, pulse rate, and sweat gland activity while a person answers test questions. These involuntary bodily responses are evaluated because significant physiological changes during the exam have a high propensity to be indicative of deception,” Morgan said. “We’re open 24/7, including holidays, because we have to be available when our clients need us.”

### Shattering the Glass Ceiling

Historically, the polygraph field has been male-dominated. However, more women are entering the profession, helping to diversify the industry.

“According to Zippia (<https://www.zippia.com/polygraph-examiner-jobs/demographics>), ‘15.9% of polygraph examiners are women and 84.1% of polygraph examiners are men,’ which highlights that women are still underrepresented in the profession. In terms of race, the field is predominantly ‘White (56.6%), followed by Hispanic or Latino (16.6%), Asian (10.5%), and Black or African American (9.3%).’ RPS has been fortunate to hire three African American female polygraph examiners, each with over 10 years of federal polygraph experience, who are exceptionally skilled and share the RPS vision and mission to provide high-quality exams while educating the public and helping change the narrative of what a polygraph examiner looks like.”

Throughout her career, Morgan has held a Top Secret/Sensitive Compartmented Information security clearance with the Department of Defense. Currently, Morgan serves as the Team Chief in the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)/Privacy Act (PA) Office, where she oversees case officers responsible for processing requests within the federally mandated time frames and ensuring that responses are legally defensible.

### The Birth of a Polygraph Business

Morgan co-founded Reliant Polygraph Services in 2022 with her husband, Doni Morgan, because there were no polygraph businesses in their area with a dual mission of conducting polygraph exams and educating the general public about polygraph testing.

“I felt compelled to help change the narrative that polygraph examiners are only ‘old, white men,’ and to show that polygraphs can be an extremely valuable tool during investigations and a rewarding career field,” she said.

Morgan added, “I’ve always had a strong interest in human behavior, credibility, and investigative work, and I was drawn to providing a professional service that helps individuals and organizations find clarity, resolve conflict, and make informed decisions when the truth is in question. The icing on the cake is that I knew I would excel in this business, thanks to my federal training and years of experience, combined with a non-threatening, non-intimidating approach.”

### Reasons Why People Are Given Polygraph Exams

Morgan explained that polygraphs are often used to support investigations, guide legal or workplace decisions, and provide peace of mind in personal matters where trust has been damaged or questions remain unanswered.

“Many clients come to us in crisis, often involving sexual behavior concerns such as infidelity or sexual assault allegations.



**Devin Morgan, co-founder and CEO of Reliant Polygraph Services**  
*James McCrae of McCrae Multimedia*

Other common reasons include theft-related investigations and drug-related matters, especially when an employer, attorney, or family needs reliable information to make an informed decision,” she stated.

Additionally, polygraphs are not used only for government job investigations. Corporate employers may use them as well, although their use in the workplace is more limited and depends on applicable laws and exceptions.

Morgan noted that polygraph testing is generally considered 80–90% accurate when properly administered.

### Professional Requirements

To be recognized as a certified polygraph professional, an individual must complete a formal polygraph training program and hands-on instruction at an American Polygraph Association (APA) accredited school. The examiner must complete on-the-job training and conduct exams under supervision and oversight.

“Some programs may also require an undergraduate degree as part of the eligibility requirements. Licensing is handled on a state-by-state basis, and requirements vary by jurisdiction,” said Morgan.



**Devin Morgan and other polygraph examiners serve individuals, businesses, attorneys, and government/public agencies in need of polygraph testing through Reliant Polygraph Services. Polygraph education sessions and demonstrations are also provided for academic institutions, community organizations, and corporations.**  
*Photo courtesy of Devin Morgan*

### Morgan’s Professional Viewpoint

RPS-administered polygraph exams are conducted with the voluntary participation of the examinee. Morgan takes providing polygraph services as an investigative tool very seriously.

“I view it as a responsibility—not just a job. Most people come to us during stressful, life-changing situations, so I approach every case with professionalism, fairness, and empathy. It’s rewarding to help individuals and organizations find clarity, but it also requires staying neutral, following ethical standards, and treating every examinee with dignity and respect throughout the process,” she added.

Visit <https://reliantpolygraphservices.com> to learn more about RPS.

