



400 YEARS
of African American
History Commission

Vol. 1 | Winter 2024

Forward



FROM THE DESK OF

Commissioner Dr. Gwendolyn Diggs



I am Commissioner Dr. Gwendolyn Diggs, and it is my pleasure to update you on recent activities of the 400YAAHC.

Justice Sunday Service Around the Clock, a tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. kicked off the year with another memorable 12-hour

streaming event on January 14th. Hosted by Actor Clifton Davis, it was a powerful event that captured outstanding contributions from individuals who shared the impact of Dr. King's work, and the need to continue that work around social justice, equity, and service.

In February, the Commission had the honor of visiting the White House to share the work we have been doing. On Capitol Hill, we hosted a screening of the **KEMBA** film in collaboration with Congressman Robert "Bobby" Scott. A panel discussion followed bringing awareness to the audience about the relationship between violence against women and the criminal justice system.

In partnership with **Miss Black USA**, the Commission engaged contestants to participate in Phase III of the I Fear For My Life Campaign that reflects our ongoing commitment to address critical issues affecting our youth, young adults, and community. See the article written by Karen Arrington, Founder of the Miss Black USA Pageant.

We invite you to stay informed by visiting our website www.400yaahc.gov and keep an eye out for our 400YAAHC Video Guide that lists all of the video resources for your convenience.

Thank you for your continued support and engagement. Together, we are making history. ►

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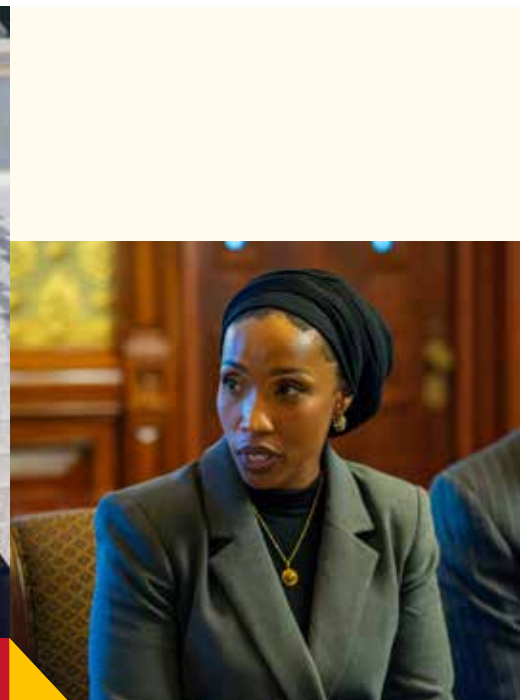
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400 Years of African American History Commission Convenes in the Nation's Capital



by Hannibal B. Johnson, Esq., 400YAAHC Commissioner



We are now six years removed from the birth of the federal 400 Years of African-American History Commission (400YAAHC). Congress created the 400YAAHC to develop and facilitate activities throughout the United States commemorating the 400th anniversary of the arrival of Africans in the English colonies at Point Comfort, Virginia in 1619. The 400YAAHC recognizes and highlights the resilience and contributions of African Americans from that seminal moment forward, while simultaneously acknowledging the painful impact of slavery, racial discrimination, and racism on our Nation.

Members of the 400YAAHC convened in Washington, D.C., for a winter meeting on February 5 – 6. This return to the nation's capital—the site of its first major program—proved both impactful and inspirational. Special moments included visits to both the White House and the United States Capitol.

At the White House, we met with Stephen Benjamin, former mayor of Columbia, South Carolina, and Senior Advisor and Director of the Office of Public Engagement. Benjamin oversees efforts on the local, state, and national levels to ensure community leaders, diverse perspectives, and new voices to inform the work of the President in an inclusive, transparent and responsible way.



