

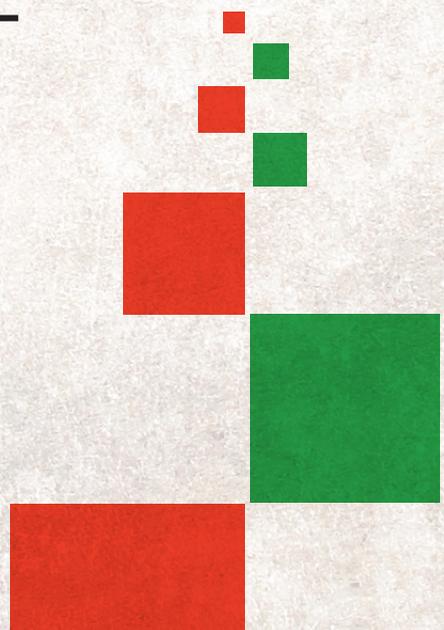


PITTSBURGH BLACK MEDIA FEDERATION
PRESENTS

AMERICAN HEROES:

THE HOMEWOOD PROJECT

*Recognizing the Power and Influence
of Local African-American Male
Engagement and Leadership*



Why look for American Heroes in Homewood?



Dr. Ervin Dyer
Project Coordinator
and member of the
Pittsburgh Black
Media Federation

Far too often, when many people think of Homewood today, they don't think of heroes.

Maligned and misunderstood, Homewood is seen as a fractured community, separate and distinct from the fabric of the larger Pittsburgh and United States. With such a toxic view and biased narrative of the community, it's all the more important to see there are heroes there.

The Pittsburgh Black Media Federation's "American Heroes: The Homewood Project" is an attempt to (re)connect the community's African-American men to the larger American story, to show that there are heroes in Homewood who, despite the odds, contribute to the spiritual, economic and social uplift of the community. Always, local heroes have been in Homewood.

History has given us such men as musicians Billy Strayhorn, Erroll Garner and Ahmad Jamal; pioneering sports writer and editor Bill Nunn; banker Oliver Byrd; and dozens of others. They were local, ambitious and creative.

heroes, linked to Homewood because they currently live there, work there or volunteer there.

Largely, they are mostly unsung heroes – men who quietly go on their way making a difference in Homewood because their hearts are in what they do.

This project recognizing black male heroes in Homewood is important because, for men who face so many obstacles in life, this effort helps to change the way black males are perceived and how they perceive themselves. We want the men to be seen as heroes and we want others to see them that way as well.

The Pittsburgh Black Media Federation's work has been done in partnership with Feel Like Going On, a local collaborative of black photographers that now has a blog partnership with the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. Feel Like Going On was co-founded more than a decade ago by two journalists – Monica Haynes and me.

Our work in Homewood is also done in conjunction with the National Association of Black Journalists and its Black Male Media Project, a 2017 initiative to help address the way we tell stories and show images of black men in

"We want the men to be seen as heroes and we want others to see them that way as well."

There are local African-American male heroes in Homewood today, too.

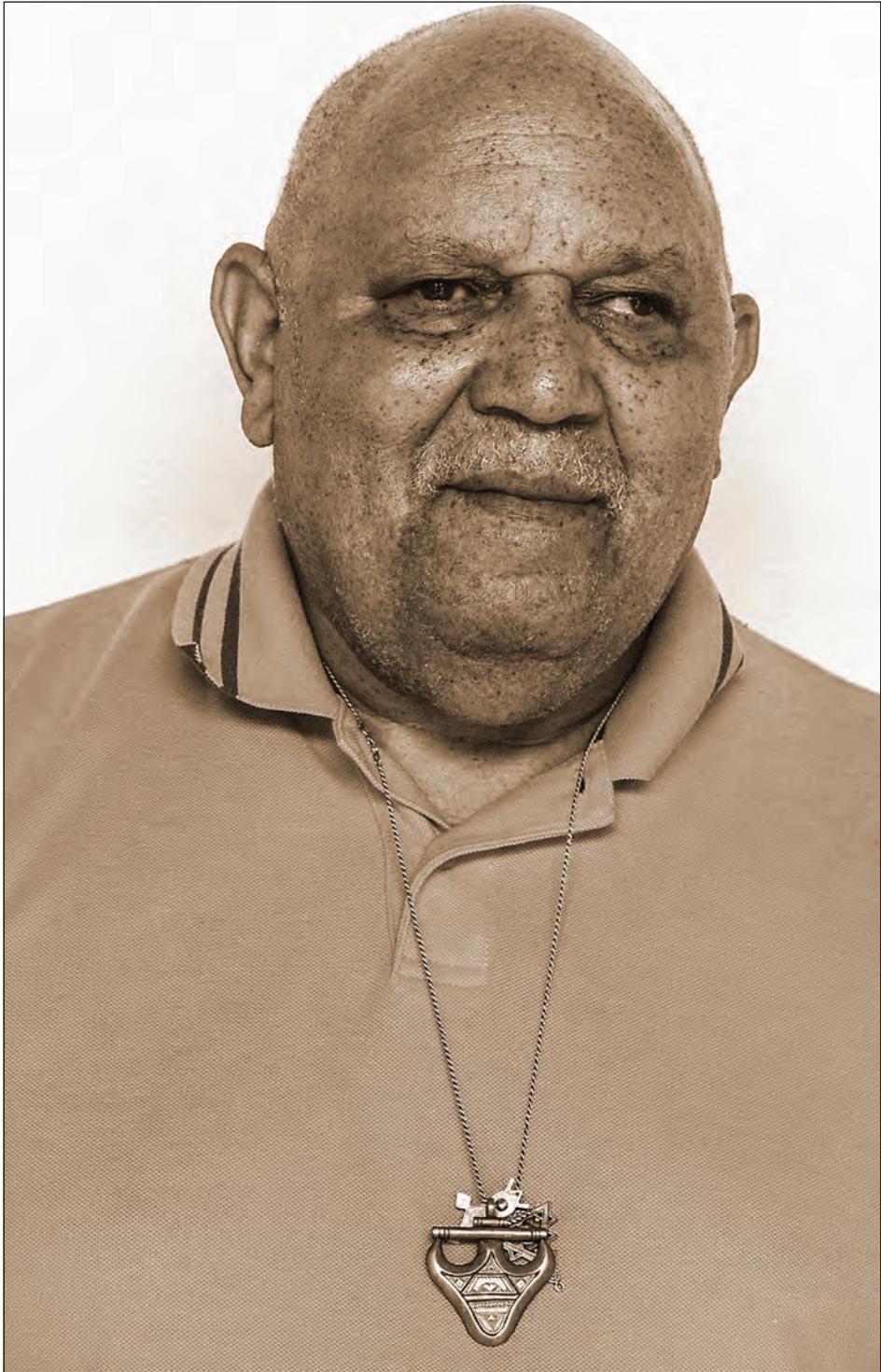
The Homewood community helped the Pittsburgh Black Media Federation to recognize 20 of them.

We found men who volunteer with sport leagues, churches and community centers. We found entrepreneurs, artists and musicians. We found elders, and young men who recently graduated from high school. They were all contemporary

the news and in society.

We are grateful to the community members who nominated the men, the photographers and writers who worked with us, and all of the people and organizations in Homewood who helped make this project successful.

This project was supported by The Heinz Endowments and the University of Pittsburgh's Community Engagement Center and its Humanities Center.



JOHN
BREWER JR.

Photo Credit: Germaine Watkins

By Christiana Dillard

Our memories hold immense power, connecting people, places, and events across generations. It is rare to come across people who use their memory not only for themselves, but also for others, in an effort to preserve moments that would otherwise be lost forever.

One of those few is John Brewer Jr., a local historian, author and business owner hailing from Homewood.

Born in East Liberty in 1944, Brewer's family

His athleticism also contributed to his receiving local recognition – he ran track and played football for Homewood's Westinghouse High School.

Brewer attended North Carolina Central University in Durham, N.C., and studied history. After college, he served in the Army, working in a high-security position that took him around Europe. While he was away, Homewood transformed from a bustling community, into one ravished by “white flight” and poverty.



moved to Homewood when he was a year old. At the time, the neighborhood contained a drastically different demographic: most of the residents were Italian and Irish families, dependent on a thriving local economy.

Living in middle-class Homewood was a dream actualized for Brewer's father, John M. Brewer. In 1955, Brewer Sr. became the first African-American principal in Pennsylvania, working at the Miller School, an elementary school in the Hill District. Consequently, Brewer Jr. got to know many faces and places in the city, and built a network of connections he would remember for years to come.

Upon his return, he found a place hardly recognizable. However, traveling around the world allowed him to meet an even wider range of people and create even more memories that would help him cultivate the skills needed to be a successful historian.

He authored a few books on regional African-American history, including “Pittsburgh Jazz,” “African-Americans in Pittsburgh” and “The Room,” a memoir on his time as a Westinghouse athlete.

As he worked on his own projects, the Carnegie Museum of Art asked for his consultation. The museum was working with thousands



of negatives from the collection of Charles “Teenie” Harris, the notable African-American photographer who shot for the Pittsburgh Courier from the 1930s to the 1970s.

Known for his impressive memory and social skills, Brewer was asked to help identify the subjects of Harris’ photographs, most of them African-Americans from around the city. He identified many of the people in the collection by relying on his own knowledge and conducting more than 100 interviews with residents around the city.

