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PFP turns 25
For 25 years PFP has been part of a collective effort to cultivate what is best in our communities. We have acted from the belief that folk arts—people’s hard-won knowledge, wisdom, and practices—can carry forward radical hope for a better and more just world.

Call this folk belief: the conviction that together people can do more than we can do alone. Exhibitions in our gallery, developed by participants in our Folk Arts and Social Change residency program and described in these pages, provide examples of what collective action can accomplish. We Cannot Keep Silent evokes (and advances) the struggle of immigrant students in a Philadelphia high school. The voices of these young people and their supporters call on us to demand and practice accountability and an expansive vision of community.

Developed by Asian Americans United (AAU), the exhibition will be open through December 2012. Cultural Exchange, the exhibition on display last winter, showed how revolutions begin in everyday actions, and in the relationships and community we build together, over years.

People featured in PFP programs over the last year provide homegrown examples of both exemplary practice and the transformative power of folk arts. Call them vanguard workers, revolutionaries, and clairvoyants. Dr. Kathryn Morgan showed how family stories are antidotes to racism and other toxins. Yvette Smalls showed us how to see beauty in ourselves and how living into beauty could be transformative. They changed our lives. Linda Goss, who has been “waking up the people” with stories for more than 50 years, reminds us both of the need to keep their memories present and of our responsibility to build on their teachings.

Teachings come from many directions. Disturbing histories stay with us, calling us to consider how we address violence. It was at a PFP gathering that Katrina Hazzard-Donald first shared the story about how she learned about the metal plate in her Daddy’s head—and about a problem that community members took into their own hands.

In a world torn by violence, other folk arts offer alternatives. Losang Samten lived in Tibet before Chinese crackdowns forced him and his family to flee. Losang creates a mandala at PFP every year: a practice of peace and loving-kindness, breath of life and hope, shaped from generations of contemplation. He paints a mandala of colored sand, its intricate patterns representing spiritual truths. The beauty is inevitably temporary; impermanent but still profound. We may be surprised to find that we can carry it inside us. This exiled art makes momentary sacred space in unimagined distant places (like our hearts).

Patience, Losang teaches. Don’t turn away. Stay and see how we are changed. However little we know about Tibet or bloody history or violence or Buddhism or Dharma, we take in some part of this—and perhaps feel a way forward.

At our 25th Birthday Bash, we began a new tradition, an annual gathering to celebrate and advance this work in folk arts and social change in which we all have a part and a stake. We inaugurated Folk Arts and Social Change awards, named after four people who have taught us and changed us, and who embody aspects of our vision and values. (Kathryn Morgan is one of those we honored in this way.) We plan to use this annual event to reflect on what and who we value, and why, and where we go from here—together. And we hope to use it to strengthen our capacity to work against the forces that divide and diminish community power. We thank you if you were part of this remarkable event this year (and we invite you to come next year.)

At our 25th birthday celebration, Board co-chair Ellen Somekawa spoke eloquently about our work. She talked about being Asian in the U.S. and tiring of the question. “Where are you from?” which all too often feels like a code for “You aren’t really from here.” “You are other.” She spoke of a different way to understand who we are: “PFP is about creating a Philadelphia where ‘Where are you from?’ means ‘Who are your people?’ ‘What is your grounding?’ ‘Who is a source of wisdom?’ ‘What is it that nourishes your strength and pride and love of justice?’ Many of us have been torn from our homelands or had our languages and cultures ripped from us—whether in our generation or generations past. But PFP works so that more and more of us can say, ‘Here and now, I am from a community that I am helping to build. I am from a place where we have the power to define our own sense of ourselves, where we grow in compassion and strength through struggling for justice for all communities.’ That is the kind of Philadelphia I want to help build.”

With your help, PFP begins the next 25 years. May we continue to find ways of using folk arts and social change to build the beloved communities of our dreams.

— Debora Kodish
Kathryn Morgan
(1919-2010) by Debora Kodish & Marilyn White

Photo courtesy Friends Historical Library/Swarthmore College
Kathryn Morgan’s ground-breaking book, *Children of Strangers* (1980), was the first work of African American family folklore by a folklorist. What a voice, and what stories. If she hadn’t known about Caddie Gordon, her great-great-grandmother, whose legacy is recounted in the volume, she would have had to invent her. Morgan said. Read the book. From the first sentence, this is anti-racist work. Work that builds strength and power in the face of fear and all that is ugly. In her writing, and in her life, Morgan showed how to be courageous and righteous, true to enduring values, accountable to the beloved communities who make us who we hope to be.

Morgan took folklore seriously. She simply refused to countenance the idea that there was any second-class status to the training she had received from her own family and community, or to the inherited stories that proved sturdy antidotes to racism and other toxins. She refused to accept that African American folklore could be defined by white scholars with suspect intentions, focused only on “street” genres, or defined by lack or pathology. She rejected the notion that history could be defined without reference to the oral traditions that Morgan ground herself in a history of Black self-determination, valuing community practices that build power, dignity, and cultural health. Her Afrocentrism embraced “children of strangers”: people who defined their status and humanity by actions, by choosing to live, “she said in 2000, in an interview with a former Swarthmore student, Laura Markowitz. Markowitz shares Morgan’s account of how, in 1976, she was denied tenure at Swarthmore. Her history colleagues didn’t consider folklore a valid form of investigation. Black students immediately reacted, “protesting the fact that the college was getting rid of their one African American woman teacher who taught courses on their lives, their history” (Markowitz 2000: 22). White student and faculty allies supported the protest. Morgan agreed to join a class action discrimination suit underway against Swarthmore. The day before she was to testify, Morgan was awarded tenure; she testified anyway.

The world eventually caught up to her. Morgan retired in 1995, the Sara Lawrence Lightfoot Emerita Professor in History and Folklore, beloved by colleagues and students. In 1991, she was the first recipient of an award named in her honor by Swarthmore’s Black Alumni Association, recognizing her contributions to the lives of African Americans at the College. In 2000, a scholarship was established in her name to support Swarthmore students interested in Black Studies. In 2009, the Kathryn Morgan Poetry Festival was established at Swarthmore. Students read selection from *Envisions*, a book of her poetry, illustrated by artist and Swarthmore colleague Syd Carpenter (2003). Morgan was named to the Circle of Elders by the National Association of Black Storyteller at their 25th anniversary gathering (2007) in a ceremony orchestrated by Linda Goss, one of the NABS founders.

Morgan wrote, “Caddy comes to my rescue even now when some obstacle seems insurmountable.” May we know and remember Morgan. May she continue to come to our rescue.

**Bibliography**


*Weep Not For Me: Old Souls Speak* [Unfinished work in progress]


**Resources**

Chopp, Rebecca. Kathryn Morgan. 2010: http://www.swarthmore.edu/31577.xml


The Storytellers. 1979. http://www.youtube.com/FHx9NCINHjk
Linda Goss
Photo: Ife Nii-Owoo, 2008
You know, people talk in terms of legacies, and what do we do from here. And you know, there’s an African proverb that says the ancestors are always alive as long as they are remembered, and I know that to be true. I think that we have to keep Kathryn’s name out there. It doesn’t mean we have to just say her name, but we have to know her work and what her work stood for. When I reread her work, I see so much of myself in it. I see so much in *Children of Strangers*. A lot of stories in there led me to re-realize some of my family stories. We haven’t told a lot of stories that our families didn’t want us to tell—that we had to kind of pull out of our families. I think Kathryn’s book reminds us that we have to tell those stories. I remember the first time we had a sit-down conversation and she asked me what kind of stories I told. I told her how my grandfather told me a lot of animal tales. And she was telling me then that she didn’t really have a lot of animal stories in her family, but she valued them. And she asked me, “Were there family stories? Stories about the history of the migration or what went on during the time of the enslavement?” And I said there were some, “I don’t know. I don’t remember all of them.” And she was saying, “Well, try to remember. That’s what’s really important. Your own family stories are very important.” And she put me on that path of really remembering some of those family stories because I had more or less taken them for granted. Because when I began as a so-called professional storyteller, I was basically telling animal stories. I was into the Anansi the spider stories. I was telling a lot of stories out of Africa. Thanks to her, I really started valuing some of those stories that had been passed on down to me.