PHOTOS: Top Left: 400YAAHC Commissioners; Right: Dr. Kideste Yusef Associate Professor, Criminal Justice Department Chair, Criminal Justice Director, Center for Law and Social Justice, Bethune-Cookman University; Middle: Stephen Benjamin, White House, Senior Advisor and Director of the Office of Public Engagement

The meeting afforded the 400YAAHC an opportunity to share with the President, through his surrogates, the myriad projects and initiatives we have implemented since our founding and the lives we have touched. The session, led by 400YAAHC Executive Director, Addie Richburg, included a historical and current overviews by former chair Dr. Joseph Green and current Chair, Mr. Ted Ellis. Key content and programmatic updates were presented as follows:

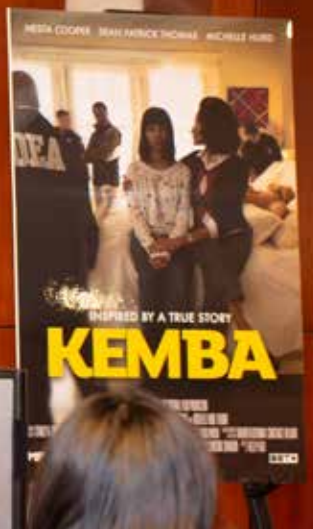
- **Youth Engagement:** *Alyrique Franklin, Saniya Gay, Tybre Faw, and Jamesia Schultz Nelson*
- **“Justice Sunday Service Around the Clock”:** *400YAAHC Executive Director Addie Richburg*
- **National Park Service:** *Commissioner Lewis Rogers*
- **“I Fear For My Life”:** *Kideste M. Yusef, Ph.D., and Kemba Smith-Pradia*
- **“Let Me Read You Your Rights”:** *Commissioner Kenya Cox, and Tybre Faw*
- **2024 National Returning Citizens Conference:** *Commissioner Ron Carson, and Carlyle Holder*
- **“Crowning Achievements”:** *Commissioner Anyanwu Cox, Commissioner Kenya Cox, and Kideste M. Yusef, Ph.D.*
- **Reparations:** *Commissioner Hannibal B. Johnson, Esq., and Commissioner Cheryl Grills, Ph.D.*

Benjamin and other staffers expressed their delight in our accomplishments. They compared the 400YAAHC favorably to other federal bodies with whom they have worked.

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PHOTOS: Top Left: Tybre Faw, 400YAAHC National Student Ambassador; Top Right: Addie Richburg, Exec. Dir. 400YAAHC; Left: Kenya Cox, 400YAAHC Commissioner; Right: Ron Carson, 400YAAHC Commissioner; Bottom Left: Prophet Anyanwu Cox, 400YAAHC Commissioner; Right: Dr Cheryl Grills, 400YAAHC Commissioner; Bottom Left to Right: 400YAAHC Meeting at the White House Middle; Saniya Gay, 400YAAHC National Student Ambassador; Right: Kemba Smith-Pradia, Kemba Smith Foundation, Feven Solomon, White House Office of Public Engagement, and Dr. Gwendolyn Diggs, 400YAAHC Commissioner. PHOTOS BY Bluejaisvision.



FEATURE STORY CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

400YAAHC Convenes in the Nation's Capital

Later that evening, the 400YAAHC hosted a special, open-to-the-public screening of **KEMBA** at the United States Capitol. Written by Christine Swanson and directed by Kelley Kali, **KEMBA** features actors Nesta Cooper, Siddiq Saunderson, Sean Patrick Thomas, and Michelle Hurd. Speakers at the event included: Addie Richburg, Executive Director, 400YAAHC; Ted Ellis, Acting Chair, 400YAAHC; Rep. Robert 'Bobby' Scott (D-VA); and Nick Reid, Moving Picture Institute (MPI).



Based on the true story of Kemba Smith (now, Kemba Smith-Pradia), **KEMBA** follows the journey of a sheltered college student who falls for a man with secrets. Her boyfriend, Khalif, turned out to be a drug kingpin. Eventually, Kemba finds herself in a web of deceit, domestic violence, and criminality. In 1994, following a plea agreement, she pleaded guilty to conspiracy to distribute crack cocaine related to her boyfriend's illegal activities. Though Kemba never dealt or handled drugs, the justice system exacted a particularly brutal form of justice from her.



Kemba, pregnant at her 1994 sentencing as a first-time, non-violent offender, received a 24.5-year prison sentence, without the possibility of parole, under mandatory minimum sentencing guidelines enacted under the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, part of America's "War on Drugs."



Kemba never lost hope. Her parents, together with attorney Elaine Jones with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, launched a campaign for legal relief, including filing an appeal decision and, later, seeking clemency. They amassed support among Black civic organizations, sororities, celebrities, and lawmakers to help free Kemba. President Bill Clinton granted clemency in December 2000.