But Brewer possesses an understanding of local history that exceeds the personal. He is the owner of The Greater Pittsburgh Coliseum, a community center and local archive in Homewood that used to be one of four trolley factories.

Brewer can recite the history of Pittsburgh’s trolley system with ease, and makes sure to emphasize that the city’s African-American population — specifically, workers in Homewood, the Hill District and other minority neighborhoods — played a key role in building and maintaining the trolleys. Now, the Coliseum hosts events for all ages, and is a living testament to Homewood’s impressive past and bright future.



Jafar Turner, right, and Tyler Perry, students at Winchester Thurston, meet with historian John Brewer at the Homewood Coliseum, where Brewer has established the Hall of Fame to honor successful Homewood residents past and present.

Brewer shares his enthusiasm for history freely, holding frequent readings of his books at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh's Homewood branch.

"Kingpins of Pittsburgh," his latest work, is a look at the numbers of men in the Hill District and will be required reading in classes at the University of Pittsburgh. He still receives calls

for consultations around the world, following his impressive work with the Harris collection. But most importantly, he hopes to inspire the Homewood community to be as great as it can be. And his knowledge, wisdom and memory are helping to make that happen.





JAMES A.

BROWN

Photo Credit: Kenneth Neely

By Christiana Dillard

James A. Brown, the youth development director for the Homewood-Brushton YMCA, is helping young people maximize their creativity with the proper resources.

Brown knows what it's like to make big changes and dedicate endless hours to become better at what you love. He grew up on Long Island, N.Y., and attended Vassar College, graduating with a degree in sociology. But he decided to take a different route, moving to Pittsburgh to pursue a master's degree in musicology at the University of Pittsburgh.

Since arriving in Pittsburgh, he has made great use of his training. He previously worked as a music production instructor for Arts Greenhouse at Carnegie Mellon University, a character development program for high school students that integrates musicianship, hip-hop, and social justice.

In 2007, he and Pittsburgh rapper Thelonious Stretch co-founded Rhyme Calisthenics LLC, a game-show style event that tests the lyrical abilities of local rappers. The show has hosted more than 50 events in the United States and Canada.

Brown has encouraged local teenagers to be similarly as innovative. For 10 years, he has led the YMCA Lighthouse Project, which allows teens on the East End of Pittsburgh to explore their creativity through media arts. Because of Lighthouse's success, the Heinz Endowments supported it with a \$1.5 million grant last year.

Lighthouse then moved from Westinghouse Academy in Homewood to the Creative Youth Center in the Homewood-Brushton YMCA.

The center features recording studios, creative suites, and other art technology used by students. The first phase of construction was completed in 2017, and the next phases will include an art studio, film lab, and youth employment center.

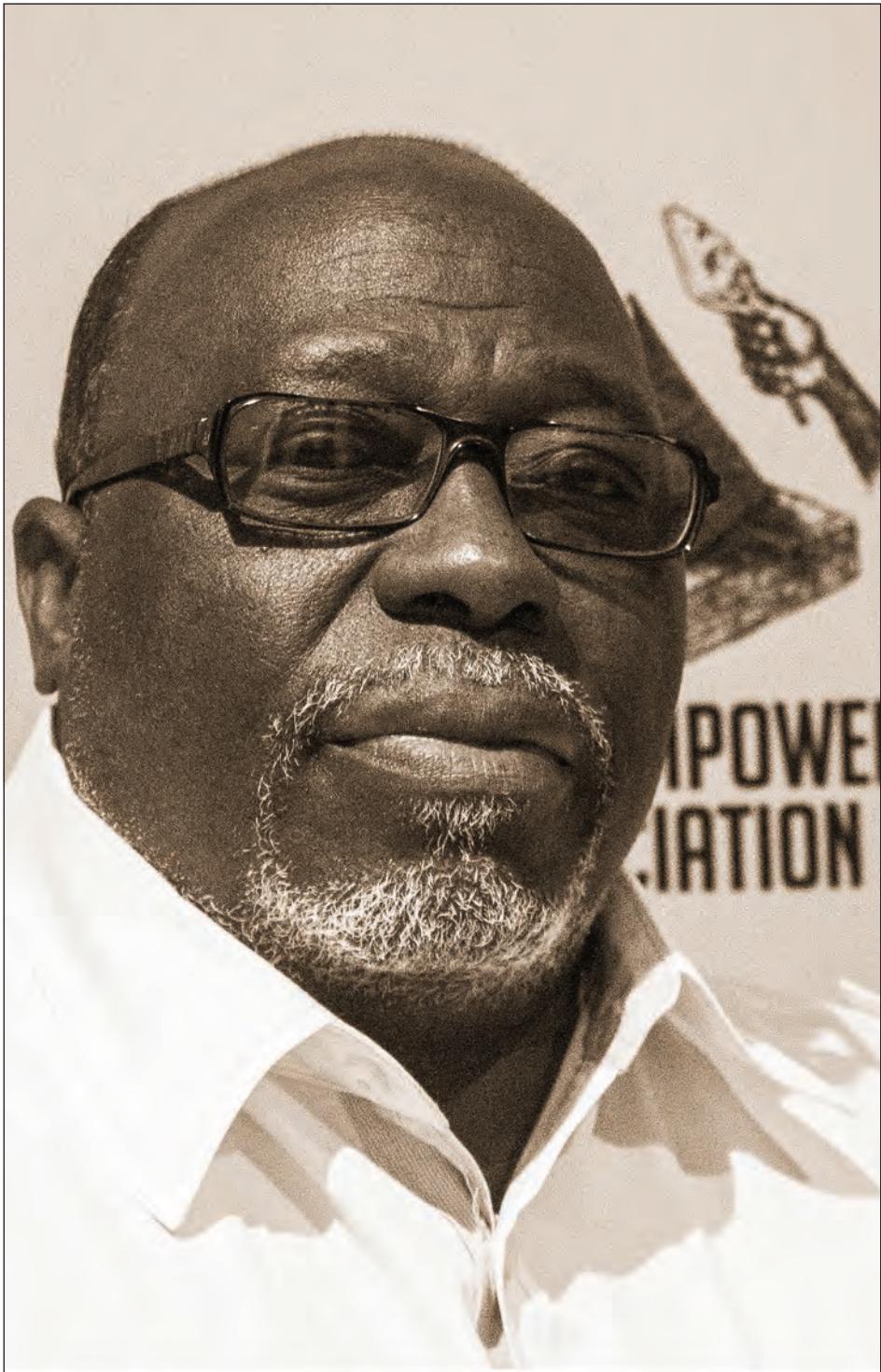
Brown is also giving back through his work behind the scenes. He has been a member of many local committees for the arts, including

the Heinz Endowments Transformative Arts Program, which allows teaching artists of color and young artists to receive funding toward their own creative projects.

He has also worked on the Y-USA Neighborhood Action Team Project, which brought together schools, non-profits and businesses to develop strategies to address the achievement gap, and the city of Pittsburgh's My Brother's Keeper Committee, which focuses on eradicating education gaps for young men of color.

Throughout it all, Brown has never stopped honing his own talents. He plays the keyboard and still produces music. In 2007, he released a hip-hop/soul album called "Fieldwork" as Armstead Brown, his middle and last names.

Homewood-Brushton YMCA has been fortunate enough to benefit from Brown's leadership as the youth development director. Young artists from Homewood can be sure to find a haven in the many local initiatives that Brown has spearheaded.



T. RASHAD
BYRDSONG

Photo Credit: Jonathan Brown

By Christiana Dillard

The Community Empowerment Association has a long history in Homewood. It provides social justice services, including mentorship for young adults, as well as town hall meetings, and interventions to ward against gang tensions.

The founder of CEA is T. Rashad Byrdsong, a longtime activist and entrepreneur who believes in African-American empowerment through community uplift.

Byrdsong has been part of the Homewood community since he was 9 years old, moving to the neighborhood from Braddock and Rankin. After serving as a combat veteran in Vietnam and drawing from principles he learned as a member of the Black Panther Party, he began CEA nearly 25 years ago.

Along with the involvement of his wife, four children, two grandchildren, and countless volunteers, CEA has been able to serve more than 25,000 people in Pittsburgh and across Allegheny County.

In fact, Byrdsong believes that the association is just as effective as the Black Panthers were in organizing community improvement efforts. CEA has conducted toy and clothes drives, and has given community members young and old opportunities to serve their neighborhood through programming.

Byrdsong fashioned CEA based on an “Afrocentric intervention paradigm,” of his own design, that aims to assist African-American families in at-risk neighborhoods find financial and personal stability.

