



# The Reapers on Woodbrook Avenue

written by  
**MARDEE BENNETT**

directed by  
**MANNY BUCKLEY**



**BACKSTAGE** GUIDE

A publication of **COMMUNITY SERVICE** at  
**AMERICAN BLUES THEATER**

## BACKSTAGE CALLBOARD

# THE REAPERS ON WOODBROOK AVENUE

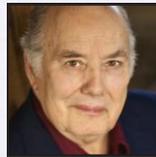
by Mardee Bennett

Directed by Manny Buckley\*

## FEATURING



MiKayla Boyd



Robert Breuler



Kristin E. Ellis



Lucas Looch Johnson



Joslyn Jones\*

Winner of the 2022 Blue Ink Award for playwriting. Spanning decades, this heartrending play explores the complex relationship between three generations of women: Loretta Reaper, a middle-aged Black woman, her grown spitfire daughter, Nell, and her starry-eyed granddaughter Tamar. Raised in the church, all three ladies cut a mean cloth while taking us on a riveting journey through time, exhuming long-buried family secrets, and creating gospel fire in the process.

*\*Ensemble member or Artistic Affiliate  
of American Blues Theater*

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## LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

American Blues Theater is located in Chicago, the traditional homelands of the Council of the Three Fires: the Odawa, Ojibwe, and Potawatomi Nations. City of Chicago was founded by the son of an enslaved African woman who was regarded as the first non-Indigenous settler. His name was Jean Baptiste Point du Sable.

Many other nations including the Myaamia, Wea, Ho-Chunk, Menominee, Thakiwaki, Meskwaki, Kiikaapoi, and Mascouten peoples also call this region home. This land has long been a center for Indigenous people to gather, trade, and maintain kinship ties.

Today, Chicago is home to one of the largest urban American Indian communities in the United States, and the country's oldest urban-based Native membership community center, the American Indian Center Chicago.

American Blues Theater makes this acknowledgment as part of our commitment to dismantling the ongoing legacies of settler colonialism.

To learn more about land acknowledgements visit [nativegov.org](http://nativegov.org).

To learn more about & engage with the American Indian Center Chicago (AIC), visit [aicchicago.org](http://aicchicago.org).

# INTERVIEW WITH PLAYWRIGHT **MARDEE BENNETT**

We asked playwright Mardee Bennett about *The Reapers on Woodbrook Avenue* and his upcoming projects.

## **WHAT WAS YOUR INSPIRATION FOR WRITING *THE REAPERS ON WOODBROOK AVENUE*?**

I was inspired by my South Carolina-born grandmother Mattie Harris Hemphill who would have been 100 years old this past July 1.

The play came to me not long after her passing. Grandma Mattie was in the room with me as I wrote the play; speaking to me and through me. I could often feel her presence - her hand on my shoulder. I found immense comfort in that as I wrote.

I was deeply inspired by the millions of African-Americans who fled the Deep South in hopes of a better life during the Great Migration. We call them migrants but I believe they were refugees escaping terrorism. I wanted to pay homage to that generation but not in a didactic way. Above all, *The Reapers on Woodbrook Avenue* is a play about family. It has humor and hope.

By making the characters as specific as possible, I believe we have created a work that is universal. We all want what's best for our children and grandchildren. We all want to be free from oppression. We're all striving and struggling. And some of us are praying for a better tomorrow.



## **WHAT DO YOU HOPE AUDIENCES TAKE AWAY FROM THIS PIECE?**

I hope audiences find the humor in the play as well as the tender moments of loving, human kindness.

I'd love audiences to walk out of the theatre with a new perspective and say to themselves, "Gee, I never thought of it that way." The goal is always to open hearts and minds.

## **WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON NEXT?**

I'm working on a new play that explores how friendships change over time. What happens when your dear friend becomes a huge success? And you don't. It's set in 1980s Hollywood.

I'm also hard at work crafting my one-man cabaret show which will go up in spring of 2023. It's called *Men I've Known* and I cannot wait to share it with audiences. Through song and monologue, we'll explore falling in love and falling in love with yourself.

# ABOUT THE BLUE INK AWARD



*The Reapers on Woodbrook Avenue* won the 2022 Blue Ink Award for playwriting. The nationally-renowned Blue Ink Playwriting Award was created in 2010 to support new work. Since its inception, American Blues Theater has named 12 Award winners, 112 finalists, and 171 semi-finalists. Nearly \$10,000 in cash and prizes was distributed to playwrights in 2022.