KEMBA is a special extension of I Fear for My Life, a scholar-led research initiative funded by the 400YAAHC. I Fear for My Life is a resource for people who are looking to learn, engage diverse voices and perspectives, and prepare for personal and social action in the on-going change movements to improve policing and criminal justice outcomes, especially for communities of color in our country.

A post-screening panel discussion included: Dr. Kideste Yusef, Moderator; Kemba Smith-Pradia, Kemba Smith Foundation; Kelley Kali, **KEMBA** director; Saniya Gay, 400YAAHC National Student Ambassador; Carlyle Holder, Correctional Management & Communications Group, LLC; and Kara Gotsch, Sentencing Project.

A standing-room-only reception at the Hyatt Capitol Hill followed the event. Special reception participants and guests included: Ron Carson, 400YAAHC; Sherman Lea, National Association of Blacks in Criminal Justice (NABCJ); Janai Nelson, Legal Defense Fund (LDF); and Kemba Smith-Pradia.

What a way to usher in the new year! What a fabulous beginning to our 2024 Black History Month. The 400YAAHC is off and running.

PHOTOS: Top Left: Kemba Smith-Pradia at podium; 2nd to Left: Rep. Robert "Bobby" Scott at podium; 2nd to Right: Janai Nelson, President, LDF; Center: Elaine Jones and guests pose for the camera; Bottom: Kemba Smith-Pradia and Addie Richburg, Exec. Dir. 400YAAHC at the podium. PHOTOS BY Bluejaisvision.

Keeping You Informed

DOCUMENTARY PREMIERE

Moving Classroom, a History Matters Episode

Thursday, March 7

The 400YAAHC Commissioners, Pen or Pencil Leaders, I Fear For My Life HBCU Student Ambassadors and NAFJ members went to Birmingham, Alabama, to participate in the 50th Annual Conference of the National Association of Blacks in Criminal Justice (NABCJ). Dr. Kideste Yusef presented a report on Phase II of the I Fear for My Life campaign that involved HBCU students who were members of the NABCJ student chapters that was well received. While in Alabama, they participated in a Moving Classroom and visited historic sites, including Tabernacle Baptist Church, where many meetings took place during the Civil Rights Movement. They also crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge that was part of the Selma to Montgomery March in 1965.

Moving Classroom is hosted by 400YAAHC National Student Ambassadors Saniya Gay and Tybre Faw. They interviewed two women who were children when they participated in the march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in what became known as Bloody Sunday.

The program also highlights excerpts from student-produced documentaries from National History Day, including the impact of the Little Rock Nine on an international level. ▶

Stronger Than 2024 Crowning Achievements [Live Streaming]

Sunday, March 24 at 7:00 pm EST

The contributions African American women have made to this country are invaluable. In business, science, education, sports, entertainment, and more, black women have risen above the brutality of enslavement, the denial of seats, and so many other obstacles designed to keep them at the bottom of the ladder. This Women's History Month, the 400YAAHC presents the Stronger Than 2024 special, "Crowning Achievements." We heard from Keynote speaker Dr. Andrea Gayle-Bennet, the First Deputy Secretary for the Executive Office of Veterans Affairs for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

In addition, we looked at the hats and wraps that African American women wear proudly as crowns of beauty. We hear from Commissioner Kenya Cox and other Commissioners, who share their remembrances of mothers, aunts, and grandmothers who dressed in their Sunday bests, including hats that said so much about who they were. Dr. Kideste Yusef and Commissioner Anyanwu Cox talk about the history behind head wraps and how they were used not just for fashion and tradition but also for cultural expression and making political statements.

Stronger Than 2024 Crowning Achievements premieres Sunday, March 24 at 7:00 pm EST. ▶

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

MARCH:

- Women's History Month
- Selma to Montgomery, AL March
- Moving Classroom - Thursday, March 7
- Anniversary of Bloody Sunday
- Stronger Than 2024 Crowning Achievements - Sunday, March 24, 7:00 pm EST.

APRIL:

- National Minority Health Month,
- Assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
- National Volunteer Appreciation Month and National Second Chance Month
- National Returning Citizens Conference, April 5-6, Arlington, VA

The 400YAAHC has published a Video Guide that lists all of the videos and films they have produced that tell the untold stories of African Americans and the contributions they have made to this country for the last 400+ years.