But the first time I met Dr. Kathryn L. Morgan was at Howard University, at the first conference of Black folklorists. So this was an historic event. And at that Black folklorists’ conference, I shared my ideas. I let them know I wanted to start a festival. I let them know I wanted to seek out other black storytellers. And I let them know that these ideas had not met with a warm reception elsewhere. Well, when I finished, people said that they really enjoyed what I said, and that’s when Kathryn Morgan came up to me, and she started to praise me. It was like she lifted me up off the ground. It wasn’t until years later that she told me her story of how, when she went to the University of Pennsylvania, she was given a very ...the ancestors are always alive as long as they are remembered

hard time as well. So she could relate to what I was saying, and she was also proud of the fact that I was still determined to do what I wanted to do. What she did was kind of like a praise song—what you do back down South when you’re in the Black church, where you realize this young person has some talent, or has some worth, and you want to lift them up. And that’s what she did. She lifted me up in front of all of those people. And it was an amazing conference because there I had a chance to meet Beverly Robinson, Gerald Davis, Bill ...
An interview by Caroliese Frink-Reed

Yvette Smalls

Beauty is as Beauty Does

Yvette Smalls in her studio
with Estan Wilson at EU
Photo: James Wasserman, 2007
Yvette Smalls (March 9, 1959–April 16, 2012) was a vanguard artist and activist. Master braider, hair sculptor, and filmmaker, she advanced a movement of African American women rejecting definitions of “bad” and “good” hair based on European standards and reclaiming African traditions of beauty. Her mother always told her, “Beauty is as beauty does,” and the saying inoculated Yvette against the negative self-image she saw afflicting others. She schooled herself in the intricate and varied hair braiding, wrapping, coiling, and weaving traditions used across the African Diaspora, understanding all of them as important forms of creative expression. A persistent, dogged researcher, she learned how to braid before the technique was widely known in the region. She was always perfecting her craft, aiming to outdo.

Yvette approached each person’s hair as the ultimate wearable art. Having embarked on her own journey of self-discovery, she could guide others on their quests. She said: “Spirit intuitively moves within me to create/sculpt hairstyles. I am obsessed with promoting the cultural, historical, and technical knowledge of African hair. I weave tradition, creativity and love into my tapestry of natural hairstyles—especially since generations of Black women have been taught to wage war on their coil. I give praise to those hair braiders who toiled, created, invented and experimented with techniques to beautify the physical presence and soothe the spiritual sense of the African woman. I employ African techniques with American inventiveness. My hairstyles are always on the edge of avant-garde with an acknowledgement of the roots of my culture. In my sanctuary we have a spiritual experience that’s difficult to explain; you come in looking one way and you leave another way.”

A revolutionary and a clairvoyant, she created extraordinarily striking visions—making us the people we imagined we might be, or become. Her gifts in this revisioning went beyond the “do’s” she created. Her greatest gift was how she was with people. She made us all see ourselves differently. And we lived into the beautiful selves she saw we were. That was her mission: “for people to feel good about themselves.” Spreading the message of self-worth and self-love, she showed that folk arts are surely antidotes to racism and other toxins. PFP honored Yvette for her life work at an event in March 2012. It was her last public appearance.

—Debora Kodish

Caroliese: How did you get started?

Yvette: I was born in 1959 and grew up in West Philadelphia, around the corner from where I live now. I was told that I braid hair like my grandmother on my father’s side. She passed on when I was born. My mother couldn’t do hair. She could do lots of things, but not hair braiding.

My older sister used to do hair and she was always sharp. When she would do my hair, I would feel so regal. There was one style she did—a little bang and these two braids, and I was like Queen Nefertiti. Oh yes, I had a passion for it. I would practice on my dolls. I could plaits hair and I could do other things, like chain braids and railroad tracks, but the cornrowing or braiding was a whole separate entity. When I asked my sister one time—I was really into it—she was like, “I don’t have time.” Then I was more determined. In the sixth grade, a woman named Karen Spencer sat with me out on the steps of 52nd and Thompson, across the street from her home, and she showed me. She used to do her sister’s hair and that’s how I finally got the stitch for actual braiding. That started my journey with the plaits.

I used to do my mother’s hair. She was my first model. I used to scratch her dandruff. That’s an old tradition that we do. And I practiced the braiding on her. I used to plait her hair prior to the braiding because my mom had a thick head of hair.

From there I started doing my hair, when I finally was allowed. See, we were the type of family that on Saturday night you’d get your hair shampooed and straightened and curled, and you would get your hair pressed for God. Then we’d go to church and back to the plaits after the curls fell out. Then you kept that for a few days, and then you got it re-combed or whatever.

Caroliese: What were the popular hairstyles during your teenage years?

Yvette: The Afro was very popular. Cornrows. Braids with beads. Anything that was African. Anything that was braided. Puffs—Afro Puffs. You’d have a couple braids going back and the big bush—all kinds of designs.

Caroliese: By that time, you did see images in the media, in Ebony and Jet and movies. How did that make you feel?

Yvette: That was another influence: seeing all that hair and all that art—that was like whoa! It made me feel great! And empowered. That was definitely important, just being around people. The wig phased out. The hot comb and curl kind of phased out. Don’t get me wrong: my mother and aunts, they were not putting down the hot comb and curl or the wig in certain places. My mother would get her hair braided, but she would put it underneath the wig. My sisters and those around me were wearing natural hairstyles.

I was experimenting: wearing the Afro, wearing designs. Zerline Mace finally came up from down South. She’s an adopted cousin. She could braid your name in your hair. She was one of my influences. I was wearing all kinds of elaborate—and I do mean elaborate—hairstyles.

Seventh and eighth grade I was just one of the queens at all times, with braids in different designs, and then in ninth grade I went to Overbrook High School. There were all the cultural hairstyles. Braids, everything—there was a mix. I lost my mother at 15 and I was finding myself. My hair thinned when my mom died. I was just sad. I remember covering my hair with hats, and because there were more Muslims
entering the school, it was easier to get away with scarves, too. In 12th grade diva status came back. I felt good and everything was going okay, and then I went to college. I picked Harcum because it was right up the street. It was a girl’s school, so I could focus. I enjoyed the educational aspects of it, but the racism and the feelings I got were different. That’s where my hair journey started. I wanted to navigate and be treated equally. I had to go and prove my facts. I always loved the library. I loved books. I always did my research.

It was a challenge. You have to remember, at Harcum they didn’t have stuff that was conducive to my hair. I had to figure out what to do with my hair away from home. Not really knowing how to straighten and curl, I had to just braid it and wear it crimped. The first year I would roll it and come home every couple weeks and get someone to do it. But that didn’t last long, especially when you’re sweating and you want to do other things. Then I reunited with Pam Parker, in 1978 or 1979.

That’s when I was introduced to braids and beads. Pam went to Washington and got her hair done from Cornrows and Company. She came back and she really looked like Nefertiti. I’m talking ‘bout stacked. Those braids and beads were sharp. That was it. That was the journey. I was hooked from then on. So I went to braids and beads.

When we first started out, trying to do what they did, we didn’t have the method or the rhythm to make it flow. We didn’t have a system where we would do beads as a set. We would do each individual bead. Can you imagine? We were intrigued with what we were doing, and we were determined to get it done. We had the image of the bead set, how it would go on the hair, but we had to come up with ways to make the work go faster. Through trial and error and long, long days and nights of doing hair, seriously, we’ve made it much easier for the women that are coming up after us.

There were a lot of shops in Washington, D.C., and New York, but they weren’t here. It was an opening for me: “Wow, everybody all over the world is doing this and it’s amazing!” That pushed me further in my journey, and then I went to Temple and had Sonia Sanchez as a teacher. Well, you know, that was it! With her big pretty Afro, and her affirming us as to who we were, I was off to the races. It was a done deal.

Women were doing hair at home then. There was Frenchy in her home. There was Brenda Eady in her home. There was me in my home. There was Kim Simpkins in her home. There was Lubara. You could say their names and people would know who they are. And Goldie. Those were the braiders who were visible. You would hear, “Oh, whose work is that?” Or you would spot their work and know it. In Philly, it wasn’t like New York or Washington. At that point, braiders weren’t really celebrated. We didn’t have shops. The barbers hated us because that meant they couldn’t cut hair. The hot comb hair people hated us because they couldn’t press and curl. The wig industry hated us. We weren’t really popular.

Caroliese: I first met you through Linda Goss. I wanted that African thread wrap. There were not a lot of African braiding shops in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Linda said, “Yvette would know,” and recommended you. I wanted to be authentic. You recommended an African woman, Sheri Dovi. Sheri did this style, and I went to the storytelling festival in Baltimore, and a picture of my hair was in the Baltimore Sun. That set the bar. From that year on, I had to outdo, I had to have a different hairstyle every year.
Yvette: Sheri was from Nigeria; she’s moved back home. Oh, she was so precious, and she helped me perfect my technique with thread wrapping. Hiddekel Burks, who is our founder and director of the National Braiders’ Guild, made sure that we learned, and I love her for that. When you left there, you knew how to do the Senegalese twist, African thread wrap, lace braids, tree braids. You name it, we had to do it, and it was great. We had to have the African technique down to a “T.” Perfection, okay? And I’m glad, because it made us set our bar right there as well. Hiddekel based the Guild on historical, cultural, and artistic aspects of our hair and culture, and it was so beautiful to see women from all over the world come together with those sharp styles. Of course, I had to outdo her and she had to outdo me, which is why I decided that we needed to have a Locks Conference. We already had the braids, but I thought we should do something different. It was right after the bombing of MOVE, too. I said, “Oh, we need to celebrate locks because locks is the original hairstyle.” That affirmed locks, and locks now have grown into a big cultural explosion.

Caroliese: In our community word of mouth is very important. Women would stop and say, “Who did your hair?” and I’d say, “Yvette Smalls.”

Yvette: I didn’t really advertise. I do what I do. Word of mouth is important.