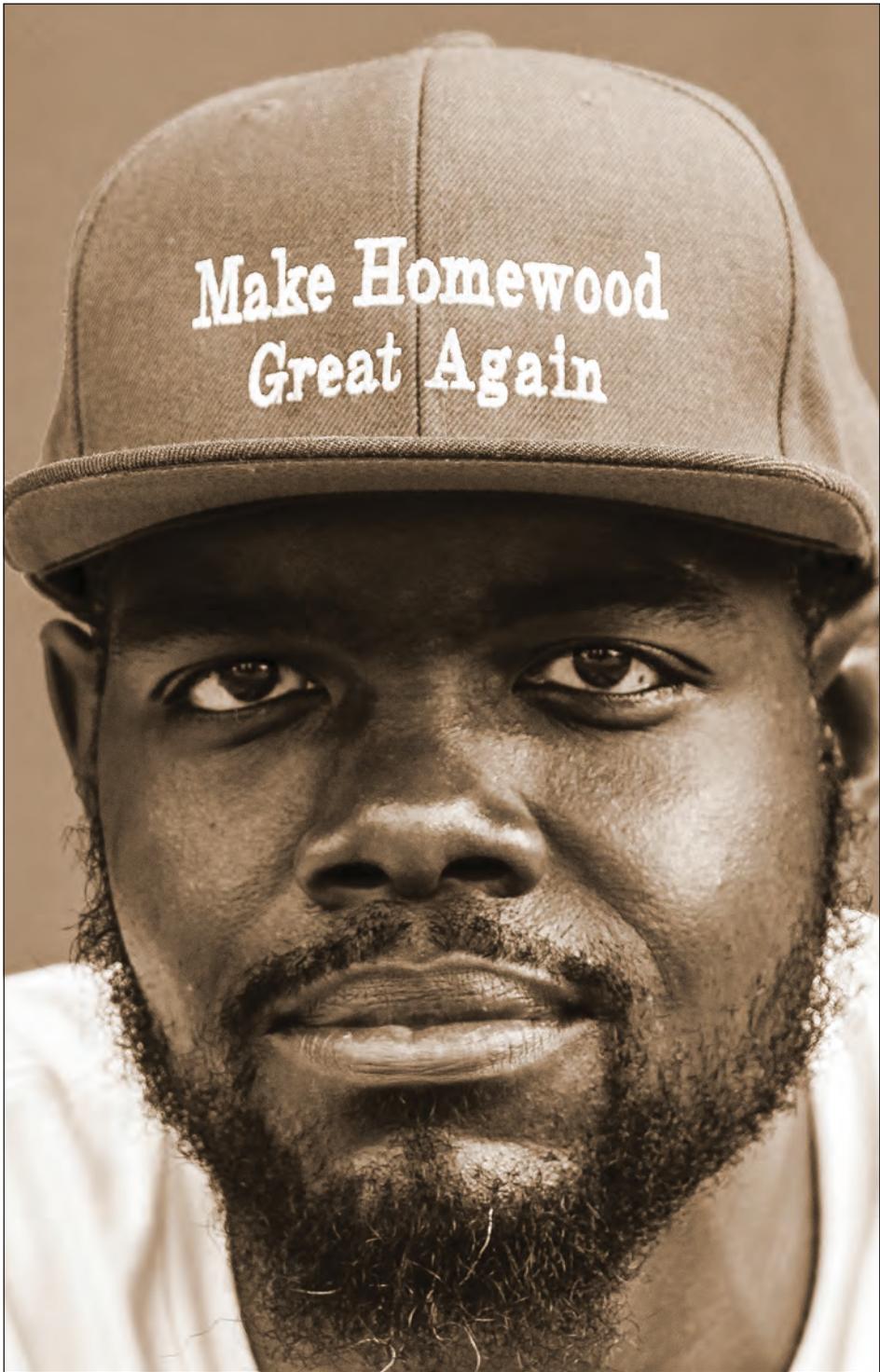
This paradigm was developed while he worked with the National Urban Peace and Justice Council, an organization that specializes in treating gang violence through the leadership of community members.

In addition to the association, Byrdsong is also the president and CEO of MA'AT Construction Group, also based in Homewood. Named after the ancient Egyptian principles of intrapersonal and interpersonal order, MA'AT has trained and hired more than 1,000 individuals from

African-American communities in Pittsburgh. Since 1997, the group has helped to spread the influence of African-American enterprise in Pittsburgh through its various projects in the area.

Through his efforts in Homewood, Byrdsong has been able to use his position in other community empowerment initiatives. He has been one of the many activists calling for a countywide model of violence prevention, viewed through the lens of public health. Earlier this year, the county received a grant to go through with such a model.

Byrdsong has dedicated his life to working as a man of the people, specifically for those in Homewood. Though he now lives in Churchill, he still works with both CEA and MA'AT to ensure that they are carrying on their much-needed missions throughout Homewood and around the county.



MARTELL
COVINGTON

Photo Credit: Jonathan Brown

By Christiana Dillard

Martell Covington knows all too well the importance of family. In fact, his own family is his proof.

When Covington, born and raised in Homewood, was a kid, his family founded the Community Empowerment Association.

Since 1994, CEA has served more than 25,000 residents of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County, many of them at risk of gang violence, lack of mentorship, or both.

Growing up, Covington took part in other Homewood initiatives. He attended Holy Rosary School, and spent time in afterschool and summer camps at the Homewood-Brushton YMCA and a Community College of Allegheny County center in Homewood.

He was also a part of neighborhood baseball and football teams. He even learned to play drums at the Afro-American Music Institute on Hamilton Avenue.

However, CEA was his home. Covington learned the ins and outs of community planning through watching his family create events, host town halls, and provide mentorship that helped curb violence in Homewood. He was also one of the first graduates of CEA's Rites of Passage and Safe Passage afterschool programming.

Covington attended Howard University in Washington, D.C. While in college, he served as a special events coordinator for CEA, which included planning the annual Pittsburgh Black Family Reunion.

When he returned to Pittsburgh with a Bachelor of Business Administration in hospitality management, he dove headfirst into nonprofit work. He serves as the CEA's youth program coordinator and assistant to the director of Youth and Family Services, and also as a mentor. One of his primary tasks is working with the African-American Leadership Institute, a CEA development program for young men.

Covington joined the board of directors for the Cameroon Football Development, an

organization that created youth soccer leagues in Cameroon, and received the opportunity to travel to the Central African country as part of his involvement. He also coaches youth football for 7- and 8- year-olds and girls' softball for Homewood Community Sports.

He is also the director of the web series "LWB" ("Living While Black"), a somewhat comedic look into the lives and struggles of African-Americans. This season focuses on the life of an African-American woman.

Covington has fashioned his life as a model for young people in Homewood. His family served as a steady support system for his many endeavors, so now he hopes to be available as a reliable resource for others.

As a longtime Homewood resident, he is a living testament of the impact community programs have on the self-esteem and self-motivation of young people.

He continues to cultivate his professional and creative skills, and works to develop the talents of his fellow Homewood residents — his extended family.



WILLIAM DAVIS

BAKER

Photo Credit: Carol Moyer

By Carol Moye

William Davis Baker has been in business for 52 years as the owner of Baker's Dairy, a convenience store that carries candy, groceries, sandwiches and other goods on Hamilton Avenue in Homewood.

Baker was born and raised in Montgomery, Ala. He was eager to come north and escape Jim Crow. After arriving in Pittsburgh in 1959, he began jitneying, but discovered that he really didn't like doing this. He then worked at a business center downtown, followed by a milk company.

His first store was on Brushton Avenue. He didn't own this building but was renting from white owners. After they raised the rent when they saw how successful he was, he decided it was time to own his own business, and bought the current building in 1962.

He later purchased the old Gelman's Loan building at Centre Avenue and Kirkpatrick Street. He had to close that store when his brother-in-law kept stealing from him.

Soon afterward, he began to dabble in real estate, which to some degree he still does.

Circa 1974, he noticed that there was no car wash in Homewood, and began by having people with buckets in front of his store. This became quite popular, and he purchased the lot next door, and had Mr. Minifield's construction company do the work for him. On the day they opened, he had ice cream for the kids and candy, and other fun things.

Baker says that he only hires local people for his business because he can relate to them. He used to hire a lot of kids, but it's getting harder to find kids he can really count on. If he finds a teenager who is well-mannered and respectful, he is still willing to give them a chance.

Baker's wife, Patricia Gardner, was the owner of Images Gallery. She operated that business for years, until her mother developed Alzheimer's disease, and she could no longer keep up the store.

Baker is currently rehabilitating the building, and hoping to lease it to another business.

At age 76, he likes being active.

"I love my age. I'm able to do things. I love that," he said.

He still is excited by his work.

"I love people. I love to help people. I love to be around people and kids. I love doing things," he said.

He also values the relationship he has with his wife.

"I have a very intelligent wife," he said.

And, apparently, Baker's Dairy has the best corned-beef sandwiches in the 'Burgh.'



GIORDAN
DIXON

Photo Credit: Jonathan Brown

By Christiana Dillard

Go-getters tend to get what they are after. One of them is Giordan Dixon, a young artist and volunteer based in Homewood who is bearing witness to the fruits of his labor.

By seeking opportunities to train in music and help other young people improve their skills in technology and reading, Dixon has built a name for himself not only in the community, but throughout Pittsburgh.

Dixon is from Highland Park, and attended Westinghouse High School during his senior year. He was a participant in the Lighthouse Project, now housed at the Homewood-Brushton YMCA. Through the program, Dixon received the opportunity to learn more about producing, mixing and mastering, and singing his own music. The recording equipment provided by the program was extremely useful in Dixon's endeavors.

When he received a grant from the Heinz Endowments to complete his own album, his mentors at Lighthouse were instrumental in assisting him in his project. Their guidance allowed him to grow as an artist, and even as a volunteer.

In fact, Dixon was already heavily involved in an outreach program called the Warrior Movement. He got started after visiting Steve MacIsaac, executive director of the Neighborhood Learning Alliance, which focuses on education for African-American students through collaborations with nonprofit and faith-based organizations. NLA also is in charge of the Warrior Movement, in which high school students mentor elementary students and assist them in their literacy and technical skills.