To downloaded scan the QR-code.



2024 JUSTICE SUNDAY



A CHARGE TO KEEP We Have to Serve This Present Age



On Sunday, January 14th, 2024, the 400 Years of African American History Commission (400YAAHC) presented Justice Sunday Service Around the Clock, hosted by actor and author Clifton Davis. The program, which streams on the Sunday before the National Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday, premiered on the 400YAAHC's website (www.400yaahc.gov) as well as their streaming TV channel (smogotelevision.com), beginning at noon EST and concluded at 12:05 am: Monday, January 15th. The 12 individual hours highlight commemorations that take place each of the 12 months of the year, along with a corresponding theme. The tribute to the work and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. raises awareness of the need for service and strengthening commitments to defend democracy and equality. The long-lasting impact of Dr. King and the path he paved in the fight for justice is upheld by a variety of diverse faith leaders of multiple denominations, national and local government officials, community leaders, youth voices, musical guests, and much more. Special guests include Isaac Newton Farris, nephew of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who attended Morehouse College like his uncle and currently serves as Senior Fellow of the King Center; General Andrea Gayle-Bennett, Deputy Secretary of the Executive Office of Veterans Services in Massachusetts; and Tony Lowden, pastor of President Jimmy Carter and the late Rosalyn Carter.

Host Clifton Davis noted for his television roles in "That's My Mama," "Amen," and "Madam Secretary", kicked off the fourth year of Justice Sunday programming by diving into

a bit of the celebration's history, as well as providing an overview for each hour and its corresponding month. The program's first hour, January, commemorates the National Martin Luther King Jr. day., with an opening by Issac Newton Farris, who spoke on Dr. King Jr's initial mission and message and the importance of his work in the future. Hour three of the program highlights events in March, like Bloody Sunday and National Women's History Month. 400 YAAHC National Student Ambassador Tybre Faw interviews Civil Rights Activist and author Sheyenne Webb-Christburg on her experience and memories regarding her involvement in Bloody Sunday: **"I made my way to Brown Chapel Church on that particular day, and after getting to that church, I'll never forget going to the front of the pew and joining in the singing of the freedom songs the prayers and special instructions were being given by the late congressman John Lewis and the late Hosea Williams who led the Bloody Sunday, March."** Webb-Christburg reflects on how, although young then, she can still remember how violent the march became. **"I remember when we got on the Edmund Pettus Bridge on that day, I was midway of the marchers, and as I looked down and I saw the state troopers, the policeman with billy clubs, the tear gas masks, the dogs, I just knew something was about to happen that wasn't good."**

June, the sixth hour of the program, focuses on the nation's observance of Juneteenth and the importance of African American Music Appreciation Month and National Soul Food Month. The segment includes a beautiful rendition of "Let Freedom Ring," performed by the Aeolians

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Keeping You Informed

EMPOWERING ADVOCACY: 400YAAHC Launches IFFML Service Training with 72+ Miss Black USA Contestants

by Karen Arrington, CEO & Founder of Miss Black USA

The 400YAAHC's collaboration with Miss Black USA in hosting the 2023 Contestants was a resounding success, showcasing the strength and excellence of Black women. The onboarding process for the 2024 contestants was met with great enthusiasm as approximately 72 accomplished young women signed on to become 400YAAHC Service Ambassadors, kicking off Black History Month with their first training with Dr. Kideste Yusef. Among them are practicing attorneys, a neurologist, pediatrician, grad students, each representing the who's who of their states, colleges, and communities carrying the torch passed on by those who have come before them.

Hosting the pageant in the nation's capital is a reminder of the influence, affluence, and power of Black women, symbolized by the nation's first Black female Vice President and the first African American US Supreme Court Justice. To further support the empowerment of a new generation of social justice advocates, the University of the District of Columbia has awarded a full-tuition scholarship to the David A. Clarke School of Law or any of their professional graduate programs to the winner of the 2024 pageant.

"I am thrilled for this year's contestants turned IFFML Service Ambassadors to spread this campaign far and wide. I eagerly anticipate another incredible week of empowerment hosted by 400YAAHC to further enrich this unprecedented partnership and collaboration," said Karen Arrington, CEO & Founder of Miss Black USA.