Caroliese: When I go to conferences, people will tell me they wait every year to see what style I’ll be wearing. So you’ve created an image for me.

Yvette: You know which clients are loyal to you, which clients are coming every year or every few months, and you were one of them. It was definitely a ritual—and a lot of styles in Africa are rituals. And the storytelling community is very important. That was their big gala where they come and they “peacock,” I call it. So you had to be sharp. You had to win the hair competition, hair and clothes, every year. I would start searching for hairstyles by August or whatever. When you would come to get your hair done, we would run a little late, because with braiding there is no concept of time. You get lost in— I call it “hand talk.” You get lost in the rhythm of the music, the conversation, the hair, the artistic aspect, and so on. You allow me to be creative and to take it to that next level.

Caroliese: Talk about some of your male clients.

Yvette: The brothers were good. Renaldo was very tender-headed because, again, when you have thick hair people don’t know how to comb it and we didn’t have the proper tools. I’m very gentle with hair because I understand you have to take it from the bottom and bring it up, as opposed to people trying to yank it down. So I understood that everyone needs special attention. Renaldo was tainted from having had his hair yanked and pulled and such. So once he came and saw how I did hair, he was hooked for life. Renaldo was a carpenter back then. I was able to barter and get things done in my renovated house, so that worked out well with some of the guys.

Caroliese: Hair has always been political. I want to bring up natural hair care. When you taught at Temple, you taught natural hair care and beauty. Your role as an activist is huge. Many of the braiders acknowledge you as a pioneer, as someone in the vanguard in Philadelphia. How do you feel about your role as a teacher?

Yvette: I wanted to be a teacher. I thought I would be a traditional teacher, with a chalkboard, but the universe said, “No, not a traditional teacher, a natural hair care teacher.” I was very intense because I wanted
Cultural Exchange:
Cultural Exchange, PFP’s first Folk Arts and Social Change residency, celebrated the efforts of four vanguard cultural workers: merchants Rashie Abdul Samad and Sharif Abdur-Rahim (from African Cultural Art Forum), and artists Frito Bastien and Isaac Maefield. These men have practiced alternative economics and politics for 40+ years: making, trading, and recirculating folk arts. The exhibition (now online at http://www.folkloreproject.org/programs/exhibits/culturalexchange/index.php) is a reminder that revolutions begin in everyday actions, and in the relationships and community we build together, over years. Rashie Abdul Samad says: “If anything is going to change, it will come from exchange with each other.”

Abdul Samad and his brother Sharif Abdur-Rahim established African Cultural Art Forum (ACAF) in 1969, opening their first store on S. 60th Street. Taking their products to the public, they became the first street-cart vendors in Center City to sell something other than pretzels and hotdogs. They began manufacturing incense in 1971, and have since developed, produced, and distributed their own line of products “made in the community for the economic development of the community.” In their early days, responding to a need for images reflecting Black cultural identity, ACAF manufactured wall plaques, using prints produced by local artists like Calypso and Leon Wisdom. Bringing culturally minded goods to the people, they and their carts became a well-known presence at ODUNDE, Unity Day, the Penn Relays and homecomings, and other community gatherings. In the mid-1970s, when African arts were not widely available locally, Rashie Abdul Samad traveled to Haiti and later to West Africa to buy and barter. “We were running off of what Malcolm was saying—that we had to become producers.”

ACAF shea butter, body oils, incense, and incense accessories are now available in stores throughout the region, and ACAF aims to reach two million customers. Since 1995, their products, along with a collection of African art gathered through travels and trade, have been displayed and sold in their store—the former Aqua Lounge jazz club at 221 S. 52nd Street. Artworks from Haiti, Mali, Cameroon, Nigeria, and the Ivory Coast, as well as samples from ACAF’s product line, were on display at PFP, tracing a 42-year journey for self-determination. Isaac Maefield describes the brothers’ achievement: “They were among the first to educate people about what was happening throughout the African Diaspora, in terms of literature, hair culture, beauty, and more. We didn’t know about shea butter until the vendors brought it. This is part of the undervalued material culture of America. Through their energy, many were educated and exposed to African arts.”

“Philadelphia was very accepting of our concept,” Abdul Samad reflects. “We were welcomed. The cultural community really made the Cultural Arts Forum last. Without the Philadelphia African community, we wouldn’t be able to exist. We tried to clear up the clichés that Blacks do not support each other. We cannot say that. We’ve been in existence since 1969, and 99.9% of
our customers are Black people. We work for the idea that if you are diligent in producing quality products, then you will get the support. When we first started to manufacture goods and we were selling in Center City, we were up against a lot of opposition. The police would throw our stuff in the gutter, put us in a cab, and send us back to West Philly—but the people protected us. People would gather around our stand. And then we went to court to get licensed to sell in Center City.”

Frito Bastien was born in 1954 in Jacmel, a coastal town on Haiti’s southern peninsula. He began working on canvas at 13, when he became the apprentice of well-known Haitian painter Celestin Faustin. In 1969 he and his family moved to Port-au-Prince, where he continued his schooling and learned about craft-making and carpentry, which became his livelihood. In late 1991 Bastien’s political activities made him a target of Haiti’s paramilitary forces, the Tontons Macoutes. When two of his colleagues were assassinated, he was forced into exile. Months after arriving in Philadelphia, Bastien learned that his wife and children had survived and were in living in Port-au-Prince.

Bastien’s luminous paintings share the thematic content of an artistic tradition that has flourished in Haiti since the 1940s. He paints from his imagination and his memory of the life and mountainous landscapes of rural Haiti, illustrating the customs and rituals of his homeland. Although much of his work evokes joyful memories, several contain an underlying suggestion of violence, evil, and hardship. This is a strategy traditionally employed by Haitian artists who could not oppose the repressive regime openly for fear of persecution, but used artistic coding to express the community’s concerns. In Philadelphia for 19 years, Bastien continues to use indirect means of expression. The beauty of his paintings contrasts with the reality with which he lives every day. His family lost their home in the earthquake. “I don’t have anything to do but imagine what is going on,” he says. “I have a headache all the time, remembering what people are going through. No work for them. No houses. So many people died. Sometimes I paint just to stop myself from remembering. Sometimes I put the paint on the wall to help my mind calm down.” Because of a work-related injury in 2009, he has been unable to paint on an easel “Art is my life,” he says, hoping to find a way to return to painting in order to share his experiences and send money home to his family. Bastien’s work has been shown in PFP’s “Folk Arts of Social Change” and a Challenge exhibition at Fleisher, at Moore College of Art, the Art Alliance, City Hall, and Vivant Gallery, as well as on walls throughout Philadelphia, thanks to his tenure at the Mural Arts Program. He has received awards from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts and a Pew Fellowship in the Arts.

Isaac Maefield Jr. gained an unparalleled education in carving, storytelling, and community history by listening to and learning from people around him. Most of those
from whom he learned are also “self-taught,” in the sense that their educations have been self-directed: some went to great lengths to seek out teachers. Maefield’s training as an artist began in his own home. His parents, who migrated to Philadelphia from Georgia in the 1940s, settled in North Philadelphia. They encouraged their children’s artistry and creativity. Isaac Maefield Sr. spent hours in his basement workshop, and Maefield Jr. remembers helping by measuring and holding things still. As a child, he was bored by the kind of meticulous care that his father required, but the lessons stayed with him. After his father passed in 1979, he began to carve—making things with his hands in his father’s memory. His mother, a hairdresser and writer, passed on her literary and storytelling skills. An encounter with Gwendolyn Brooks at a poetry reading—an occasion on which the 17-year-old Maefield shared his own poems with the audience—led to a college scholarship. Maefield remains active as a poet and storyteller. He was a founder of Pathfinders and of Keepers of the Culture, Philadelphia’s Afrocentric storytelling group. Many institutions have showcased his carving, sculpture, and jewelry: the African American Museum of Philadelphia, Balch Institute, Erie Museum of Art, Hershey Museum of American Life, the Luckenbach Mill Gallery, and a PFP exhibition at City Hall, among others. He has received commissions from the Smithsonian Institution and WDAS Radio; the United Negro College Fund commissioned a piece that was given to Nelson Mandela. He has been artist in residence at the Paul Robeson House and elsewhere. Maefield has worked as a teaching artist for decades, through the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts and independently, and continues to develop arts education programs for young people in his North Philadelphia neighborhood and citywide.

**Thanks:** The exhibition was curated by the artists in collaboration with Selina Morales and Debora Kodish. Isaac Maefield installed the show. Thank you to Eric Joselyn, Mia-lia Kiernan, and Kate Farquhar for help. Funding was provided by the National Endowment for the Arts, Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, Philadelphia Cultural Fund, and PFP members.
OWN NINE PIECES of folk art by local artists and support locally-sourced folk arts, made in the community, reflecting significant local traditions. Be a part of the Philadelphia Folklore Project’s first-ever Community Supported Art Program (CSA)! Typically, a CSA (where the A stands for agriculture) is a chance for consumers to invest in local farms—they pay upfront to receive a weekly “share” of vegetables. This new art program is modeled after a traditional CSA but instead of garlic, chard, and tomatoes, “shareholders” receive original artwork made by local artists working in community-based and traditional arts.