Each year American Blues Theater accepts worldwide submissions of original, unpublished full-length plays. The winning play will be selected by Artistic Director Gwendolyn Whiteside and the theater's Ensemble. The winning playwright receives a monetary prize of \$2,500. Cash prizes are awarded to finalists and semi-finalists too. All proceeds of the administrative fee are distributed for playwrights' cash prizes.

[The 2023 Blue Ink Award is accepting submissions now.](#)

## 2022 BLUE INK AWARD WINNERS

**Winner:** Mardee Bennett (*The Reapers of Woodbrook Avenue*)

**Featured Finalists:** Gina Femia (*Staff Retreat*), Rachel Lynett (*White People By the Lake*), Matthew Paul Olmos (*a home what howls (or the house what was ravine)*), Deborah Yarchun (*Preservation*)

**Finalists:** Paris Crayton III (*Only Some of God's Children or Mississippi Magnolias*), Raul Garza (*Arbolito*), Emma Gibson (*If nobody does remarkable things*), Shannon TL Kearns (*Body + Blood*), Matthew Libby (*Tomorrow and Tomorrow*), Kyle J. McCloskey (*Edge of Town*), Tania Richard (*The America Situation*), Nia Akilah Robinson (*"WP" Means "White People"*), chandra thomas (*...of Champions*), Sarah Tuft (*ABIGAIL*), Ken Urban (*The Moderate*), P.C. Verrone (*The Pretendians*), Jessica Wu (*Good Mourning*)

**Semi-finalists:** Lucas Baisch (*404 Not Found*), Leah Roth Barsanti (*The Almost Emperor of the Unofficial Deestrick of Lake Michigan*), Cris Eli Blak (*Sons of Liberty*), Brysen Boyd (*Closing Costs on 6101 Nyanza Park Drive APT D6 Flushing, NY 11351*), Xavier Clark (*supper*), Erin Considine (*Artists & Vandals*), Shualee Cook (*Cercle Hermaphrodites*), Andrew Lee Creech (*Last Drive to Dodge*), Pauline David-Sax (*Cotton's Tale*), Angela J. Davis (*AGATHE*), Alexandra Espinoza (*All My Mothers Dream in Spanish*), Mouncey Ferguson (*Three-Day Hold*), Linda Maria Girón (*amémonos // let us love each other*), Keiko Green (*Sharon*), Amina Henry (*Interstate*), M.J. Kang (*Pretender*), Gloria Majule (*Culture Shock*), Nick Malakhov (*A Picture of Two Boys*), Thaddeus McCants (*No Different Than Cotton or Cobalt*), Karissa Murrell Myers (*Blood of My Mother's*), Felicia Oduh (*Mercy*), Tira Palmquist (*The Body's Midnight*), Ankita Raturi (*The Elephant is Very Like*), Kira Rockwell (*Oh, to Be Pure Again*), Marcus Scott (*Tumbleweed*), SEVAN (*Gorgonae*), Christopher G. Smith (*The Violin Maker*), Phillip Christian Smith (*Walking While Black*), Ellis Stump (*Once on Rumspringa*), Caridad Svich (*Clara Thomas Bailey*), Caity-Shea Violette (*Rx Machina*), Laura Zlatos (*The Blue Whale*)



## ABOUT THE ARTISTS



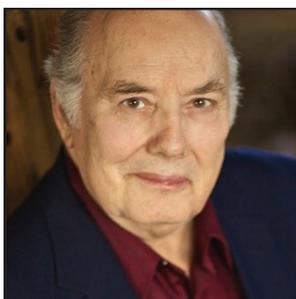
**MARDEE BENNETT** he/him (*Playwright*) is a playwright, screenwriter, and actor based in New York. With a sharp ear for dialogue, Mardee’s work explores the collective triumphs of Black people in America. His comedy *Cane* was a 2021 Blue Ink Award Finalist. *The Reapers on Woodbrook Avenue* was a finalist for the Eugene O’Neill Playwrights Conference and the Seven Devils Playwrights Conference. Other full-length titles include *Loretta*, *The Nerve*, *In the Ramble*, and *A Pleasant Place to Be*. His work has been developed at Center Stage, National Black Theatre, Signature Theatre, and Gloucester Stage Company. He will premier his one-man show *Men I’ve Known* in April 2023. A proud Baltimore hometown boy, he trained at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts. Mardee is represented by A3 Artists Agency.