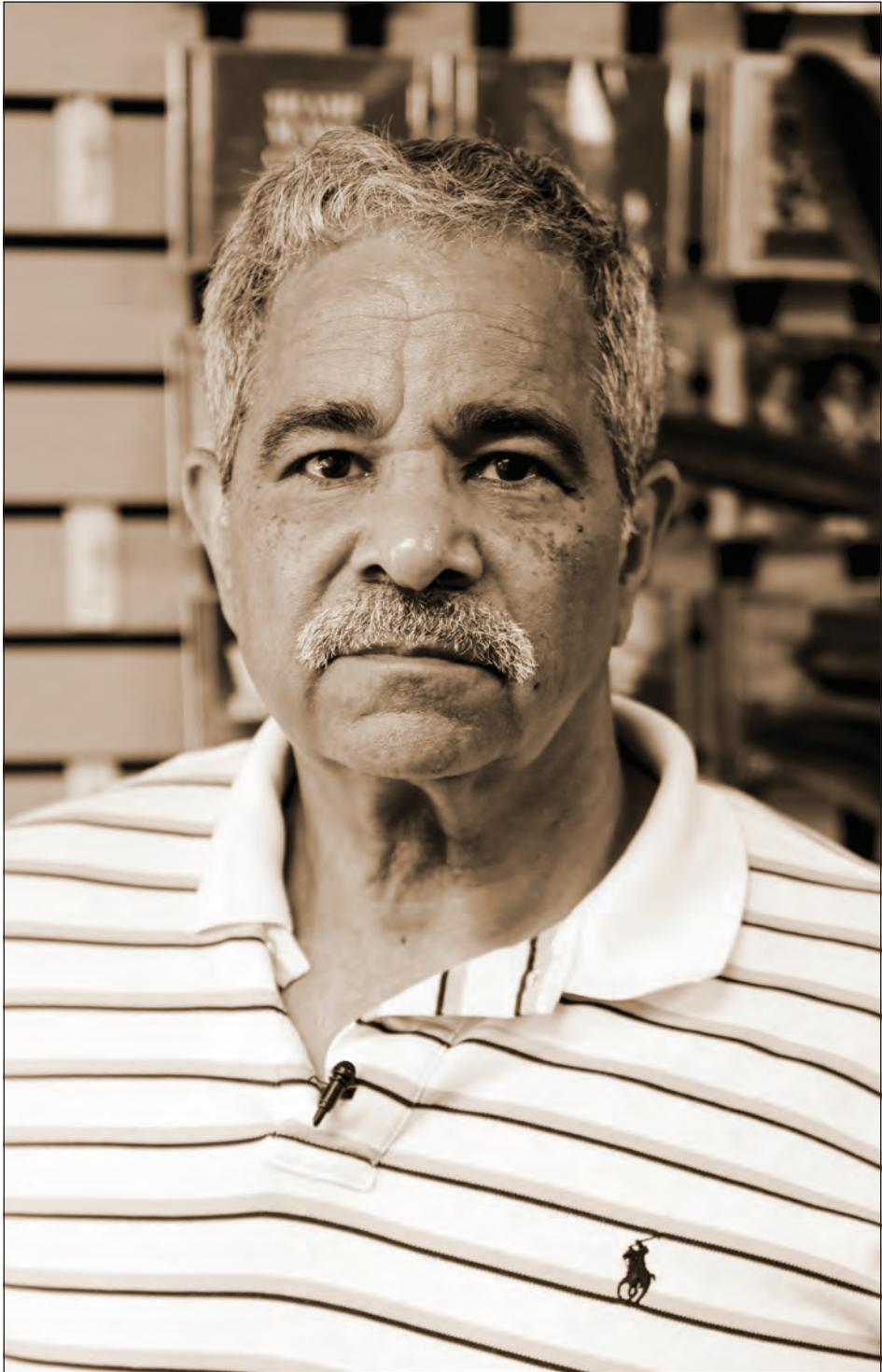
As a result of Dixon's involvement and willingness to volunteer, he became the original Tech Warrior. He helped introduce students to robotics at Woolslair, Arsenal, Lincoln and Weil elementary schools. Later, he joined the Reading Warriors, and was placed at Woolslair.

Dixon is still involved in community initiatives.

He works at Assemble, a community arts center that hosts events for community STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, and math) programming. He is also still creating music, and plans to release his album next year.

As a Pittsburgh native, he realizes the importance of giving back to a place that has given him so much.

Homewood and its surrounding areas have, and will, benefit from Dixon's dedication to uplifting and inspiring the community.



NEIL
DORSEY

Photo Credit: Brian Cook

By Christiana Dillard

Dorsey's Record Shop is one of the oldest surviving businesses in Homewood.

Since 1946, the Dorsey family has owned and operated the shop, adjusting and adapting to the changing times to stay afloat in the shifting, high-tech, and fast-paced economy.

Neil Dorsey, son of the founder, Cornelius Dorsey, now runs the shop, and believes that to stay afloat, you have to stay aware.

Neil Dorsey was born and raised in Homewood, and grew up washing windows and mopping floors in the shop. He graduated high school in 1963, and attended West Virginia State University. He served in the Army for three years during the Vietnam War era, and returned to Homewood to work with his father at Dorsey's.

Just as society was changing, Dorsey's felt that it had to change, too. Technology shifted from record players to stereos and speakers, and soon, Dorsey's purchased three repair trucks for at-home repairs for clients. However, it found that the amount of labor involved in fixing home appliances was not practical, and went back to focusing on music sales.

Eventually, the medium of music recording changed, too, making retail sales harder. Like they always did, the Dorseys made it work.

Neil Dorsey became the head of the shop after his father retired. He went back to school to learn how to become a more versatile business owner.

He trained in computer hardware while his son Marcus went to college, studied film, and came back to the shop to specialize in software. Through trial and error — including another foray into home repairs, which is no longer a service — the two have found a harmonious balance, while still being able to work with music, depending on their clients' needs.

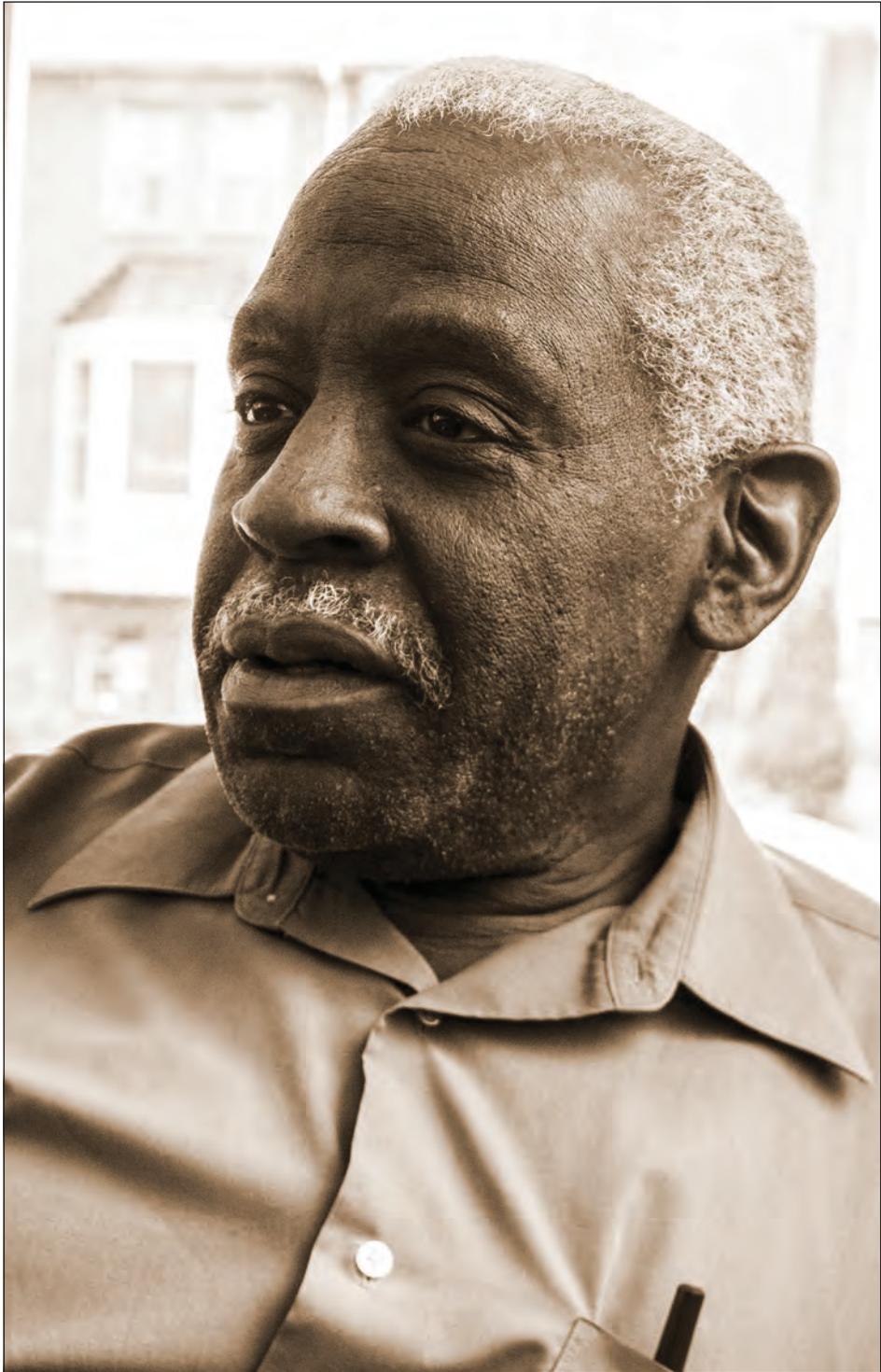
Neil Dorsey makes sure to keep the Dorsey's Record Shop tradition as a family-owned, community-centered business alive. The shop supports neighborhood churches, nonprofits,

and schools, financially and otherwise.