How it works: Nine folk artists will be producing original works. One work from each artist will be part of every shareholder’s unique bag of art. Shares went on sale on July 12, 2012 and cost $350. In addition to receiving a bag filled with nine art works, shareholders receive an invitation to meet the artists at an exclusive “shareholders only” preview party at PFP in September. In December (at another party with artists) shareholders receive their bags, in time for holiday giving. (Nine gifts for friends and family!) Shareholders get great original art, meet (and invest in) interesting artists, learn about the social issues and histories behind their work, and create a sustainable base for folk arts in our city.

Only fifty shares are available. ($350 too steep?) Consider splitting the price with nine other people, then dividing up the basket. A sample collection is on display in PFP’s gallery at 735 S. 50th Street. Shares can be purchased online at PFP’s store (http://www.folklorep project.org/store/index.php) or with a check for $378 (includes sales tax) sent to PFP’s office at 735 S. 50th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19143. For more information, call us at 215.726.1106 or email csa@folklorep project.org.
Participating artists and what you get:

1. **Ra’sheeda Bey**, “Worry Doll”. As a child, growing up in Philadelphia, Ra’sheeda remembers making dolls from old socks, stockings, and scraps of fabric left over from the quilts and clothing that she, her mother, and grandmother made. Ra’sheeda says, “My dolls are made with pride, dignity and love from the grassroots up!”

2. **Alma Luz Castro**, Oshie (Japanese paper-folding). Alma has been making dolls since she was a child. In addition to the oshie, paper folding mounted on mats, that is her CSA offering, she makes kami ningyo (Japanese paper dolls), kimekomi ningyo (Japanese miniature dolls), kusudama (pomanders—balls with 600 folds), oyama (adult dolls), and boxes.

3. **Maisaloon Dias**, Palestinian tatreez needlework bookmark. Maisaloon is a Palestinian American social worker raised in Philadelphia. She says of her work, “This is my life, this is who I am, this is my culture. It gives me a sense of belonging.” Maisaloon teaches tatreez and uses the art to start discussions about the occupation of Palestine and peoples’ perceptions of Arab women in America.

4. **Stephanie Hryckowian**, Painted Ukrainian pysanky (Easter egg). Since the 1970s, Stephanie has taught pysanky-making at Wheaton Village (Millville, NJ) and in public schools, libraries, camps, and bazaars in the tri-state area. She paints eggs with a wax dye-resist method, using traditional patterns and those of her own design. Included in this CSA is her specialty: painted goose eggs.

5. **Christina Johnson**, Quilted picture frame. Christina is a fiber artist focused on relaying traditional African American quilting techniques and cultural values. She says, “My art challenges traditional and stereotypical edicts, encouraging individual empowerment with the hope of assisting women to use their voices and art for continued social change.”

6. **Eric Joselyn**, Philadelphia Bingo. Politically active his whole life, Eric is known among an extended community of activists as an invaluable resource. He says, “Traditional community skills and popular cultural traditions have taught me a lot about building a happy and democratic opposition to the greedy, hateful society foisted upon us.” Folk arts play an important role in his politics and style. For this CSA Eric is creating a Philadelphia Bingo game guaranteed to help you look at the city in a new way.

7. **Marta Sanchez**, Confetti-filled cascarenos. Since 1992 Marta has organized local artists and children throughout the Philadelphia area to create and sell brightly colored confetti-filled cascarenos, donating the proceeds to the “Cascarenos Par la Vida Art Fund” (which she founded) to assist youth affected by HIV/AIDS. CSA shareholders will receive a dozen painted cascarenos (“eggshells” in Spanish)—some painted by Marta and others created by community members.

8. **Pang Xiong Sirirathasuk Sikoun**, Appliquéd Hmong baby-carrier. In Philadelphia, Pang Xiong is a motivating force behind traditional Hmong celebrations of New Year, weddings, births, and the commemoration of the Hmong people’s departure from Laos. Baby-carriers (nya) are deeply significant garments. Various Hmong peoples have their own traditional patterns, executed in appliqué and reverse appliqué, and with handmade pompons and other decorations.

9. **Matthew Smith**, Handmade steel cowbell. Matt’s percussion instruments travel the globe. He has been making congas, bongos, timbales, cowbells, and other percussion instruments in his shop, Ritmo Studios, for over 20 years. “The cowbells I make are done completely by hand. Each one is tuned to be a beautiful-sounding instrument.”

Philadelphia CSA programs are modeled on a Community Supported Art program in Minnesota, created by Springboard for the Arts and mnartists.org. Funded in part by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, this new initiative in our region is facilitated by the City of Philadelphia Office of Art, Culture and the Creative Economy. Two organizations were chosen to participate. In addition to PFP’s CSA, the arts collectives GrizzlyGrizzly and Tiger Strikes Asteroid are offering a CSA. Get information about the works included in their offering at www.csartphilly.com.
The exhibition We Cannot Keep Silent goes beyond the headlines about a groundbreaking civil rights case to document a community’s fight against bias violence at a Philadelphia high school. Participants share their stories and analyze their multilingual, intergenerational organizing experiences. Like the social justice struggle it documents and advances, We Cannot Keep Silent calls us all to be accountable—to one another and to a vision of community where we grow in compassion and strength through struggling for justice for all. Developed by Asian Americans United (AAU) through PFP’s Folk Art and Social Change Residency program, the exhibition will be on display through November 2012.

When PFP first approached AAU about doing an exhibit on the struggle at South Philadelphia High School (SPHS), the curators recognized the importance of critical reflection on a case many Philadelphians experienced only through the media. Helen Gym, AAU organizer and exhibit curator, noted the campaign’s “complicated racial politics and the difficulty in addressing how to build safe and welcoming school climates.” Before and during the crisis, SPHS and school district officials evaded responsibility for growing racial hostility within the student body. The school needed to heal,” Gym reflected, “but in order to do so it could not deny what had been happening or sugarcoat simplistic efforts to ‘move on.’”

We Cannot Keep Silent offers a compelling mix of participant voices, documents, images, and analysis. The exhibit opens with the journal of immigrant student Wei Chen, who carefully chronicled relentless anti-Asian, anti-immigrant harassment at SPHS dating back to 2007, including steps he and others took to address the increasing violence. An hour-by-hour timeline charts what happened on December 3, 2009, when over the course of the school day more than two dozen Asian immigrant youths were beaten by their peers. School officials would later deny that violence had occurred on school grounds.

Two-sided cards prompt viewers to contrast the authorities’ statements with eyewitness evidence. The simple device highlights how previously unquestioned “truths” serve to minimize, mislead, deny, normalize, and even scapegoat. In a collection of documents, students, parents, and community members give detailed testimony about racial violence and call on authorities to take action.

The next sections of the exhibit show how students and experienced adult organizers took on the oppressive conditions at the school and grew as a force for change. A series of photographs selected by the students and the curatorial team documents a two-and-a-half year campaign to expose and address bias violence in local schools. Portraits of individual students and adult allies accompany excerpts from in-depth interviews to convey how involvement in this campaign transformed their lives. A final section on traditions of organizing reminds us of how shared struggles against bias violence have expanded the possibilities for all of us.

In the essay that follows, exhibition curators share an overview of the issues behind We Cannot Keep Silent.
We have been here before, too many times. We have been in places where racial bias, inequity, and injustice come together in a furious storm of hate. We have watched our children suffer the consequences, and, too often, we have watched them pick up tools of hate against other communities.

But that is not the only story. Our communities also share a tradition of justice and activism. When our children have been attacked, communities have risen up to protect them, to envelop them with love and pride, to empower them with knowledge and the kinds of solutions that bridge racial divides. We have taught them to demand justice instead of resorting to retaliation.

On December 3, 2009, more than two dozen Asian immigrant students were beaten in a day of targeted violence at South Philadelphia High School. The assaults began before nine o’clock in the morning, when teachers reported groups of students roaming the halls looking for Asian students. A dozen students rushed into a classroom and assaulted an Asian youth. Witnesses said they beat him and threw a desk on top of him. Around eleven o’clock there was a rush of students into a hallway where English Language Learner (ELL) classes were held. While school police held the crowd back, teachers hurried students into classrooms and locked their doors. At lunchtime, Asian immigrant students expressed fear of going to the cafeteria, but the school principal ordered them downstairs. Many were subsequently attacked there. Dozens of students surrounded small groups of Asian youths, beating them with fists and trashcans while security cameras showed other students egging the attackers on. Around one in the afternoon, a group of students dragged an Asian girl down a stairwell by her hair. After school, 10 Asian students asked to remain inside the building. Instead, they were ordered to remain inside the building. The school principal, who had offered to walk them home, quickly dropped from sight. A crowd of more than 100 chased, cornered, and then surrounded the students as 20 to 40 of their peers beat them. At the end of the day, 13 students sought emergency room treatment and dismissed the events of the day as a “blip.”