**MANNY BUCKLEY** he/him (*Director*) is a proud Ensemble member of American Blues Theater. He is a Chicago-based director, actor, playwright and teaching artist. Blues credits include *Fences*, *It’s a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!*, *Six Corners*, *Looking Over the President’s Shoulder* (Jeff Award Nomination-Best Solo Performance), and *Dutchman/TRANSit* (Black Theatre Alliance Award Nomination). Manny toured nationally as “Satchel Paige” in the original production of *The Satchel Paige Story*, and appeared in *The Father* (Helen Hayes Award Nomination) at Studio Theatre in Washington, D.C. He originated the role of “Carson” in *Hit the Wall*, which sold out extensions in Steppenwolf’s Garage Rep. Select Chicago credits include *The Brothers Size*, *1984*, and *Of Mice and Men* (Steppenwolf); *Dorian* (House Theater); and *Love’s Labor’s Lost* (Chicago Shakespeare Theatre). Mr. Buckley is the recipient of a Black Theatre Alliance, and Black Excellence Award. He most recently directed *Kingdom*, an audio drama, with Broken Nose Theatre.



**MIKAYLA BOYD** she/her (*Tamar*) is thrilled to be a part of this reading. She is a Chicago-based dancer, actor, writer. She is a junior at the Latin School of Chicago and a Flag Girl on the South Shore Drill Team. Her previous performances include: *Voice of Good Hope* (City Lit Theatre), *American Blues #ENOUGH Showcase 2021*, *Metamorphoses* (Latin School of Chicago), *Emma’s Child* (City Lit Theatre), *Spike Heels* (Latin School of Chicago), *American Blues #ENOUGH Showcase 2022*, *American Blues Youth Playwright Showcase ‘21/’22*, *On Fred Gray Ave* (City Lit Theatre) as well as stage managing the Winter Dance Company Recital and Adv. Acting Company Production of *Lawrence and Holloman* at her school. She enjoys the arts, studying medicine/indigenous cultures, and plans to attend university in following years.



**ROBERT BREULER** he/him (*Rex*) is a member of Actors Equity Association and the Steppenwolf acting ensemble where he has performed some 50 roles since 1986. He is the President of Perennial Theatre Chicago, dedicated to mining our Lifetimes of Experience to share with the greater community. Upcoming he will be playing Hercule Poirot with the SAG-Aftra Senior Radio Players (October 22) featuring his wife and creative partner Suzanne Petri, an Ensemble member of American Blues.

## ABOUT THE ARTISTS



**KRISTIN E. ELLIS** she/her (*Nell Reaper & Tamar Reaper*) is a passionate storyteller and teaching artist. Kristin wrote and performed her one woman show “I Don’t Trust It” (solo series: MPAACT Theatre) Kristin recently closed *Pipeline* (Next Act Theatre). Notable credits: *Paradise Blue* (Black Theatre Alliance Award for Best Featured Actress, TimeLine Theatre). *Traitor* (A Red Orchid Theatre. Dir. Michael Shannon). *What I Learned in Paris* (Black Theatre Alliance Award nomination for Best Featured Actress, Congo Square Theatre), *The Inside* (Black Excellence Award nomination for Best Theatre Actress, MPAACT Theatre). Regional credits: Writers Theatre, National Black Theatre, McCarter Theatre & others. Kristin’s TV credits include: *The 4400*, *The Chi*, & others. With a host of independent films (Black Harvest Film Festival), commercial work, and Voice Overs. BFA (Theatre School-DePaul). Kristin is represented by Stewart Talent. She thanks God for every opportunity. For more visit [IamKristinEllis.com](http://IamKristinEllis.com).



**LUCAS LOOCH JOHNSON** he/him (*Ronald Johnson & Corey Johnson Reaper*) is a French/American actor, drummer, who holds a BFA from The Chicago College of Performing Arts. He recently made his American Blues Theater debut on August Wilson’s *Fences* (Lyons & Cory u/s). Other past projects include: Theatre- *Cruel Intentions* (Ronald), *Hundred Days* (Drummer/Self), *Peter and the Starcatcher* (Prentis), *Murdering Macbeth* (Doctor). Film- *Carvana* (ArtClass), *Sour Patch Kids* (York Productions), *The Big Leap* (FOX) *Lacy’s Christmas Do-Over* (Golan Productions), *Games for Children* (M&C Productions), and *Write B!tch* (Snack Shack Productions). He’d like to thank his family and friends here and overseas for the endless support. Spread Love. DDO Artists Agency. @LucasLoochJohnson