Local promoters are allowed space in the shop to hang their flyers for events. Dorsey believes that because the neighborhood has been good to the store, it is only right to repay it accordingly.

Neil Dorsey and his family have played an important role in making Homewood feel like home. Despite the development of shopping malls and eventually, online shopping, Dorsey's Record Shop has thrived because it prioritizes the needs of its customers.

In return, Homewood has continued to support the hard work of the business owner, who shows no signs of slowing down soon.



ELWIN
GREEN

Photo Credit: Carol Moye

By Carol Moye

Elwin Green was born in Louisville, Ky. In 1972, he volunteered to join the Army, and served in Japan. He loved it there and wanted to stay, but the powers that be, in 1974, sent him to the recruiting station in Pittsburgh.

While in Pittsburgh, he pursued a degree in English from the University of Pittsburgh, but left town in 1980, before completing his degree, to return to Louisville.

In 1983, he decided it would be wise to finish his degree, so he returned to Pittsburgh. In January of 1984, while staying with his friends on the North Side, he discovered an ad for an efficiency apartment in Homewood. It was his first visit to the community, and he's been there ever since.

He soon began singing in the choir at Bethany Baptist Church and met the woman he calls the love of his life, Janet Jackson, a Homewood resident. They married in 1986.

"When I first walked up Homewood Avenue, the stretch from the busway to Hamilton was mostly lined with the abandoned remains of multi-story, mixed-use buildings," Green said. "I was immediately overwhelmed by a sense of opportunity. I knew that to others, Homewood appeared to be dead; but I believe in resurrection."

In April 2004, Green still wasn't quite in love with Pittsburgh, and was planning to move to California to try to get a start in the film industry. But a month later, he got an email from Carmen Lee, an editor of a suburban edition at the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. She told him the newspaper was responding to the need to diversify its staff and suggested that he apply for a job there.

Green was hired as a business reporter at the Post-Gazette, where he worked from September 2004 to February 2011.

Green considers himself a "placist."

"I believe deeply in the importance of place. In order to do what God wants, we have to connect with specific people. In order to connect with

specific people, we need to be in a specific place. After all these things, I became convinced that Homewood is my place," he said.

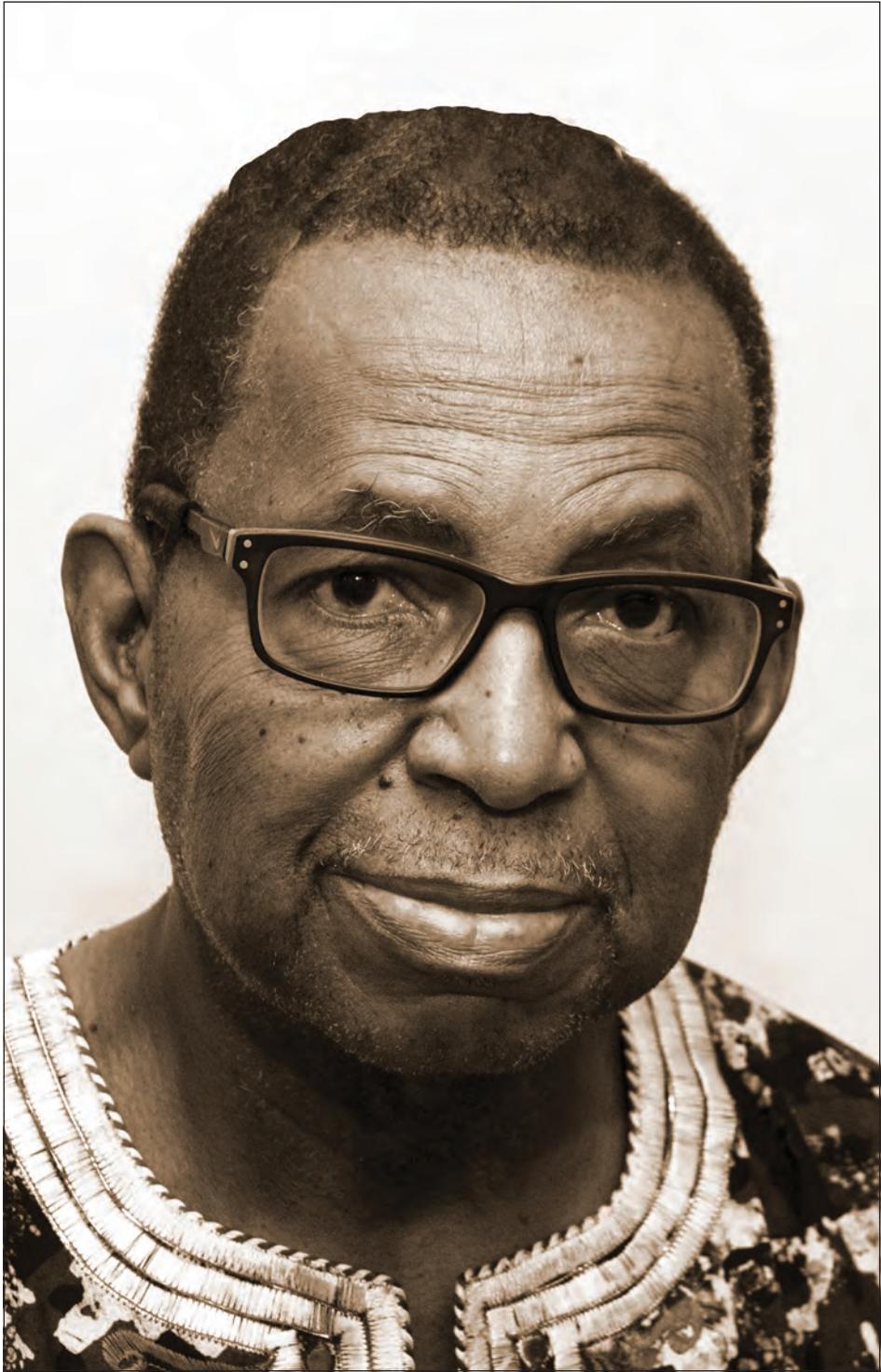
In October of 2005, he was chatting with fellow tenants when he heard gunshots. When he went upstairs, he saw bullet holes in the bay window of his and his wife's second-floor apartment. That incident really put him out of sorts, and everyone noticed.

After Green wrote about the incident in the newspaper, the "My Homewood" blog was born. It lasted from October 2005 until March 2010. In April 2010, he shifted the blog to his company, Luminaria Productions, where it lives today, as "Homewood Nation," a public service project.

The focus of "Homewood Nation" is to:

- Elevate the conversation
- Better inform local people
- Make people less afraid of Homewood
- Initiate conversation that taps more deeply into people's sense of agency

"I want to help dispel the feeling/assumption that Homewood residents are powerless," Green said.



DR. JAMES
JOHNSON

Photo Credit: Germaine Watkins

By Christiana Dillard

Dr. James Johnson, co-founder of the Afro-American Music Institute in Homewood, recognizes the importance of training students of all ages in the art of blues, jazz, soul, and gospel, as a way of heightening community consciousness, self-awareness, and music appreciation.

Born in Tennessee and raised in Louisiana, Johnson was surrounded by music in many forms. He grew up in the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, and was influenced by gospel and jazz. His mother, a classically trained pianist, was one of President Truman's favorite performers.

Not surprisingly, Johnson trained in the classical tradition, and studied violin in college. Though he received acclaim for his talents and even played in orchestras, he found his real love in jazz piano, partly due to his college experience at Grambling State University, a historically black college in Louisiana.

While in Louisiana, Johnson helped train Vietnam veterans in African-American music at the Lakeside School of Music. His passions for teaching and music motivated him to begin a program that inspired others to discover their own artistry.

In 1977, Dr. Nathan Davis, an internationally renowned saxophonist and colleague of Johnson, encouraged him to move to Pittsburgh, considering its reputation as a center of jazz. Johnson, along with his wife, Pamela, founded AAMI together as a nonprofit.

In 1982, the Johnsons secured their first location at St. James AME Church in East Liberty. After six years, they moved the facility to Tioga Street in Homewood. The institute moved to Hamilton Avenue more than a decade ago, with bigger facilities. Now, it hosts special events, such as recitals and concerts, to showcase the talent of the students.

The AAMI currently trains about 300 students a year and they learn about the African-American musical tradition through singing and

instrumentation.

Johnson teaches a class on African-American music at the University of Pittsburgh, and has also taught at Carlow University and the Community College of Allegheny County. From 1990-1994, he was on staff at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, conducting music instruction while making a weekly commute from Pittsburgh.

He has gotten the opportunity to play with jazz legends, while also building relationships with internationally recognized artists who have visited and taught at AAMI.

Johnson's mission and musical instruction in Homewood has affected musicians all over Pittsburgh. He and his wife created a safe space for novice and experienced musicians to participate in strengthening the African-American tradition.

With a combined love for his community and his music, it is safe to say that Johnson's legacy will last for a very long time.