As shocking as these assaults were, they were far from isolated. For more than a year prior to December 3rd, Asian Americans United, the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, Victim/Witness Services of South Philadelphia, and a number of community advocates had raised alarms about pervasive anti-Asian violence at SPHS. In October 2008, after five Asian immigrant students were severely beaten in the subway by dozens of their classmates, most of the school’s Asian students stayed out of school for two days. Chinese youths reached out to adults in the community for support. Over the ensuing months, AAU and allies documented dozens of incidents—from multi-student assaults to random beatings, threats and intimidation, racial slurs, and near-constant harassment and ridicule for students who were Asian and recent immigrants.

The harassment didn’t come just from classmates. Students reported that staff members made racist comments: “Hey Chinese.” “Speak English.” “Are you Bruce Lee?” Staff members turned their faces away when classmates threw food at Asian students in the
cafeteria or shoved them out of lines. A staff member mimicked Asian students’ accents in front of others. Security personnel often refused to investigate harassment complaints unless students reported the problem in English. When community members tried to address the violence at the school, the principal accused them of having an “Asian agenda.”

As one student said: “As soon as we open our mouths, we’re treated like we’re animals.” In contrast to public documents and press accounts, We Cannot Keep Silent is grounded in first-person testimonies from people who lived through this crisis.

Wei Chen, SPHS student, boycott leader, and founder of the school’s Chinese Student Association, testified before the School Reform Commission on December 8, 2009: “I want to ask the School Reform Commission something... Have you ever cared about us? Our Asian students are being affected by school violence and it’s getting worse and worse. Looking at the students who were attacked, I feel very sad because the school could have done something to prevent it from happening.”

SPHS student Duong Nhe Ly reflected: “South Philadelphia High School has been a persistently dangerous school in the city and there has been a long history of racial violence and bias violence going on inside the school. But the school district—the school officials—hadn’t done much to resolve the issues inside the school. So it’s just inevitable that on December 3rd, 2009 there was a series of attacks inside the school. So 30 Asian students—Asian immigrant students—were beat up, and then 13 of them had to go to the hospital to seek treatment. Even after that, the school refused to take responsibility for failing to protect the students and for being indifferent when the students were trying to ask for help.”

Shocked by the indifference, defensiveness, and hostility of school leaders, Asian immigrant students boycotted their school for eight days and went on to work with community leaders and advocacy groups over the next two years to demand accountability and highlight the issue of bias violence. The boycott announcement stated: “It is our opinion that South Philadelphia High School is still not a safe place for us. Because we are Asian immigrants, we are targeted... Because of that we will not return to South Philadelphia High School this week. Instead, we are going to meet in our community to figure out some real solutions of our own.”

The student boycott forged a strategic partnership between young immigrants and veteran adult community organizers. The strength, breadth, and endurance of this intergenerational coalition grew out of the partners’ multilingual capacity and decades of experience in community lawyering, victim advocacy, youth development, and organizing for justice. Organizers created a caring, safe space where students who had been silenced and ignored could speak out and assert their power.

Meeting in Chinatown, speaking their home languages, students and organizers collaborated and built their campaign against harassment and violence. At the same time, the coalition served students’ immediate needs, providing them with counseling, legal assistance, and skilled interpretation.

It was the nature of the violence on December 3rd that provoked the boycott and the ensuing campaign. Bias violence uses fear to constrict and confine a whole group of people. It can limit where people of a certain color can live or go to school, where people of a certain faith can observe their religion, who is allowed to hold hands with whom, what language people feel safe speaking outside their homes. By refusing to admit that bias violence was taking place at SPHS, school leaders tried to evade responsibility for educational failure—for the fact that our children are growing up filled with such rage and intolerance that they could attack peers based on their race and nationality.

The campaign was not about blaming young people. It placed responsibility squarely on the shoulders of a school district that had done little to address the alarming level of racial harassment at SPHS—despite the concerted advocacy of students and organizers for more than a year prior to the events of December 3rd. Students and their allies sought transformational change.
by building a loving, multiethnic/multilingual community in which participants could learn, grow, and rethink and refute the options most often presented to them: silence or individualized retaliation.

The campaign that followed and continues today achieved significant victories. A new principal was appointed. The U.S. Department of Justice charged the district with racial discrimination and violating the civil and constitutional rights of Asian youths. A groundbreaking settlement with the Department of Justice and the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission established that schools have a responsibility to maintain a climate free of harassment and bias and would be held accountable for failing to do so. Coalition members formed a multiracial, multilingual collaborative at the school to raise student voices around identifying and addressing safety issues there.

The South Philadelphia agreement became the model in spring 2012 for a Justice Department settlement involving the harassment of LGBT students in Minnesota’s largest school district.

Perhaps the most lasting legacy is the rise of new generation of vocal activists—from immigrant youths to adult community leaders—who have continued and broadened this campaign, making connections with larger issues and working within multiracial coalitions to carry this struggle forward. Alison Sprague reflected: “I don’t think I’ve ever been part of a coalition that was so intergenerational and interdisciplinary. All of us came at this from different places and with completely different skill sets, but we were able to bring such a level of commitment, deep listening, mutual respect and incredibly hard work. I felt like we asked ourselves what does it mean to move forward through all of this, and together we came up with a profound answer.”

It’s worth remembering that in 1967, too, Philadelphia high schools were a flashpoint of interracial tensions as a result of the city’s changing demographics. In particular, schools in South Philadelphia experienced significant racial violence as they underwent racial transition. Describing the rise of Black activism and Black Power in Philadelphia in his book Up South, historian Matthew Countryman writes that many African American students at these schools were harassed with racial slurs. Trash was thrown at them as they walked to school. Their buses were pelted with stones.

In response, a community was galvanized, staging rallies and marches and demanding Black students’ right to affirm and express their own culture.

The Asian American movement of the 1960s and 1970s was deeply inspired by the practices and traditions of the Black freedom struggle. Asian Americans United had its beginnings in “Yellow Seeds,” a radical organization that called for a movement to combat all forms of racial oppression. AAU has pursued this mission for 26 years, organizing communities to challenge wrongs ranging from predatory land development to educational inequity while fighting for housing, immigration, and welfare rights.

Building on all these activist traditions, the civil rights campaign at SPHS connected to larger struggles and demanded justice and institutional change. Like other movements, it built spaces of ethnic pride and voice. It sought connections with other communities addressing violence in schools. It let students know that a community of adults was there to share hard-won knowledge and history. It gave participants a sense of how struggle is advanced across generations.

And it calls all of us to consciousness that our struggles for justice continue.

Notes


2 Student boycott announcement, December 6, 2009.

3 Alison Sprague, founder, Victim/Witness Services of South Philadelphia. Interview, April 2012.
Miss Cassie’s Beauty Saloon, on the corner of Cedar Avenue and 35th Street in Cleveland, Ohio, was like many Black-owned and patronized beauty parlors in hundreds of African American communities. For the regulars, as well as the occasional patrons, it was a hub of community information and activity. Here, the women convened their neighborhood circle to catch up on gossip, get job information, and take a few moments to themselves—as well as preparing their hair for the upcoming week. Getting one’s hair done on Saturday allowed it just enough time to “cure” before it was revealed either on that important evening out or in church the next day. But of course, for the married woman and the sexually active girlfriend, it meant no sex that Saturday night, especially if your man couldn’t afford to pay to have your hair redone, maybe by Tuesday, so that it would be presentable for the rest of the week. Moisture was the enemy of hot-combed and curled hair, so any activity that worked up a sweat was off limits. This included sex.

On Saturday, Cassie’s most heavily booked day, neighborhood men entered the Beauty Saloon to peddle their wares: perfumes, costume jewelry, boosted clothing and records. It was on Saturday, July 11, 1958, that I learned that my Daddy, Stonewall Hazzard, had a steel plate in his head. Junior Pearl, Reverend Pearl’s wine-head son, had revealed that fact as he heaped praises on Stoney, as Daddy was called. Stoney took a blow on the head that cracked a two by four in half and shattered a Thunderbird wine bottle. “You shoulda seed him, Miz Stonewall, you shoulda seed it, Katrina. He jus’ shook his haid an kep’ own comin’.” Junior himself had sustained a small cut on his left hand, inflicted by Albert, whose hair was in a “bad process.”

Albert had been openly attacked and severely beaten in public by several men in the neighborhood, one of whom was Junior Pearl. The other men included my Daddy, Stonewall, Teddy, a local wine-head, and Teddy’s youngest and handsomest brother, Herman, who was just starting out on the road toward alcoholism. The winos had got sober just for the occasion. These men—two and a half winos and a 65 year old—had formed an ad hoc community vigilante group. On that warm Saturday morning, during the housewives’ mid-morning ritual of sweeping the sidewalk and tossing soapy water onto it, while the street-corner mechanics worked on their cars or gathered around them with a few bottles of beer, at a time when the action would be highly visible to the community, the vigilantes caught Albert and began to mete out justice.