**JOSLYN JONES** she/her (*Loretta Reaper*) is a proud Artistic Affiliate of American Blues Theater. Credits include *Flyin’ West* (American Blues Theater) *Steel Magnolias* (Theatre at the Center); *Intimate Apparel* (Theatre Squared); *ANDROMEDA* (Theatre Squared); *The Project(s)* (American Theater Company) Jeff Nomination, Best Production; *The Delany Sisters: Having Our Say – The First Hundred Years* (Fleetwood Jourdain Theatre); *Once On This Island* (Marriott Lincolnshire Theatre); *12 Ophelias* (Trap Door Theatre); *Weekend* (TimeLine Theatre), *Bourbon At The Border* (Eclipse Theatre) BTAA Nomination, Featured Actress; *Escape* (Live Bait Theatre); *Flyin’ West* and *RAISIN* (Court Theatre), *Bee-Luther-Hatchee* (The University Of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign); *Fabulation: Or, The Re-Education of Undine* (Next Theatre); *Relevant Hearsay* (MPACCT: Theater on the Lake); *Bee-Luther-Hatchee* and *Smokey Joe’s Café* (Open Door Theater); *Meshuggah Nuns!* (Chicago Jewish Theatre); *The Kurt Weil Revue: Songs of Darkness and Light* (Theo Ubique Cabaret Theatre) Jeff Nomination, Best Musical Production; *To Kill A Mockingbird* (Metropolis Performing Arts Centre); 2002 Class of The School at Steppenwolf. She has understudied: *Having Our Say* and *Crumbs From The Table of Joy* (Goodman Theatre); Film: *Cherry*, directed by the Russo Brothers with Tom Holland as her scene partner; Television: *South Side-Mrs. Odom* (HBO Max); *Chicago PD* (NBC). Joslyn is a proud member of Actors Equity Association and SAG-AFTRA. [linktr.ee/JoslynJones](http://linktr.ee/JoslynJones)

# ABOUT THE GREAT MIGRATION

The central family in *The Reapers on Woodbrook Avenue* migrated to Baltimore from South Carolina during The Great Migration. Below is a brief summary of The Great Migration from The National Archives. You can access the original article [here](#).

The Great Migration was one of the largest movements of people in United States history. Approximately six million Black people moved from the American South to Northern, Midwestern, and Western states roughly from the 1910s until the 1970s. The driving force behind the mass movement was to escape racial violence, pursue economic and educational opportunities, and obtain freedom from the oppression of Jim Crow.

The Great Migration is often broken into two phases, coinciding with the participation and effects of the United States in both World Wars. The First Great Migration (1910-1940) had Black southerners relocate to northern and midwestern cities including: New York, Chicago, Detroit, and Pittsburgh. When the war effort ramped up in 1917, more able bodied men were sent off to Europe to fight leaving their industrial jobs vacant. The labor supply was further strained with a decline in immigration from Europe and standing bans on peoples of color from other parts of the world. All of this afforded the opportunity for the Black population to be the labor supply in non-agricultural industries.

Although the migrants found better jobs and fled the South entrenched in Jim Crow, many African Americans

faced injustices and difficulties after migrating. The Red Summer of 1919 was rooted in tensions and prejudice that arose from white people having to adjust to the demographic changes in their local communities. From World War I until World War II, it is estimated that about 2 million Black people left the South for other parts of the country.

World War II brought an expansion to the nation's defense industry and many more jobs for African Americans in other locales, again encouraging a massive migration that was active until the 1970s. During this period, more people moved North, and further west to California's major cities including Oakland, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, as well as Portland, Oregon and Seattle, Washington. Within twenty years of World War II, a further 3 million Black people migrated throughout the United States.

Black people who migrated during the second phase of the Great Migration were met with housing discrimination, as localities had started to implement restrictive covenants and redlining, which created segregated neighborhoods, but also served as a foundation for the existing racial disparities in wealth in the United States.



Scott and Violet Arthur arrive with their family at Chicago's Polk Street Depot on Aug. 30, 1920, two months after their two sons were lynched in Paris, Texas. The picture has become an iconic symbol of the Great Migration. (Chicago History Museum)

# ABOUT REPARATIONS

*The Reapers on Woodbrook Avenue* adds to the conversation about reparations. Below is a brief overview of the subject and its history in the United States.

Reparations are the act or process of making amends for a wrong one has done, by paying money or otherwise helping those who have been wronged.

The first recorded case of reparations for slavery in the United States was to a formerly enslaved person named Belinda Royall in 1783, in the form of a pension. Since then reparations continue to be proposed and/or given in a variety of forms. The 1865 Special Field Orders No. 15 (often referred to as "Forty acres and a mule") is the most well known attempt to help newly freed enslaved people integrate into society and accumulate wealth. However, President Andrew Johnson reversed this order, giving the land back to its former Confederate owners.