THOMAS
KILCREASE

Photo Credit: Germaine Watkins

By Christiana Dillard

Through its ups and downs, Homewood has remained a neighborhood where togetherness is a cherished value.

Many community members have established initiatives to keep Homewood from becoming disjointed. One of them is Thomas Kilcrease, who has worked to spread a positive influence in the community. Now, he is helping others, especially young people, to leave their own legacy.

Kilcrease, who is 29, grew up in Homewood, with both sides of his family hailing from the area. He attended Crescent Elementary on Bennett Street, and continued his education in the Penn Hills School District.

Kilcrease has been involved in community mentorship, fellowship, and ministry since his teenage years. In his youth, he discovered his service calling as a part of Bethany Baptist Church. He joined the church's Youth Christian Conquerors program and, in 2001, received the opportunity to work as a summer missionary in Mexico at 14 years old. His ability to bring in teenagers from around Homewood and encourage them to participate in Bible study and church activities allowed for the expansion of YCC.

After returning to Pittsburgh from Liberty University, where he studied psychology with a focus in child and adolescent development, Kilcrease began heading YCC as its youth pastor.

In addition to regular programming for Homewood children, he also takes his students to Summer's Best Two Weeks camp, a co-ed Christian sports summer program.

His involvement in the church and YCC not only strengthened his love for God and his community, but also his leadership skills.

Through Bethany, he has made connections with Faison Elementary, Homewood Children's Village, the Homewood-Brushton YMCA, and the Lighthouse Project.

Earlier this year, Kilcrease was ordained as a

deacon at Bethany. He continues to minister to young people and other members of the church as a mentor and friend. He also has helped with community projects, such as building a neighborhood playground with KaBoom!, spending his time with young people as an academic assistant, and participating in community clean-ups.

Kilcrease, who received his master's degree in education from Liberty, is currently pursuing a doctorate in educational psychology at Regent University. However, he is still motivated by his friends, family and neighbors in Homewood to continue his service.

His wish is to see the community embrace and exceed its potential. The relationships he has built with young people have made a lasting impact on their lives, as well as his own.



RAYNARD

LUCAS

Photo Credit: Jonathan Brown

By Christiana Dillard

Raynard Lucas is a product not only of his own talent, but also of the opportunities presented to him through programming throughout Homewood.

Lucas is a young artist who made music in Homewood throughout high school, and continues his efforts while in college.

However, he credits much of his success to the Homewood-Brushton YMCA Lighthouse Project and the mentors who helped him along the way.

Lucas is a native of the Homewood area, growing up in the adjoining neighborhood of Lincoln. He attended Westinghouse High School, where he was introduced to the Lighthouse Project, an afterschool program that allows students to explore their creative abilities through music, visual arts, fashion, and digital media.

Because the project was originally housed at Westinghouse, Lucas had easy access to honing his passion.

However, his involvement was not the only source of his interest. He has always loved creating music, and, with his friend Robert Rose-Thompson, created the alternative rock band Ink in seventh grade. The two continued playing together throughout their time in Lighthouse, giving them even more of a platform to share their work. They have performed at notable Pittsburgh venues, such as the REX Theater, the Andy Warhol Museum, and even the Google office in Bakery Square.

Thanks to their dedication to their craft, Ink's first EP, "5 Years," is available on iTunes and streaming services now.

Lucas is especially thankful for the guidance he has received from members of the community — not only in their actions, but in their example. The leadership at the Lighthouse Project has pushed him to create with vigor, and has supported his efforts with its time and energy.

Additionally, the leaders have inspired Lucas to give back; he is a volunteer for The Free Store in Wilkinsburg, a shop in the neighborhood

next door to Homewood that allows community members to pick up to five free items — mostly clothing — as needed.

Now that Lucas is attending Point Park University, he is as busy as ever. However, he has not lost his passion for creativity. He is studying animation and visual effects, and continues to play with Ink.

His advice to younger artists is to "reach for the stars and break down the asteroids."

With his ties to local initiatives and his love for artistry, perhaps he will become a mentor to local young people like those who inspired him.



NATE
MITCHELL

Photo Credit: Kenneth Neely

By Christiana Dillard

It is commonly said that artists have the ability to express themselves through multiple mediums. Maybe it is because they are known for taking chances.

Nate Mitchell, owner of The Natural Choice Barber Shop & Salon, and a professional DJ, goes above and beyond “chance.” He makes things happen.

Mitchell was born in Homewood and grew up on nearby Lincoln Avenue. He moved from there to Homestead and returned to Homewood during his teenage years. In fact, his return to Homewood aligned with his discovery of his talents. A Christmas gift of clippers from his parents with the promise that they would not be paying for his excessive haircuts anymore inspired him to learn how to cut hair himself.

Around the same time, a friend allowed him to experiment with his music equipment and collection, sparking Mitchell’s interest in manipulating sound.

The day before he planned to leave Pittsburgh for Washington, D.C., he learned that he was an expectant father. Realizing his responsibility, he stayed in Pittsburgh, attending classes at Community College of Allegheny County/ Homewood-Brushton Branch while cutting hair in surrounding barbershops.

In 1997, he decided to venture out on his own, and opened The Natural Choice in Oakland. He felt that the college neighborhood needed a hair shop servicing students of various backgrounds, and planned to take advantage of the location.

Later, he saw a similar opportunity in up-and-coming Lawrenceville. He co-founded 720 Records and Cafe, which sold music and other merchandise, and housed a cafe for store-goers. Although Mitchell is no longer a part of the business, 720 was a great environment for his love of music.

He still DJs under the pseudonym DJ Nate Da Barber, traveling across the country and internationally to share his gift.

Mitchell is a lifelong Pittsburgher. He and his wife, caring for their two daughters, are raising the next generation of Pittsburghers. Consequently, he can testify to the changes, both positive and negative, that local neighborhoods have gone through.

Now he is witnessing Homewood experience its own revival. The recent opening of his second barbershop, located on Homewood’s Dallas Avenue, is contributing to growth in the community. Not only does Mitchell employ three neighborhood employees, but he is also training a barber apprentice.

He also rents out The Shop, the facility where the barbershop is housed, to local businesses – but not for money. Instead, he allows them to utilize the extra space if they agree to perform a reasonable amount of hours of community service in Homewood.

Despite all of his endeavors, Mitchell is proudest of being able to leave his mark on his childhood neighborhood through doing what he loves.

His business, The Natural Choice, is set to mark its 20th anniversary, and Mitchell is planning a free celebration downtown at the August Wilson Center. Like he does in everyday life, Mitchell hopes to bring locals together through creativity and positivity.

That winning combination has allowed him to live his fullest life, granting his community the ability to share in his success.



RON
PORTER

Photo Credit: Jonathan Brown

By Christiana Dillard

Ron Porter, founder of RDP Consulting Services, has adopted the mission to help Homewood develop economically, socially and politically. For nearly 50 years, he has worked with small and large organizations, and takes great pride in supporting positive outcomes for Homewood.

Porter grew up in the Hill District. He attended Pittsburgh Public Schools and graduated from Millersville University of Pennsylvania. After getting married, he moved to Homewood in 1970, and has remained in the community.

Before founding his consulting firm, he worked in human resources at Warner Cable Corporation of Pittsburgh, Allegheny International Corp. and Westinghouse Electric Corp. He focused on making each business more inclusive.

When Porter founded RDP in 1984, he kept that same mission. The firm serves corporations, educators, and communities locally, nationally and internationally. RDP guides organizations in addressing issues of diversity, leadership and cultural awareness. RDP has worked with the Allegheny County Housing Authority, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

His international consulting assignments have included Ghana, Ethiopia and South Africa.

Despite Porter's impressive background as a consultant, he still recognizes that his roots remain on the frontlines. RDP facilitated the founding of the Homewood Community Development Collaborative. He is active in developing collaborations and planning among leaders in five East End communities, including Homewood, Larimer, Lincoln-Lemington, East Hills and East Liberty. He has consulted with Bridgeway Capital on the renovation of the 7800 Susquehanna Street Building in Homewood.

Education reform is another priority for Porter. Several of RDP's clients are educational systems; the firm has worked to facilitate significant change, including student discipline reform and educational planning. From 1993-2008, he served as an adjunct instructor of

Multicultural Management at the Heinz School of Public Policy and Management at Carnegie Mellon University. Porter developed and taught the course Managing in Multicultural Society, which was required for all full-time graduate public policy majors.

Although Porter's wife of 48 years, Barbara, passed away in 2016, his two sons, five grandchildren, and two great grandsons provide great support. Likewise, Porter is committed to supporting positive change in Homewood and surrounding communities.

He recognizes that many of the difficulties faced by Pittsburgh's urban communities, including Homewood, are the result of public policy. He believes the solutions to the major challenges facing East End communities will require attention to multiple sectors, including education, business development, fair access to employment and fairness within the law enforcement system.



JOE
SIMMONS

Photo Credit: Carol Moyer

By Bonnie Pfister

“You have any pies in there?” a woman called out from her car.

“Sweet potato? There’s one left. And an apple and peach, uh-huh,” Joe Simmons replied.

He stood outside of his North Homewood Avenue shop, Dana’s Bakery, during an unseasonably warm September afternoon, fielding greetings from passers-by, neighbors and regulars who rely on his doughnuts, fruit turnovers, layer cakes and cupcakes to sweeten their days.