It seemed that Albert had been molesting Miss Annie’s six-year-old daughter. Albert and Annie lived together, or it appeared that way sometimes. No one was exactly sure, because sometime he was there and sometime he wasn’t. He was her “old man” and not her husband. Albert was “urples” in color, with intermittent pink flesh speckled across his lips—“wine-burned lips,” acquired from drinking so much cheap wine that the color had actually faded onto them. His dark skin, which at one time was a glorious, enviable ebony with a deep purple cast, had become uneven: blotchy, greasy, darker in some places, dry looking in others. That’s
“urple”—used to describe Albert and others like him who ruined the gift of flowers in their pigment by drinking too much cheap wine for too many years. Albert was about five foot ten inches tall and thin. He always wore “high-water pants” that looked like they ended an inch or two above his ankles. He thought of himself as a “good dresser” and kept up with the latest fashions sold by the Jewish merchants who peddled certain types of clothing in Negro communities.

Miss Annie was a tall, milk-chocolate brown woman with a greasy face and finely chiseled features. Her well-defined mouth and nose had a natural “come hither” quality. She was one of the very few women in our neighborhood who had a child but no husband. Thick, luscious, nappy hair framed her stunning dark face like a halo, yet she hated her hair, and that’s how she found herself seated inside Miss Cassie’s Beauty Saloon under the care of Dixie Peach, the hot comb, and the curling iron. There she told the tale.

As she spoke to the beautician, the conversation could be overheard by nearly everybody seated in the storefront beauty parlor. This was a time before the Negro “perm,” and women could actually hear each other talking because their ears were not muffled by a blowing stream of hair; nor were their heads engulfed by spaceman-like headgear. They had a sense of community in the shop because they could and did talk to each other. They shared Hoodoo secrets on the use of urine and menstrual blood; and sometimes they cried. Miss Annie’s heart had become so full over this issue that they cried. Miss Annie’s heart had no male relatives close by who she could call upon to help her, and the neighborhood knew it. So they often helped her out by giving her small items, like extra fish when someone in the neighborhood went fishing or vegetables from the backyard gardens.

The mothers were so outraged that they carried the tale back to the confines of their homes, their basement or attic apartments, their kitchenettes, and that Saturday night they forgot all about their newly pressed hairdos. Instead they demanded that something be done; they cuddled up, stroked, teased, tempted, and promised their men the best sex that they ever had. But not before letting their men know that something had to be done about Albert. “Supposed he tries that with someone else’s child?” they asked. “You know Annie ain’t got no man,” I heard Susie Mae whisper into Stonewall’s ear.

The following Saturday, Albert met his fate right outside of Miss Cassie’s Beauty Saloon. In the bright sunshine the community observed Junior Pearl, Rev. Pearl’s wine-head son, Teddy, Herman, and my 65-year-old Daddy, Stonewall, with the steel plate in his head, grab Albert and administer an old-fashioned neighborhood ass-whuppin’. No one dared to interfere. Even the local police patrol, known to the neighborhood as “317” from the number on the black and white car they drove, passed on by and pretended not to notice what was happening. Albert drew a knife trying to defend himself, cutting Junior on the left hand. He also resorted to a discarded wooden two by four, which he used to clobber Daddy over the head. When the wood couldn’t deter Stoney,Albert grabbed a discarded Thunderbird bottle and laid it against my Daddy’s forehead just above his left eye, the exact location of the steel plate. I later heard Junior Pearl and Daddy laughing about it. “The police didn’t do nothing,” they said. I asked why. Junior and Daddy explained that the policemen had families. “They got kids. They got girl children. They knew why we was trying to kill ‘im.” Albert, though he was not killed that sunny Saturday morning in July 1958, disappeared from the community and was never seen or heard from again. The following Tuesday, Miss Cassie’s Beauty Saloon was overbooked. with midweek appointments.
Isaac Maefield with his sculpture
"The Visionary"

Photo: Debora Kudish
My father was a sanitation worker. But to me, his job was when he went to the basement and made things. My mother was a beautician by trade, but for me, I was most proud of the hats she made. I remember the first time she called me to show me her first hat. I was a little kid, and she wanted to know what I thought of it. I was so proud of her. I have rings that my father made. I have an appreciation of people making things.

So that was my motivation for inviting other people in from scratch to this exhibition. I also want to encourage them. Bobby Hart makes these chairs. He makes intricate tables and chairs, and he does it for love, as a hobby. When he saw me making these elaborate checkerboards, that made him want to make a better board. The same thing with the walking sticks. Mark Brown is my next-door neighbor. Mark’s work influences me. Even though he’ll say he is my student, he influences me. The walking stick by Mark has 22 symbols, including adinkras. I’m proud of that stick because I pointed him down various paths, but Mark went on his own journey. The other stick was done by Thomas Mitchell, who has passed away. Often woodcarvers express themselves in other media too, so he made jewelry and drummed. He was one of the original Pathfinders, a network of artists, mostly woodcarvers. When I would see a carved walking stick, I would say, “Who made that?” And often it would be someone working in their basement, and I would say, “Come on in.” My models were the jazz musicians. They would get together and share. So I was thinking, “That’s what woodcarvers should do.” We were together no more than six months before we had a show at the African American Museum, which was unheard of. We went to schools to do workshops…

For me, it’s a mantra. I use art for social change. I use that as a bridge. When I started carving, people would gather to watch me carve, and I could ask, “Have you ever heard about Malcolm?” In this way I could start a dialogue. Art empowers.

I made the cobra walking stick in 1980 or 1981. I was in South Philly, at a place called Chicken George’s at Broad and Christian. Someone had cut down a sumac tree there, and the cobra came from that tree. I remember all the sources I get my wood from. I have never broken a branch off a tree to carve. All my pieces are found pieces or the tree is cut down. I don’t believe in killing anything. I’ve been a vegetarian for 29 years. I don’t believe in sustaining myself off the backs of other creatures. I like to respect all life, even the life of a tree.

The everyday stories behind the cobra stick are incredible. I don’t know how many fights I’ve broken up with that stick. I know of at least three muggings I’ve broken up. One even involved the cops. A guy was mugging an elderly guy and I told him, “No, you stay right here.” He was looking at it. Later the cops were wondering, “Who are you and what is that stick?”

Once I went into the bathroom at Penn Station in New York, and there were these young guys around this elderly white man. I could see his face was red. I used to wear the cane like a rifle, with the cobra face over my shoulder. I had a turban on, with Africa in the middle of the turban. I was in very good shape at the time. I was getting acclimated to the rest room, and I heard one of them say, “Who is this guy? Let’s get out of here!”
When I realized they were going to rob him. The elderly man looked at me and said, "Thank you." It was my presence, but I know it was also the stick.

The thing about the stick is its thickness. Depending on the angle, one side is friendly and the other side is ferocious. That wasn't by design, but I could tell you all kinds of stories. One time two rottweilers attacked me and I used the stick to fend them off. That stick is one thing I'll never sell.

Ironically, my mother was disgusted by it. Growing up in Waynesboro, Georgia, she killed so many snakes in the cotton fields that she never wanted to see another. The cotton itself fought you because it had those needles that would prick you, and then those worms that would bite you. There were mosquitoes and sometimes a possum or a raccoon coming through, so it was tough duty working in those cotton fields and being paid a penny a pound! And what does cotton weigh? Of all the little varmints and challenges of picking cotton, the most feared was the snake. She didn't even want to look at the cobra stick because of her memories of snakes.

The Visionary's wood came from the Recycling Center in Fairmount Park. I cut the wood out after walking the length of the tree. The Visionary's mouth is open: it is influenced by the need to speak out for freedom, justice, and equality. All too often, people don't speak out. They deny themselves their own voice. We think of spoken word as someone in front of an audience, but long before that, there was someone to say, "No, the emperor doesn't have any clothes. No, this is wrong." The Visionary speaks out.

Sometimes, as a woodcarver, you might have a concept first, begin to work that, and have that emerge from the wood. The flip side is that sometimes the wood itself suggests something. The Messenger is one in which I saw the face in there. The wood itself took the lead in what it would do. There's an expression that woodcarvers have called "listening to the wood." That piece suggested what it wanted to be, and I heard it. I always had an affinity for the water. I'd salvage pieces of driftwood and decorate them, and then I started carving them. Driftwood is forgiving, soft to negotiate. I think it might have been discouraging if I had started off with a hard block of wood. Wood is like a cat. You have to rub it a certain way or it's not going to like what you are doing. You have to learn the ways of it, the challenges of it, the various grains, the blemishes.

I had a neighbor, Philip Dukes, a truck driver. His company used to give me some of the wood I used. He would give me wood over 20 years old. Sometimes I would come home, and wood would be piled on my porch. Mr. Dukes had a coal-burning stove. He used this wood to heat his house—mahogany and all this precious wood. He saw me carving and said, "Let me give you some real wood." Mr. Dukes was my first teacher when it came to identifying woods.