The call for reparations intensified in 2020, amidst the protests against police brutality and the COVID-19 pandemic, which both kill Black Americans disproportionately. In addition to reparations for slavery, some also argue for reparations for Jim Crow laws, segregation, redlining, and violence against Black people from police.

The idea of reparations remains controversial, due to questions of how they would be given, how much would be given, who would pay them, and who would receive them.

Advocates for reparations have used other examples of reparations to argue that victims of institutional slavery should be similarly compensated. In several cases the federal government has formally apologized to or compensated groups for past actions, including:

- Under the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, signed into law by President Ronald Reagan, the U.S. government apologized for Japanese American internment during World War II and provided reparations of \$20,000 to each survivor, to compensate for loss of property and liberty during that period. No compensation was given to the descendants of affected individuals though.
- The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act transferred land, federal money, and a portion of oil revenues to native Alaskans.
- The Apology Resolution of 1993 apologized for the overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawaii, but gave no compensation.

Forms of reparations which have been proposed or given in the United States by city, county, state, and national governments or private institutions include:

- Individual monetary payments
- Land-based compensation related to independence
- Settlements
- Apologies and acknowledgements of the injustices
- Scholarships
- Token measures (such as naming a building after someone)
- Waiving of fees
- The removal of monuments and streets named to slave owners and defenders of slavery
- Systemic initiatives to offset injustices



A Juneteenth reparations rally at the Minnesota capitol building in June 2020

# THE ROLE OF THE BLACK CHURCH IN AMERICA

The Black Church, and the community associated with it, holds a prominent place in the lives of the characters of *The Reapers on Woodbrook Avenue*. Below is an excerpt from an article entitled “To Understand America, You Need to Understand the Black Church” by Henry Louis Gates Jr. The article originally appeared in *Time* on Feb. 17, 2021. You can read the full article [here](#).

No pillar of the African American community has been more central to its history, identity, and social justice vision than the “Black Church.” To be sure, there is no single Black Church, just as there is no single Black religion, but the traditions and faiths that fall under the umbrella of African American religion, particularly Christianity, constitute two stories: one of a people defining themselves in the presence of a higher power and the other of their journey for freedom and equality in a land where power itself—and even humanity—for so long was (and still is) denied them. Collectively, these churches make up the oldest institution created and controlled by African Americans, and they are more than simply places of worship. In the centuries since its birth in the time of slavery, the Black Church has stood as the foundation of Black religious, political, economic, and social life.

The Black Church has influenced nearly every chapter of the African American story, and it continues to animate Black identity today, both for believers and nonbelievers. In that sense, the Black Church functions on several levels, as a spiritual center—a place of worship—and as a social center and a cultural repository as well, a living treasure trove of African American sacred cultural history and practice: literally the place where “the faith of the fathers and mothers” is summoned and preserved, modified and reinvented each Sunday, in a dynamic process of cultural retrieval and transformation, all at the same time.

With a language all its own, symbols all its own, the Black Church offered a reprieve from the racist world, a place for African Americans to come together in community to advance their aspirations and to sing out, pray out, and shout out their frustrations. It was the saving grace of both enslaved Black people and of the 10 percent or so of the Black community that, at any given time before the Civil War, were ostensibly free; the site of possibility for the liminal space between slavery and freedom, object and subject, slave and citizen, in which free Black people were trapped. The church fueled slave rebellions, nurtured and sustained the Underground Railroad, and was the training

ground for the orators of the abolitionist movement, and for ministers such as Richard Harvey Cain who emerged as powerful and effective political leaders during Reconstruction. It powered anti-lynching campaigns and economic boycotts, and formed the backbone of and meeting place for the civil rights movement. Rooted in the fundamental belief in equality between Black and white, human dignity, earthly and heavenly freedom, and sisterly and brotherly love, the Black Church and the religion practiced within its embrace acted as the engine driving social transformation in America, from the antebellum abolitionist movement through the various phases of the fight against Jim Crow, and now, in our current century, to Black Lives Matter.

The Black Church, in a society in which the color line was strictly policed, amounted to a world within a world, providing practical physical and social outlets and economic resources for local African American communities. Even in the antebellum period, the Black Church was the proving ground for the nourishment and training of a class of leaders; it fostered community bonds and established the first local, regional, and then national Black social networks. It was under the roofs of these churches that African Americans, in the heyday of Reconstruction—especially in that magical summer of 1867, when Black men in the former Confederacy got the right to vote—also learned of the opportunities and obligations of citizenship and the sanctity of the franchise.