This collaboration is a testament to the commitment to empowering Black women and paving the way for a future where resilience, excellence, and activism reign supreme." ►

LEGISLATION MATTERS



(2024) Reintroduced 116th Congress (2019-2020) H.R.8196 - Protect Black Women and Girls Act of 2020

With Bi-partisan support, members of the U.S. House of Representatives re-introduced legislation that would ensure the federal government implements measures to protect Black women and girls from racial inequities in healthcare, housing, education, and employment, among other areas. ►



& Mt. San Antonio College. The cultural spotlight then highlights soul food as Martha Hawkins, owner of Martha's Place in Montgomery, Alabama, reflects on her restaurant and its ties to civil rights history: "I even had the opportunity to have a lot of the civil rights people, icons that lived, that came to my restaurant to eat. Even Rosa Parks came to my restaurant every time she came to Montgomery; she always took cornbread back with her. When they had the 40th anniversary of the Bus Boycott, they were at my restaurant."

In the closing hour of the Justice Sunday program, Tony Momrelle performs Donny Hathaway's Someday We'll All Be Free, reminding viewers of Dr. King's lifelong mission for equality and justice. The diverse myriad of speakers, performers, and video programs presented by the 400 YAAHC upholds King's legacy and reminds the audience of the need for service above self. The 12 hours of content can be seen on the 400YAAHC's website (www.400yaahc.gov) and on their streaming TV channel (smogotelevision.com). ►

PHOTOS Left to right: Ted Ellis, 400HAAHC Commissioner; Doby Flowers, Founder FSU Civil Rights Institute; Fred Flowers, Founder FSU Civil Rights Institute; Clifton Davis, Actor and Justice Sunday Host and Addie Richburg, Exec. Dir. 400YAAHC; Isaac Farris, Nephew of Dr. King, and Tony Lowden, Jabez Ministries. Bottom: Dr. Stephon Ferguson, MLK Performer and Rev. Dr. Allen J. Sims Sr., Pastor, Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church. PHOTOS BY Bluejaisvision.

400 YEARS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY COMMISSION

As outlined by Public Law 115-102, the Commission shall—

- (1) plan, develop, and carry out programs and activities throughout the United States—
 - (A) appropriate for the commemoration;
 - (B) to recognize and highlight the resilience and contributions of African-Americans since 1619;
 - (C) to acknowledge the impact that slavery and laws that enforced racial discrimination had on the United States; and
 - (D) to educate the public about—
 - (i) the arrival of Africans in the United States; and
 - (ii) the contributions of African-Americans to the United States;
- (2) encourage civic, patriotic, historical, educational, artistic, religious, economic, and other organizations throughout the United States to organize and participate in anniversary activities to expand understanding and appreciation of—
 - (A) the significance of the arrival of Africans in the United States; and
 - (B) the contributions of African-Americans to the United States;
- (3) provide technical assistance to States, localities, and nonprofit organizations to further the commemoration;
- (4) coordinate and facilitate for the public scholarly research on, publication about, and interpretation of—
 - (A) the arrival of Africans in the United States; and
 - (B) the contributions of African-Americans to the United States;
- (5) ensure that the commemoration provides a lasting legacy and long-term public benefit by assisting in the development of appropriate programs; and
- (6) help ensure that the observances of the commemoration are inclusive and appropriately recognize the experiences and heritage of all individuals present at the arrival of Africans in the United States.

COMMISSIONERS

Mr. Ted T. Ellis
 Director of the Civil Rights Institute at Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL
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 Founder / President
 Appalachia African American Cultural Center
 Pennington Gap, VA
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 The 2019 Movement
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Supt. Terry E. Brown
 National Park Service
 America 250
 U.S. Semiquincentennial



The 400 Years of African American History Commission (400YAAHC) is a federally appointed committee, operating independently as established by the Secretary of the Department of the Interior and administered by the National Park Service. The 400 Years of African American History Commission Act, signed into law January 8, 2018, established this 15-member commission to coordinate the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in the English colonies on August 20, 1619, when 20 enslaved Africans were brought to Point Comfort in the English colony of Virginia (now part of Fort Monroe National Monument).

400 Years of African American History Commission

c/o National Alliance of Faith and Justice

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