The United Negro College Fund invited me to do the Mandela piece. I had never done a portrait before. And I was faced with the difficulty of getting current pictures of Mandela, as the images around were mostly of him as a younger man, before he was imprisoned. When I saw I could do this, covered with sawdust in the middle of my shop, I just fell on my knees and thanked God for showing me how. The original piece is hanging somewhere in Mandela's living room. This started me on a track of doing portraits. I did a little carving of Malcolm X, and I was at a flea market with it—which I never do, but someone had talked me into going. And this man bought the Malcolm X carving, and he asked me if I could do other portraits. He was buying the Malcolm X piece for someone else, he said, but he might want to keep it for himself. His name was Jonathan Demme, and at the time that did not mean anything to me. There was a moment when I asked him, "Who do you want to give this to?" He said, "Denzel Washington." I laughed. I thought this guy was crazy! I put my hand on his shoulder and said, "Don't worry, you can give this to Denzel. I can make you one or two more." Later, I found out who he was! But Demme commissioned a three-panel relief portrait from me, of Martin Luther King, Mandela, and Malcolm X, and he gave it to a dear friend of his, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who was then President of Haiti. Aristide idolized these men. Had I not done the Mandela piece in the first place, I wouldn't have had any portraits to show anyone, and I would have been at that flea market just with some jewelry, and that door never would have been opened. So that's the empowering aspect of art.

By the time I was 10, my father and I had a secret—that I could beat him at checkers. As a kid in North Philadelphia, by the end of one day I might have played marbles, deadblock, halfball, football, baseball, swimming—all in one day. But I always made a point of being home right before dinnertime and having the checkerboard set up, waiting for my father when he came home from work. As it went along, he couldn't understand this little boy beating him. Playing other children wasn't a competition for me. Other places to play were street corners and barbershops, but it was unthinkable for a kid to play with adults, grown men. So I had no competition. I stopped playing checkers, and by the time I was 12, I got into chess. And chess became my game. In 1976, I came in fourth in the World Open at the Sheraton in Philadelphia. I was a rated expert. I beat masters and grandmasters. I beat a man, a doctor, at the Franklin Mercantile Chess Club. It took me two years to beat him. I used to wait on him like I waited on my father with the checkerboard. I'll never forget the first and only time I beat him. He looked at me and said, "I think you know enough to win." And he laid his king down. That was a triumphant moment for me because this man had once played Bobby Fischer. Even though he was elderly, he mentored...
me. He took me under his wing.

Fast forward to Bootsie’s Laundromat, where I was reinitiated into checkers. I had become a chess player. I studied dozens of books. They say chess is a jealous lover. To be good, you have to study. So I read. I went to all of the masters. I studied their games. I read and practiced their games. I looked down on checkers because I thought it was a children’s game. Bootsie’s Laundromat was where I did my clothes. These men were playing checkers there, every day. In between washing and drying my clothes, I watched them and I was amused by the dialogue. It reminded me of the experience of growing up with my father. I was captivated by the culture, the language that was used. One day I was watching Bootsie and Thomas Rogers, who would become my second checker teacher after my father. He was 92 at the time, a retired welder. He had worked on the waterfront and at the Budd plant. He was a master welder. “Roger the Dodger” was his nickname. That’s another thing I like about checkers. They are always going to give you another name.

My nickname is “Mister Ike.” And it’s so funny—these guys are 90 years old. And I’m calling them “Manslaughter Junior,” “Hong Pong,” or whatever their name is. Some of these names go back to their childhood. But the names read like wrestlers’ names. Somehow they gave me “Mr. Ike.” That’s my checker name. I was trying to play Roger and I could not win a game to save my life. I thought, “How can this man be beating me at this children’s game?” He was laughing, and I realized that checkers was more than a notion. There was an honesty, a blatant dialogue that goes on during checkers that’s very therapeutic. The language and the usage of it—it’s almost like an unwritten rule of checkers as it is played at Bootsie’s. You can call someone a name. You can talk about their family tree. You can tell them how fantastic you are. How they know nothing about it. You can talk trash. You can say whatever you want. It’s not taken personally, regardless of how big or small someone is. Maybe someone was a bully, but towards the end, there are no bullies there. History, art, and culture change people. The culture of checkers is very therapeutic. Very similar to playing ball. I used to play ball. One of the therapeutic things about playing ball is you can affirm your “I am.” That trash talking translates into your everyday life. You gotta believe in yourself even when it looks as if you are up against all odds. Sometimes it looks like you are going to lose a game; then you see a move and it opens it all up. These skills are transferable to everyday life. You can think that all is lost, but then there’s a move you can make. Or there’s a blessing that comes your way.

There is the same bravado in checkers. You have to believe in yourself—if for no other reason than to back someone off of you. They say, if you can’t win the game, win the trash talking.

The checkerboards are part of the material culture of the game. And the beauty of it is, you can go into prisons around the world and see boards of all kinds of materials, found objects. People have a personal connection to their set. You didn’t go into a store and buy a board. People play on boards that their fathers and uncles made. “Spanish Pool” is the name of the game we play, and you can’t go to a department store and buy that kind of board. You’ll find the kind of little plastic board kids play on, but you can’t go to a store and find a hundred-man board. Mostly, people will buy two sets and make a board. There are some exquisite boards and some that people made and just left, with different color combinations that they like. There’s a lot of creativity involved with the game. That’s the beauty at Bootsie’s.
Wiggins, Bernice Johnson Reagon (well, I already knew Bernice—but again, to see her in that situation), Richard A. Long, William J. Faulkner, and James Early. And they didn’t look down on me. They welcomed me into the mix, saying “Go for it.” “Do what you need to do.” I really was encouraged from that gathering and especially by Kathryn, because, like I said, she just went out of her way. You know Kathryn talks about the Caddy “buffer” stories in her book. Kathryn became a buffer for me. She would be there at the times where I really needed someone there to support me. And every time we would meet we would have these wonderful discussions. She was encouraging me to keep doing what I was doing, and to write the stories down and put them in a book. Even though I had been a poet and I had been in anthologies during the Black Arts movement, and I kind of thought of myself as a writer, I had never really thought about getting a book together. But she said it’s very important to make a record of these stories, and you must get those stories in print one day.

I brought it up at the board meeting for the National Association of Black Storytellers. I realized that when I would put Kathryn Morgan’s name out there to other storytellers, they had never heard of her. They had never heard of her book. A lot of people really didn’t know that much about Sonia Sanchez, either. There are a lot of Black storytellers out there, but they don’t necessarily know of Black poets. So I said, “Oh, my goodness, you know something has to be done about this.” There were some people that I felt we really needed to honor and one of them was Kathryn Morgan, and the other one was Sonia Sanchez. They are so important to the development of our people. To me, they both were truth messengers.

Didn’t matter how painful that truth was. They were willing to get that truth out and really, to encourage us as a people to get that truth out. And as a Black storytelling association, part of our mission was to bring out the story, bring out the storyteller, bring out the oral historian, bring out those who were promoting the culture and who had really sacrificed themselves to get that culture out. So, to me they were perfect to really be introduced to the storytelling family, and to be honored.

When Kathryn was introduced to the storytelling community at the National Association of Black Storytellers in 2007, it was like she represented the ancient mother of all mothers. The queen mother. The African mother. She owned this beautiful white gown, and with her bald head and that necklace around her head—we were in awe. And even though I had seen her on a regular basis, I was in awe too. We were all in awe of her presence.

When I introduced her, I told the story of how we met, and how she had encouraged me. I was crying. Everybody in the audience was crying. And Kathryn just sat there smiling. She just sat there beaming. And when she stood up, everybody just rose to their feet. And she lifted up her arms, and she said “How I love you and how I thank you for this great honor.” I mean it was just unbelievable. They swarmed her—they surrounded her to the point that you couldn’t even see her. You couldn’t see her face. I had to break through the crowd. And she was just laughing. Just grinning. And they were calling her “Mother.” They were touching her. It was like they had always known her. It was like she was never a stranger to them. It was the strangest thing. It was just wonderful. It was just beautiful.

And we gave her a plaque and she kept that plaque near her side as long as she could, even when she was in the senior citizen home. You would walk in there and there was that plaque, and she would say, “Oh, I just love the Black storytellers. Oh, I’m going to every one of the gatherings.” That was really like my thank you gift to her, you know. And she received it like a thank you gift from everybody in that room. It was like “Asante sana. Asante sana.” We were singing and chanting. And after the circle of elders, we gather in a circle. We gather around the elders and we chant and we just start dancing in a circle. And there’s the drums—and the word is so spirited. It’s all just spirit, and things just happen. You don’t even know what is gonna happen. It’s just something that’s magical. And that day was just so magical. I was just so happy for Kathryn.

And now I think about the fact that she would be making transition three years later—you know I had no idea. But she really enjoyed it. It was just a spectacle, but in the most positive way.
people to get it. It’s not just about the natural hair; it’s about natural hair care, because you have to know how to take care of your hair. That was important to me: I’m grateful that I had that opportunity to teach and pass it on to my young people, to my students. My nieces were my first students. I just started teaching them how to take care of their hair when they were about six or seven. They would sit there and watch us, and I saw how tradition was passed down. They would come and imitate us later. My baby braiders touched my heart because that affirmed what I kind of suspected—that when children watch they really do learn.

When I started teaching, I didn’t have a set rule or way to do it, but after I saw that I was going to be teaching, I made a curriculum. I want them to know about the historical, cultural, and artistic aspects of hair. I want them to get the techniques last. A lot of them want the techniques to go make some money: no. You’re going to learn your history and culture, and then you get the techniques. Caroliese: What are some things you’re most proud of?