The church also bred distinct forms of expression, maybe most obviously its own forms of music. Black sacred music, commencing with the sacred songs the enslaved created and blossoming into the spirituals (which W. E. B. Du Bois aptly dubbed the “Sorrow Songs”), Black versions of Protestant hymns, gospel music, and freedom songs, emerging from within the depths of Black belief and molded in repetitions and variations in weekly choir practice and Sunday worship services, would eventually captivate a broad, nonsectarian audience and influence almost every genre of twentieth-century popular music.

# THE ROLE OF THE BLACK CHURCH IN AMERICA



Members of the congregation of the "store front" Baptist Church in Chicago (1941)



Worshippers at Holy Angel Catholic Church in Chicago (1973)

The blues, jazz, rock and roll, soul and R&B, folk, rock, and even hip-hop bear the imprint of Black sacred music. It is evident in the sound of such a wide array of legendary artists that it is difficult to limit a list, but there are some names that simply cannot go unspoken: Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, and Dinah Washington; Aretha Franklin, Little Richard, and James Brown; Sam Cooke and Marvin Gaye; Donny Hathaway and Teddy Pendergrass; Curtis Mayfield and Jerry Butler; Tina Turner; Whitney Houston; Patti LaBelle; practically all of Motown, all the way to Mary J. Blige, John Legend, Jennifer Hudson, and Kirk Franklin, whose talents were nurtured in church pews and choirs. Mahalia Jackson, Dr. King's sacred soul mate and private muse, is, of course, in a class of her own, stubbornly resisting the extremely lucrative financial lure of "going secular" but nevertheless influencing the styles of a plethora of Black singers ranging over a host of genres. "The church is our foundation," Hudson says. "Somehow to me it relates to our culture. I noticed when I was in Africa how the music wasn't just music; it was a message. Well, it's the same in the church. When you're singing a song, it's not just a song; it's your testimony. It's your story. You're singing with purpose and to God."

Today, African Americans, like all Americans, are increasingly moving away from organized religion. Yet in nationwide surveys, roughly 80 percent of African Americans—more than any other group—report that religion is very important in their lives. This is hardly surprising when we understand just how central faith institutions have been in the history of Africans and African Americans and their cultures and social institutions in this country. For centuries, these religions—primarily but not only many denominations of Christianity—have served as a lifeline for African Americans. Whether that lifeline will remain as vigorous and vital in the twenty-first century is an open question. At a moment when the Black community and the nation overall seem to be at a crossroads in the future of race relations, it is more important than ever to illuminate the Black Church's past and present, both to appreciate what Black religion has contributed to the larger American story and to speculate about the role it will play as race relations transform in this society.

# BARRIERS TO MENTAL HEALTH CARE FOR MEMBERS OF THE BLACK COMMUNITY

*The Reapers on Woodbrook Avenue* explores mental health across generations, including some of the stigmas and biases that Black individuals with mental illness face. Below is information from NAMI about some of the barriers that prevent many in the Black community from receiving culturally competent mental health care. It has been edited here for length. Read the full article [here](#).

What happens at the intersection of mental health and one's experience as a member of the Black community? While the experience of being Black in America varies tremendously, there are shared cultural factors that play a role in helping define mental health and supporting well-being, resiliency and healing.

Parts of this shared cultural experience — family connections, values, expression through spirituality or music, reliance on community and religious networks — are enriching and can be great sources of strength and support.

However, another part of this shared experience - being subject to racism, discrimination and inequity- can significantly affect a person's mental health. Being treated or perceived as "less than" because of the color of your skin can be stressful and even traumatizing. Additionally, members of the Black community face structural challenges accessing the care and treatment they need.

According to the Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, Black adults in the U.S. are [more likely](#) than white adults to report persistent symptoms of emotional distress, such as sadness and feeling like everything is an effort. Black adults living below the poverty line are more than twice as likely to report serious psychological distress than those with more financial security.

Despite the needs, only [one in three](#) Black adults with mental illness receive treatment. According to the

American Psychiatric Association's [Mental Health Facts for African Americans](#) guide, they are also:

- Less likely to receive guideline-consistent care
- Less frequently included in research
- More likely to use emergency rooms or primary care (rather than mental health specialists)

## BARRIERS TO MENTAL HEALTH CARE

### Socioeconomic Disparities

Socioeconomic factors can make treatment options less available. In 2020, [10.4%](#) of Black adults in the U.S. had no form of health insurance.