In a neighborhood that’s lost many businesses over the years, Dana’s Bakery has been a steadfast fixture for nearly four decades.

“I’ve been here so long, I’m a staple,” Simmons said. “I’ve seen generations grow up. Adults stop in and say, ‘I remember you from when I went to Holy Rosary School around the corner.’”

That is quite an impression, considering the school has been closed for more than 20 years.

Simmons’ start in the baking industry was random.

When fresh out of McKeesport High School, he heard that the nearby Vienna Bakery Co. was hiring. Simmons began working as a dishwasher for the company, a wholesaler of breads and cakes to supermarkets and restaurants.

After about six years he moved on, working at retail bakeries across the region east of Pittsburgh. He credited that hands-on experience with teaching him the ins and outs of baking, customer service and running a business.

Eventually, he joined West Mifflin’s G&K Bakery, purchasing sweets there that he would take to a Hill District location for resale.

“I began to feel like, ‘I can do this. Let me find my own location,’” he said.

Many fellow bakers along the way donated equipment. One passed along a doughnut fryer, while the now-shuttered Stagno’s Bakery in

Larimer gave Simmons an oven. (Both of the appliances are still going strong today.)

At age 35, with a young, growing family, Simmons soon had his operation up and running. He named the bakery after his daughter Dana, a toddler at that time.

There’s little downtime for a business owner. Simmons’ workday has long started around 1:30 a.m., and he said he’s become accustomed to getting by on about four hours of sleep each night.

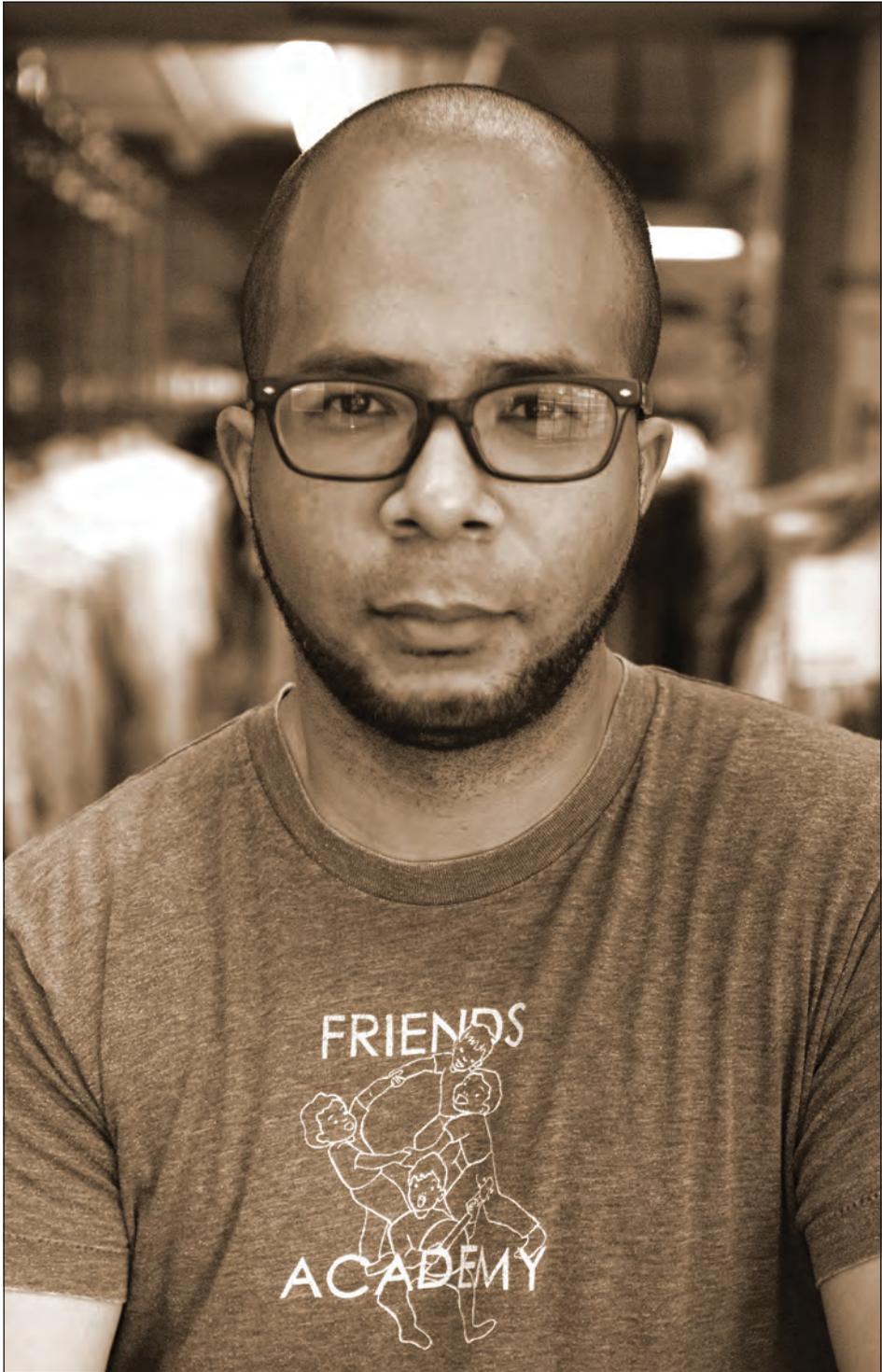
His wife, Sandy, has added a pushcart of tropical-flavored ices under a bright yellow and pink umbrella, which is becoming “a business in and of itself,” he remarked.

Now 73, Simmons shows no sign of slowing down. From his home in East Hills, he often bikes to work.

He relaxes by fishing and hunting, usually for small game, like squirrels and rabbits. Son Brandon Simmons, 35, one of his six children, often joins him hunting, as well as working at the bakery.

Brandon Simmons may take the business over eventually but his father has no retirement plans.

“I’ll be here until the man upstairs calls me home, if they need a top baker up there,” he said.



JUSTIN
STRONG

Photo Credit: Brian Cook

By Christiana Dillard

Justin Strong knows that creativity coupled with a willingness to change keeps the entrepreneurial spirit alive.

As a business owner, he has headed many Pittsburgh music clubs and lounges. Now, he is the fourth-generation owner of Strong Fabric Care LLC, in Homewood. Each business has allowed him to grow professionally and personally, helping him connect with the Greater Pittsburgh community.

A Pittsburgh native, Strong graduated from Allderdice High School in 1996 and studied at the University of Pittsburgh. While there, he was known for hosting parties and get-togethers at his tiny apartment in Oakland. As a result, he was inspired to begin his business career in 1997 by developing 7th Movement Development LLC, an economic development firm for creatives in Pittsburgh.

Later, he took a leap of faith and opened the Shadow Lounge, a performance venue and lounge in East Liberty. Shadow hosted many locals who would go on to enjoy broader celebrity, including rappers Mac Miller, Kellee Maize and Real Deal. Later, AVA Bar and Lounge was opened right next to Shadow, and the two spaces worked toward making East Liberty an ideal location for nightlife.

Both businesses enjoyed success before closing in 2013.

Strong's legacy in the area had already been established, and he continued to take on new ventures. In 2014, he moved his sights to Homewood, taking over Strong Dry Cleaning, a business his family started in 1930 in North Carolina. The Strong brand moved to Pittsburgh in 1945, and has remained one of the few black-owned dry cleaning companies in Southwestern Pennsylvania.

With locations in Homewood, Downtown and Oakland, he has been able to continue the legacy of the cleaners by taking on both commercial and residential clients.

The Homewood storefront is owned by Strong,

allowing for the cleaners to retain some autonomy and serving as a successful example of black business in the community.

Strong has always been an advocate for the power of community change through economic development. His businesses throughout Pittsburgh have assisted in bringing positive growth to many communities, including Homewood.

He continues to take an innovative approach to entrepreneurship, working now as general manager of Spirit Lodge and Hall in Lawrenceville, which was recently named one of the top bars in the country by Esquire magazine.

Strong brings his talents to every venture he is a part of, and that includes his work in the Homewood community.



MONTE & RAMON **ROBINSON TWINS**

Photo Credit: Kenneth Neely

By Christiana Dillard

Moving from the playing field to the sidelines proved a smooth transition for Westinghouse High School alumni Monte Robinson and Ramon Robinson.

As the head football coach and offensive coordinator for the Westinghouse Bulldogs, respectively, they have helped the team pick itself up from more than a decade of lackluster seasons that went against the football program's proud tradition. Together, the two have put endless hours into ensuring that the team is successful in more ways than one.

The Robinson twins grew up in Homewood, and played football at Westinghouse. The team benefited from the athletic abilities of the twins, with Ramon playing as star quarterback.

The team won back-to-back City League championships in 1992 and 1993 – the first top victories since 1981 – reviving the Westinghouse name as a championship school.

The twins graduated from Westinghouse in 1995, but did not leave their community behind. Monte began coaching Little League Football in 2001, with ambitions of returning to Westinghouse to assist the football program. He finally received his opportunity in 2006, when he was hired as the offensive coordinator, and in 2008, transitioned to head football coach. That year, he also began the Men of the House initiative, which, in 2015, partnered with Homewood Children's Village.

Men of the House engages Westinghouse football players in a daily study hall, social skills seminars, and health and wellness sessions.

Ramon, too, has given his talents to coaching youth football and baseball in Homewood for more than 10 years. He is the offensive coordinator for Westinghouse football, works as a union painter for the University of Pittsburgh and owns his own company, R&R Painting.