Yvette: I’m proud of the film Hair Stories—that I have done something that people can go reference a hundred years from now and say, “Oh, okay, this is something she was saying,” whether they accept it or reject it. The work that I’ve done in terms of natural hair and natural hair care has helped people to really take it and run with it, and be serious about the art form—not just exploiting it for money. So I’m proud about the film, and knowing that I left some very good students, and they’ll pass it on and keep it going.

The movie was finished as a result of my father dying. Me saying, “Oh, I might die and I didn’t finish this work, I didn’t do this movie, I didn’t finish this film.” So there I go—another mission. I didn’t know about making movies, so I went to Miyoshi Smith, and that was a deep process.

We’re very visual people and we need to see and hear. I wanted people to see and hear what I was trying to say. People wouldn’t listen to me, because I had been talking for years and trying to tell them things. I said, “I’ll get the information through another way.” That is my mission, for people to feel good about themselves. Whoever, however—the creator made you, you’re perfect.

The film taught me a lot of things as well. I didn’t realize our history wasn’t documented in America even though we built America. I had to go to people’s archival photo books, to their family albums, because when we went to the Free Library and the Balch Institute to find pictures and images of us, it was really hard. It left me feeling like we weren’t important enough to be documented in history. That was an empty feeling.

The thing that I’ve understood about the film is that it is political. It wasn’t intended for politics, but it is. My intention was to bring awareness to the subject. I want people to just love themselves and know that they’re perfect as they are. Caroliese: I love that you talk about hair not just from a scientific standpoint but also in a cultural way. You taught me a lot about hair in America and its use and misuse. From the time that we were enslaved, what the uses were for hair. We mistreated our hair; we did what we could. I always tell my children we didn’t have time to pack our lotions and creams. My children are amazed when I tell them it wasn’t until the 60s that we had a comb for our hair.

I cried, my sister cried, as children, because the comb that my mother was using was not for our hair. Yvette: I was so fixed on making sure that women felt good about themselves, having them feel empowered. One image that stays in my mind is of this little girl when we were in school. I see some girls like this now. Little dark girls who have hair that’s either short or broken or plastered to their head. And that messes with their self-esteem. And it’s still prevalent today. When their hair is done, they act differently. Don’t the children act differently in school? I remember growing up short, dark-skinned, left-handed; I had a lot of things going against me. In my home, I didn’t feel that way. I was loved and felt affirmed by my parents and my aunts. My mother told me, “Beauty is as beauty does.” She was serious, because that’s how she was. That’s how we were raised. But the outside world was cruel and mean to darker children. So that is my mission—that nobody has to feel bad about themselves, whether they are light, dark, green, purple, blue. You’re okay however you are. That is a mission God has me on.
PFP turned 25 with a great party! Fabulous performances, delectable food and drink, and dancing were enjoyed by 225+ people. Mark your calendar for the first weekend of June next year. This will be an annual event. For now, thank you to everyone who made it a wonderful evening.

This year, we inaugurated the **Folk Arts & Social Change Awards** to exemplify values and traditions central to PFP’s work: commitment to social justice, engaged and activist work, a sense of hope and possibility, belief in the power of work that pays attention to the lived experiences of local communities. By naming the awards after people who forged PFP’s vision, we hope to draw attention to the lives and legacies of those who have changed us. In this inaugural year, we gave awards to people who have been critical in shaping PFP’s path. Here are brief introductions to the awards and awardees:

**Kathryn Morgan Award for Folk Arts & Social Justice.**

Kathryn Morgan (1919–2010) was a native Philadelphian, the first African American woman to get a Ph.D. in folklore from the University of Pennsylvania, and the first appointed to be on the faculty of Swarthmore College. A pioneering folklorist, she opened the field of family folklore, paying attention to African American and women’s experiences, and showing how family stories were “antidotes to racism.” Kathryn’s presence on PFP’s board in the 1990s built our commitment to “disturbing the peace of racism.” **Awardee: Lois Fernandez**

Kathryn Morgan Award for Folk Arts & Cultural Heritage Practice.

Kathryn Morgan Award for Folk Arts & Social Justice.

Kathryn Morgan (1919–2010) was a native Philadelphian, the first African American woman to get a Ph.D. in folklore from the University of Pennsylvania, and the first appointed to be on the faculty of Swarthmore College. A pioneering folklorist, she opened the field of family folklore, paying attention to African American and women’s experiences, and showing how family stories were “antidotes to racism.” Kathryn’s presence on PFP’s board in the 1990s built our commitment to “disturbing the peace of racism.” **Awardee: Lois Fernandez** is best known as the co-founder of ODUNDE and for 37 years the driving force behind this beloved annual celebration, which affirms African culture as a resource for community well-being. In the vanguard of cultural movements, she pushed the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to treat all children the same regardless of the marital status of their mother. In collaborations with PFP ("Hucklebuck to Hip-Hop," "Philly Dance Africa," exhibitions, and more), and in community coalitions, Lois has stood strong for self-determination and for the importance of culture as a means of creating community well-being. She was a PFP board member in the 1990s.

**Channavy Lenora Koung Award for Folk Arts & Cultural Heritage Practice.**

Channavy Lenora Koung (1976-1996) learned traditional Cambodian music from her father, Koung Peang, and performed in the family mohori ensemble from a very young age. She took a lead role in the first lak hon bassac (folk drama) performance to be produced here for the Cambodian community, in a 1990 partnership with PFP. She helped a new generation of Cambodian Americans to embrace and extend folk and traditional arts, assuming responsibility for keeping folk arts a vital resource in new settings. **Awardee: Germaine Ingram**'s creative work as a tap dancer and choreographer has consistently showed how tap dance (and
African American folk arts, from self-fashioning to ring shouts) are rich resources for exploring challenging legacies. She initiated PFP’s project on local African American women tap dancers (“Plenty of Good Women Dancers”), uncovering and documenting experiences that had been left out of the record. Thanks to her, a generation of pioneering artists received long-overdue recognition. As an artist, board member, and staff member, she has shaped PFP’s approach to using folk arts as a means for opening doors.

**Rosemary Cubas Award for Folk Arts & Activism.** Activist and community organizer Rosemary Cubas (1943–2005) was involved in countless campaigns for human rights—locally and globally. PFP worked with Rosemary to develop the documentary I Choose to Stay Here, supporting the struggle of people in her lower North Philadelphia neighborhood to fight the city’s abuse of eminent domain and hang on to their homes. Rosemary taught PFP (and many others) how community is knit and rebuilt when people listen to one another and act collectively for justice, no matter what the odds are. **Awardee: Debbie Wei** opened a view of cultural reclamation as an effective social justice strategy. A long-time member of PFP’s board, Debbie worked with PFP to create anti-racist folk arts workshops for teachers, student residencies, children’s books, a documentary video, and the Folk Arts-Cultural Treasures Charter School—all efforts grounded in attention to the experiences of Asian American and immigrant communities. For more than 20 years, PFP has been guided and inspired by Debbie and AAU activists, who have modeled how to organize and analyze and speak truth to power.

**Ella King Torrey Award for Visionary Work in Community Culture.** Ella King Torrey (1957–2003) was a program officer at The Pew Charitable Trusts in 1987, when she helped PFP get its first grant—a process of encouraging us to imagine possibilities and articulate work that needed to be done. She had great generosity of spirit. Ella’s graduate study of folklore and work documenting African American quilts in the South influenced her approach. She founded the Pew Fellowships in the Arts and included folk artists in a groundbreaking act of equity that has had powerful local, regional, and national impacts. **Awardee: Louis Massiah.** Since 1974 Louis Massiah has pioneered the use of media for creative expression and social change. PFP is one of countless beneficiaries of Louis’ work. We have taken part in many Scribe programs and learned from them all: “Precious Places,” “Storyville,” “Documentary History Project for Youth,” community radio station WPEB, and more. Louis’ politics and vision, both at Scribe and in his creative work, have truly opened doors, showing how inclusive and critical work can change lives and reveal and reshape the terms by which we reckon history and experience.

Who should receive these awards next year? Nominate community members for consideration by calling 215.726.1106 or emailing us pfp@folklorequay.org Send the name of the nominee, the award for which you are nominating them, and a brief account of why you think they should be honored. Thanks!
about the philadelphia folklore project

Folklore means something different to everyone—as it should, since it is one of the chief means we have to represent our own realities in the face of powerful institutions. Here at the Philadelphia Folklore Project, we are committed to paying attention to the experiences and traditions of “ordinary” people. We’re a 25-year-old independent public interest folklife agency that documents, supports and presents local folk arts and culture. We offer exhibitions, concerts, workshops and assistance to artists and communities. We conduct ongoing field research, organize around issues of concern, maintain an archive, and issue publications and resources. This work comes out of our mission: we affirm the human right to meaningful cultural and artistic expression, and work to protect the rights of people to know and practice traditional and community-based arts. We work with people and communities to build critical folk cultural knowledge, respect the complex folk and traditional arts of our region, and challenge processes and practices that diminish these local grassroots arts and humanities. We urge you to join—or to call us for more information. (215.726.1106)

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