The Black community, like other communities of color, are more likely to experience [socioeconomic disparities](#) such as exclusion from health, educational, social and economic resources. These disparities may contribute to worse mental health outcomes.

### Stigma

Negative attitudes and beliefs towards people who live with mental health conditions is pervasive within the U.S. and can be particularly strong within the Black community. Although beliefs and attitudes vary, [research](#) shows that many Black adults – especially older adults – view mental health conditions as a consequence of personal weakness. As a result, people may experience shame about having a mental illness and worry that they may be discriminated against due to their condition.



# BARRIERS TO MENTAL HEALTH CARE FOR MEMBERS OF THE BLACK COMMUNITY

For many in the Black community, it can be incredibly challenging to discuss the topic of mental health due to how they may be perceived by others. This fear could prevent people from seeking mental health care when they really need it.

Additionally, many people choose to seek support from their faith community rather than seeking a medical diagnosis. In many Black communities in the U.S., the church, mosque or other faith institution can play a central role as a meeting place and source of strength.

Faith and spirituality can help in the recovery process and be an important part of a treatment plan. For example, spiritual leaders and faith communities can provide support and reduce isolation. However, they should not be the *only* option for people whose daily functioning is impaired by mental health symptoms.

## **Provider Bias and Inequality of Care**

Black people have historically been negatively affected by prejudice and discrimination in the health care system in the US. Unfortunately, many Black people *still* have these negative experiences when they attempt to seek treatment. Provider bias, both conscious and unconscious, and a lack of cultural competency can result in misdiagnosis and inadequate treatment. This ultimately can lead to mistrust of mental health professionals and create a barrier for many to engage in treatment.

Black people may also be more likely to identify and describe physical symptoms related to mental health problems. For example, they may describe bodily aches and pains when talking about depression. A health care provider who is not culturally competent might not recognize these as symptoms of a mental health condition. Additionally, Black individuals are [more likely](#) to receive a misdiagnosis of schizophrenia when expressing symptoms related to mood disorders.

## **SEEKING CULTURALLY COMPETENT CARE**

When a person is experiencing challenges with their mental health, it is essential for them to receive quality care as soon as the symptoms are recognized. It is equally important that the care they receive is provided by culturally competent health care professionals.

While we recommend seeking help from a [mental health professional](#), a primary care professional is also a great place to start. A primary care professional might be able to provide an initial mental health assessment and referral to a mental health professional if needed. Community and faith organizations may also have a list of available mental health providers in your area.

When meeting with a provider, it can be helpful to ask questions to get a sense of their level of cultural awareness. Providers expect and welcome questions from their patients or clients, since this helps them better understand what is important in their treatment. Here are some sample questions:

- Have you treated other Black people or received training in cultural competence for Black mental health? If not, how do you plan to provide me with culturally sensitive, patient-centered care?
- How do you see our cultural backgrounds influencing our communication and my treatment?
- Do you use a different approach in your treatment when working with patients from different cultural backgrounds?
- What is your current understanding of differences in health outcomes for Black patients?

Whether you seek help from a primary care professional or a mental health professional, you should finish your sessions with the health care professional feeling heard and respected. You may want to ask yourself:

- Did my provider communicate effectively with me?
- Is my provider willing to integrate my beliefs, practices, identity and cultural background into my treatment plan?
- Did I feel like I was treated with respect and dignity?
- Do I feel like my provider understands and relates well with me?

The relationship and communication between a person and their mental health provider is a key aspect of treatment. It's very important for a person to feel that their identity is understood by their provider in order to receive the best possible support and care.

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

## **CHICAGO URBAN LEAGUE**

Chicago Urban League works to achieve equity for Black families and communities through social and economic empowerment.

## **SOUTH SIDE COMMUNITY REPARATIONS COALITION**

A community-based assessment and planning project; founded and housed in the Chicago Urban League's Research and Policy Center. Our main focus is aiding residents in collectively understanding and prioritizing reparation strategies to craft recommendations that repair and restore Black communities on the South Side of Chicago.

## **YOUNG CHICAGO AUTHORS**

Cultivates artistic development, social and emotional learning, and academic success in Chicago's youth.

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## **RESOURCES FOR HEALING FROM EMOTIONAL OR RACIAL TRAUMA**

For those seeking counseling or a safe space to heal from emotional or racial trauma, below are some resources that can help provide you with the tools and information that you may need.