In 2016, the brothers were inducted into Westinghouse's prestigious Wall of Fame, where hundreds of notable alumni are commemorated.

Ramon was inducted into the Pittsburgh City League Hall of Fame for his stellar performance as a championship player for the Bulldogs. Their honors corresponded with their best season as coaches yet: they competed in 2016's playoffs against Brashear High.

The whole community came out to share in their entire season.

But with all of their accomplishments, the Robinson twins spend just as much time tending to their own lives. Both are proud husbands and fathers. Monte has been married for 14 years and has two daughters, while Ramon married in July and has four children.

As family and football men, Monte and Ramon have touched the lives around them in ways big and small; but as fraternal twins, they have supported each other the longest.

And their partnership has given them the strongest team they could ask for.



VON
WASHINGTON

Photo Credit: Germaine Watkins

By Bonnie Pfister

Von Washington was born in Homewood, but moved with family to Atlanta when he was 11. It was quite a change of pace.

“I didn’t know anybody. It was a big jump,” he said.

He graduated from high school in Cobb County, just northwest of Atlanta, took jobs detailing cars and, he admitted, found himself “getting into too much trouble.”

By age 26, he’d had enough. So Washington returned to Homewood two years ago.

“My whole family’s here. It was a place to make a fresh start,” he said.

People in the neighborhood guided him to Rebuilding Together Pittsburgh, based on Susquehanna Street. Part of a national organization, it was started 25 years ago as an all-volunteer effort to provide low-income homeowners with critical home repairs and provide accessibility modifications to make it easier for older residents and those with physical limitations to continue to live in their houses.

Rebuilding Together Pittsburgh still relies heavily on volunteers to complete more than 150 projects across Allegheny County each year.

Since 2015, Washington has learned and is honing carpentry skills, as well as nearly every kind of work that goes into rehabbing a house. He builds wooden staircases; hangs, sands and paints drywall; weatherproofs basements; and lays flooring. He also serves as a house captain, guiding groups of volunteers who take on a project for a day or a weekend.

“I’ve matured a little bit, and straightened up a lot,” he said.

Demi Kolke, a senior planner for the city of Pittsburgh, met Washington while working at Operation Better Block, which strives to strengthen homeownership in the neighborhood.

“Von personally has helped to rehab dozens of homes for some of the most vulnerable people in Homewood,” she said.

“His willingness to give back to the neighborhood is helping to make it a better place for those who live here and generations to come.”

Now 28, Washington describes himself as a bit boisterous, given to joking around with colleagues and volunteers. But he takes the work seriously.

“What we’re doing is great,” he said. “I never imagined staying in one job this long, but I like it. I liked it from the beginning.”

Eventually he hopes to strike out on his own as a carpenter or contractor, to better support his three children and nurture the next generation in his neighborhood.

Homewood is a unique place, he said. While it may be poor in resources, it’s rich in human connectivity.

“There are people here who want you to succeed,” Washington said.

As for thinking of himself as a hero, he shrugged off that notion.

“I don’t know about that,” he said. “But I think what I’m doing is really cool.”



ANWAN

WESLEY

Photo Credit: Brian Cook

By Christiana Dillard

Fathers are an essential component of the family unit.

Anwan Wesley, founder of Fatherhood Outreach Programs in Pittsburgh, realized this for himself as a young father. Now he has four children and, through his many community and personal initiatives, is embracing his title not only for his own children, but also for those in need of protection and support in Homewood and beyond.

Wesley grew up on Inwood Street in Homewood surrounded by influences both positive and negative. As a child, while his neighborhood experienced an increase in crime and violence, he found stability in his father's evangelism and community initiatives.

Although he moved to Penn Hills as a teenager, he kept himself in spaces that encouraged growth and fellowship. He was one of the first attendees at Imani Christian Academy, an independent school that started in a house in Edgewood and is now located in East Hills. There, he was further able to appreciate the sanctity of a solid support system.

With so many opportunities for his own growth, it is no surprise that Wesley began his own initiative to help others. After becoming a father, he found that the role naturally suited his push to inspire and uplift.

In 2003, he created Fatherhood magazine, a publication for fathers-to-be in communities like Homewood. The magazine was a gateway to many more of his ventures; his newest is the iLoveLife! Campaign 4 Love Movement, a brand of clothing depicting positive messages.

Wesley also uses his background in mentorship to coach youth sports. He became the head coach of the varsity boys' basketball team for Imani Christian Academy in 2015. The team has fared successfully under his leadership.

In his second season, the players were section champions in WPIAL 1A Section, and runner-ups in the conference championship. Last year, they were able to make it to the state playoffs.

Affectionately known as "Coach Wan," he also heads a year-round basketball program consisting of leagues, camps, clinics, and tournaments for younger students at Imani, Crescent Elementary in Homewood, and the Homewood-Brushton YMCA.

However, it is Wesley's four children — ages 17, 13, 12 and 4 — who inspire him the most to continue his activism. Interacting with their friends and relatives has allowed him to create a connection between other community members that he uses in his work. He has found that personal connections are an effective way to reach and teach young people, to help them best exercise their potential.

In calling fathers to step up to their responsibilities, he has also created deeper relationships between families, making for a community strengthened by love.



AYODEJI

YOUNG

Photo Credit: Carol Moyo

By Carol Moye

Ayodeji Young was born in Cleveland, and is the son of Yetunde and Samuel Young. In the summer of 1987, he moved to Pittsburgh, where he spent the majority of his childhood.

His mother, a native Pittsburgher, was an African dance instructor and community activist in Homewood and other communities. Ayo, as he is often called, is 39 years old.

He is the proud father of three daughters, Jordane, 16; Asauta, 14; and Amirah, 10.

Here is his story in his own words:

“What makes me able to connect with people in my community so well is that I grew up in the same streets going through the same trials and tribulations that the families I serve are going through. I am not perfect. I have a felony for selling drugs. I’ve done a little prison time and I’ve completed four years of probation.

This is why I offer my services – because I can relate. This is why they reach out to me, because they know I’m coming from a real place.

When tragedy strikes I often find myself in the middle of it offering counsel to the families and helping them with whatever they may need.

I have two side hustles: One is my clothing line, The Militant Rebel, which is a hoodie and T-shirt business, and the other is party promoting.

In times of need, I’ve thrown parties to help pay for funerals and to leave the families with money to help them get by. In our community, once you’re known for something, you’re locked into that role in the eyes of the people unless you make a total change and that’s what I’ve done.

Even though I haven’t worked for the YMCA for almost three years, the community still calls on me for the same services and I answer every time.

I love the people of Homewood, and want to give back to them the way they gave so much to me. I continue to be an active part of Homewood because I want to work for the greater good of the community. I love coaching football and

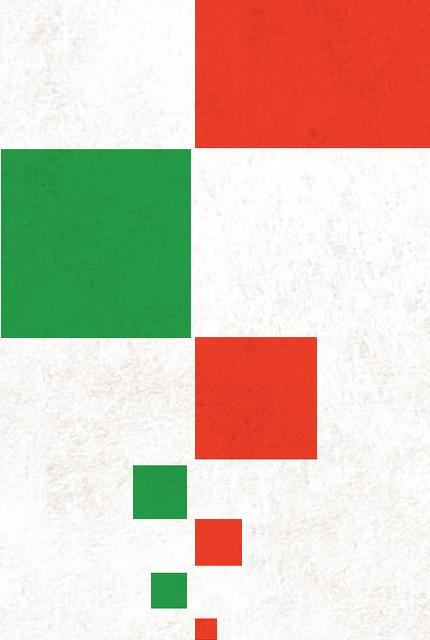
being looked up to by hundreds of kids.

I’ve been coaching Pee Wee football for the last 17 years in Homewood, and for the last seven, I’ve been the head coach of our most critical age group, the 13- to 15-year-olds. I’m also the vice president of Homewood Community Sports, which consists of football, basketball, wrestling and track. We have over 300 kids participating in our program, along with their parents and other community volunteers.

I work for Planned Parenthood of Western PA as a violence prevention specialist with a focus toward domestic abuse and toxic masculinity. I do groups on these topics in four schools from grades 6-12, an adult inpatient drug treatment facility, Job Corps and several community organizations.

Prior to working at PPWP, I was a manager for YouthJ, an afterschool program for young people ages 12 to 20. And prior to that, I worked as violence prevention outreach worker at the Homewood-Brushton YMCA for eight years.

I’m also a board member for the Alliance for Police Accountability.”



“As a young black individual, it’s important to learn about your history, and communities that represent our culture. Black history is used to preserve our identities through experiences and stories of the past. I was lucky enough to find out about this project and learn something new about black people – specifically in Homewood. There were so many important figures in Pittsburgh history that I got to learn about through my interviews with Mr. John Brewer, and I think that this project is a great way for other people to learn about them.”

— Jafar Turner

SPECIAL THANKS

PHOTOGRAPHERS

Brian Cook | Carol Moye | Germaine Watkins
Jonathan Brown | Kenneth Neely

WRITERS

Bonnie Pfister | Carol Moye | Christiana Dillard

THE HEINZ ENDOWMENTS
HOWARD HEINZ ENDOWMENT • VIRA I. HEINZ ENDOWMENT



HUMANITIES
CENTER
Wherever the human mind leads



University of Pittsburgh

Find out more about
American Heroes: The Homewood Project at
www.pbmf.org/inspireblackmen.