Sponsored by the National Great Blacks in Wax

## Black Americans and Organ Donations: The Challenges of Mistrust Disparity and Need

By Eboni Yahudah and Shaniya Brown

### Why Organ Donation Is a Community Issue

Organ donation has been a major issue within our society for many years. The main challenge we often face is the limitation surrounding individuals' willingness to make a life-saving decision, regardless of who they are or their values. This process involves healthcare professionals networking with donor families and sharing responsibility for the shortage of organ donations caused by personal choice and judgment. As a community, we can increase awareness and support for those who are hoping and depending on the decisions

of families for their success. To achieve this, we must support and encourage one another to dispel misconceptions and help our people. Ultimately, the responsibility to make a change rests with us.

### Historical and Cultural Context

Since at least 1550 BCE, Black communities in ancient Kemet practiced the preservation of vital organs and performed surgical interventions, demonstrating advanced anatomical knowledge and a commitment to life—a tradition echoed in modern organ donation.

With this rich history and evidence of medical intervention, what holds the Black community back from donating?

There are many factors, including personal preferences, religious beliefs, skepticism about the medical system, concerns about how Black people are treated, and questions about the value placed on Black bodies and their organs.

### Current Realities and Data

Black Americans face a critical disparity in organ donation. Although they make up approximately 13–14% of the U.S. population, they account for nearly 28–29% of patients waiting for life-saving organ transplants (HHS Office of Minority Health). This disproportionate representation underscores the urgent need for greater access and donor participation within the community. Yet, despite the high



*Stephanie "Safiyatou" Edwards representing the Tall Spirit in West African culture for Annual Voice of History Street Fair 2024 Black Mission Media*



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need, only about 22.8% of transplants in 2024 went to non-Hispanic Black recipients, highlighting systemic gaps in transplant receipt (HHS Office of Minority Health). Additionally, living donation among Black donors remains low, with just 17% of recovered organs coming from living black American donors compared to 30% for White donors.

Underlying health disparities exacerbate these challenges. Black Americans are three to four times more likely than White Americans to develop kidney failure, often due to higher rates of hypertension and diabetes (National Kidney Foundation). Compounding the issue, historical mistrust of the medical system contributes to hesitancy in organ donation, with many expressing concern that doctors may not prioritize saving lives equally (PubMed). Collectively, these factors illustrate the urgent need to educate, build trust, and increase participation in organ donation, particularly within underserved black American communities.



*Stephanie "Safiyatou" Edwards in front of National Great Blacks In Wax Museum Black Mission Media*



*(L-r) Dr. Joanne Martin, The Culture Queen, Stephanie "Safiyatou" Edwards and Dr. David Fakunle in procession at start of the Annual Voice of History Street Fair 2024 Will Kirk/Johns Hopkins University*

#### Dr. Joanne Martin's Perspective

"This issue is deeply personal for me. I have family members and friends who have been both organ donors and organ transplant recipients. I also recognize that within our community, a range of feelings, beliefs, and lived experiences influence the decision to become a donor—whether through a driver's license designation or by offering an organ to a friend or family member. Regardless of individual choice, the need for organ donors remains critical. My hope is that, through collective education and open conversation, we can better understand the issue and support our friends and neighbors where and when we can."

#### Spotlight: Stephanie "Safiyatou" Edwards' Journey

The need for organ transplants frequently touches our community, and we would like to highlight Stephanie "Safiyatou" Edwards. After receiving a life-saving kidney transplant, Edwards is now focused on rest and recovery. Funds raised through her campaign will support her living and recovery-related expenses, allowing her the space to heal while remaining connected to the community she has long served.

A deeply rooted community leader, Edwards is known for her artistry and

spirit, which have inspired celebration, culture, and connection—most visibly at the National Great Blacks In Wax Museum's Annual Street Fair, where she has helped open the event with her striking "Tall Spirit" (Moko Jumbie) presence for the past three years.

#### Call to Action and Closing Reflection

Edwards' journey reminds us of the power of community, care, and collective responsibility. The need for organ donors remains critical, and conversations about donation, support, and healing are more important than ever. You can help by learning about organ donation, talking openly with loved ones, and supporting Edwards' recovery through her campaign. Every act of awareness and generosity strengthens the bonds that sustain us all. We invite the community to support the Edwards' campaign: <https://www.gofundme.com/f/safis-new-kidney-fundraiser>

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