### **ASSOCIATION OF BLACK PSYCHOLOGISTS SELF-CARE TOOL KIT**

A self-care tool kit for families & communities. Written in English and Spanish.

### **BLACK EMOTIONAL & MENTAL HEALTH COLLECTIVE**

A national training, movement building, and grant making institution that is dedicated to the healing, wellness, and liberation of Black and marginalized communities.

### **THE FAMILY INSTITUTE AT NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY**

The Family Institute brings together a diverse group of leading therapists to provide behavioral health care to children, adults, couples and families across the lifespan.

### **THE LOVELAND FOUNDATION—LOVELAND THERAPY FUND**

With the barriers affecting access to treatment by members of diverse ethnic and racial groups, Loveland Therapy Fund provides financial assistance to Black women and girls nationally seeking therapy.

### **NAMI CHICAGO**

NAMI Chicago promotes community wellness, breaks down barriers to mental health care, and provides support and expertise for families, professionals and individuals in Chicago and beyond.

### **RESOURCES FOR BLACK HEALING**

Black healing resources from the University of North Carolina Wilmington Counseling Center.

### **SAFE BLACK SPACE**

Creates opportunities for Black people to heal and thrive.

### **VERY WELL MIND**

An extensive collection of mental health resources and organizations for the Black community.

# ABOUT AMERICAN BLUES THEATER

Winner of American Theatre Wing's prestigious National Theatre Company Award, American Blues Theater is a premier arts organization with an intimate environment that patrons, artists, and all Chicagoans call home. **American Blues Theater explores the American identity through the plays it produces and communities it serves.**

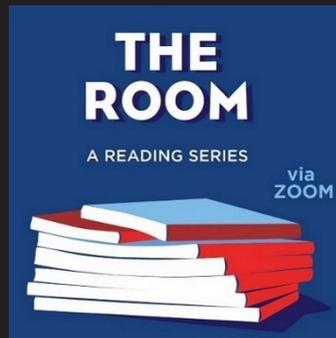
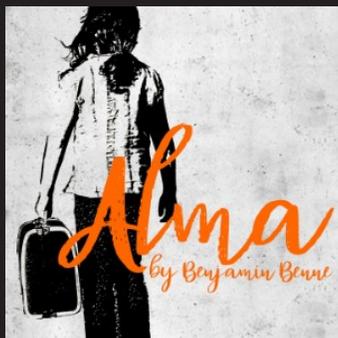
We are Chicago's **second-oldest professional Equity Ensemble theater**. As of 2022, our theater and artists received 221 Joseph Jefferson Awards and nominations that celebrate excellence in Chicago theater and 40 Black Theatre Alliance Awards. Our artists are honored with Tony Award and Pulitzer Prize nominations, Academy Awards, Golden Globe Awards, Emmy Awards, and numerous other accolades. Our artists work throughout the nation - including Broadway and regional theaters - and loyally return to our stage.

American Blues Theater is committed to developing the classic plays and musicals of tomorrow. More than half of our mainstage productions are world and Chicago premieres. Our new play development consists of a variety of programs – including world and Chicago premieres, the nationally-recognized *Blue Ink Award*, commissions, *The Room* staged readings, *The Garage* concerts, and annual *Ripped Festival* of new short-plays. Our Arts Education offerings includes acclaimed programming in Chicago Public School classrooms, artist-led instruction for all ages through *Classes for the Masses*, and being a Chicago-anchor for the national *#ENOUGH: Plays to End Gun Violence* program.

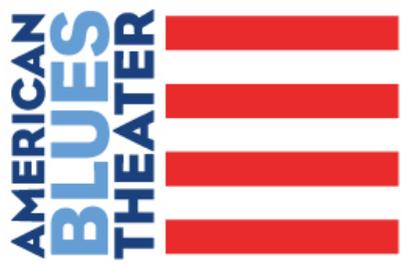
**We believe it is an honor and duty to serve our community.** We raise awareness of other non-profit organizations' commendable causes through creative collaborations. We hold food drives, distribute promotional materials, offer free post-show discussions, provide complimentary tickets, honor military personnel, hold exclusive performances for underserved communities, and raise awareness for children's surgeries. We donate proceeds from "Pediatric Previews" to Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago.

American Blues Theater is your Chicago home for bold, exceptional, and relevant performances. **Your ticket purchases and donations help us make Chicago *the first city* in all our hearts.**

## UPCOMING EVENTS AT AMERICAN BLUES THEATER



Visit [AmericanBluesTheater.com](https://AmericanBluesTheater.com) to learn more.



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