“I AM FROM” POEM COLLECTION WITH APPLETREE HONOREES
AppleTree recognizes the contributions and impact of education stakeholders who are increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion in education. We hope to inspire and motivate DEI growth for individuals and educational organizations that serve children.

We thank those who agree to be interviewed taking the time to participate and share their experiences, insights, and perspectives on DEI practices in education.

We give a heartfelt thank you to our readers who inspire us to do what is right for children and families.

**WHO ARE WE**

AppleTree is a non-profit organization consisting of a research institute and public charter preschools with campuses across Washington, DC and New York City. Through our signature early learning program *Every Child Ready*, we help students build the foundational skills that are necessary to thrive in kindergarten and beyond.
At AppleTree, we endeavor to foster an environment where each person’s true self and experience are welcome. We believe that only with a diverse and inclusive environment; can you truly celebrate and support all students, families, and staff. Our commitment to diversity is on the belief that our community is strengthened by the vibrant exchange that occurs when individuals with different backgrounds, abilities, and heritages share their various perspectives.
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National Black Child Development Institute
Marquita Furness Davis, Ph.D., Deputy Director of Early Learning, U.S. Program, leads the foundation’s national early learning strategy which aims to ensure that all young children have access to high-quality, effective, and affordable Pre-K.

Prior to joining the foundation in 2017, Marquita was the executive director of a large anti-poverty community action agency in Birmingham, Alabama. At this same agency, she previously served as deputy director of child development services overseeing two early childhood federal programs, Head Start and Early Head. Appointed by two governors, Marquita also served as the director of finance for the State of Alabama, commissioner for the Alabama Department of Children’s Affairs, and Pre-K director for the state of Alabama.

Marquita earned her bachelor’s degree from Northern Illinois University, a master’s degree from Alabama A&M University and a Ph.D. in Early Childhood Education and Development from the University of Alabama at Birmingham.
Who is Marquita?

That is an interesting question. I do not know if I have been socialized to talk about who I am. I don’t want to use the westernized view of self, which includes my job or what I do for a living. Who is Marquita? Well, I am the daughter of Julia and George, sister of Solivian, born in Peoria, Illinois, wife to Michael, mother to many, and a believer of God. I strive to be a good human being who is sincere and authentic. I know that I am generous, sensitive, and a bit of a drama queen. I want my life to be meaningful and the space that I take up in the universe to be filled with purpose. I am a woman who believes in the value of community. I believe in people’s rights to fight for justice and for people to live in peace. Who am I? I am a believer in equality for all and a child of the sun. I am complicated, yet simple. I am ambitious and driven, but humble. I am always thankful for my lived experiences and crave for more. I am joy and so much more; most of all, I am the dream and the hope of a slave (paraphrase from Maya Angelou’s poem “Still I Rise”).

What motivates you to do the work you do?

I have always cared very deeply about people and their circumstances, which drove me to work directly with children and families. When I was an undergraduate student, I first majored in business, but I later changed my major to social work. Who would have known that decades later, I would have the opportunity to marry those skill sets together professionally. Since the beginning, I have been motivated by business principles like being a leader, developing a strategy for success, offering good service, and building and promoting a strong team. All of these skills are necessary when you are trying to create and be a part of change. I am motivated by the results, goals, and outcomes that need to be achieved to provide a voice for communities. In general, children don’t have a voice, especially African American and Latino children and children experiencing poverty. So, the idea that I can be a conduit for children’s voices is a great privilege to me. When an opportunity to work at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation came, I thought, wouldn’t it be great to be at the table where decisions are being made about funding strategies for communities of color. Wouldn’t it be an honor and an opportunity to be at the table to represent and advocate for the same community that I have served in and for most of my professional life? I have a mantra; If you are not at the table, then you are on the menu. I did not create that mantra, but I believe in it...and to be able to be in the space of philanthropy, as a woman of color, on behalf of Black and brown children in America was, and is, a once in a lifetime opportunity.

I was in discussion with a group of women, and one talked about their invisible backpack. They spoke about their emotions as bricks in their backpack they are always carrying with them, and no matter how many degrees they have or how hard they work, it is never enough. This woman’s words resonated with me. What are your thoughts on that statement?

I think many women, and in particular women of color, have the imposter syndrome. Even if you don’t call it by that name, it is ever-present. It is that nagging thought of never being good enough. Do I have enough to bring to the table? You feel like you have done all the right things; you went to college, you got a Master’s degree, and a great job at a wonderful consulting firm, but it still feels like it just isn’t enough. You can feel overwhelmed, and even with all the accolades you have, you start saying things like, should I go back to school for another degree. Perhaps I should get a law degree instead of an MBA. All the negative thoughts we tell ourselves and receive from the world can cause so much self-doubt. You ask me, how am I successful? I haven’t done anything extraordinary in any right. I am uncomfortable with the accolades. I am not haughty by any stretch of the imagination, which is perhaps a detriment to me.

I still look in awe and amazement at the superpowers of so many women and say, if I could only be like them. What I am, is fearless and that one superpower pushes me forward. Listen, I have been told no so many times in my life, and I think to myself, is that all you have? If all I am going to hear is no, you better have another plan because no is not a deterrent for me. It may have something to do with my personality as the baby of the family. As I said
What are four truths about yourself?

1. I am sensitive, an empath of a sort. I attuned to my feelings because there are times when I can overthink or over-process things and may believe a person’s intentions are not in my best interests. I am always conscious of this part of myself and careful about how I listen to people.

2. I am a risk-taker. I lived in Alabama for 27 years. I was established, and there was no reason for me to leave, but I took a risk and gave up the life I knew to move to Seattle and DC to work at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. It is one of the best decisions I have ever made.

3. I am a talker and an extrovert. I get my energy from being around people.

4. I love being a Black woman. I love my hair, my deep hue skin, and my culture. All that comes with being Black. I love Black people and sharing our stories.

earlier, I am fearless and a free spirit. I am not afraid of the word no and not scared of taking chances or change. I am not the smartest person in the world, but I will push myself harder than most people. You should know even as you get to spaces where you think you have arrived; there are still times when you will feel as though you are not good enough or doubt your abilities…when that moment comes for me, I close my eyes and I jump, and I keep pushing myself because I am not afraid to fail.

One last thing, I am a motivator because that is what I believe we need to do more for each other. In my life, I needed someone to motivate me, and that is what I received from my mentors Dr. Virginia Caples and Dr. Bernice Richardson. These strong fabulous women, and so many more, poured into me all that they could give me. It is our responsibility as women and women of color to pour into each other. I love Black women and want them to be successful. I root for their success and pray God continues to bless them because if Black women win, I win.

What was it like making history as the first Black woman named Finance Director of the State of Alabama?

I was serving as the Commissioner for Children’s Affairs on the Governor of Alabama’s cabinet when I received a call from the Governor’s office for an important meeting. When I arrived, he asked me if I would be the finance director for the state. I thought he was joking, seeing I had no accounting background, but he wasn’t. He told me that day that he knew I could do the job because I was a leader, understood budgets, and he trusted me. I don’t know if I fully understood at that moment the implications of what his request meant, and I told him I needed to think about it and pray about it. I ended up saying yes to that role. I understood history, and I knew I would be making history to be the first Black woman, the first woman since the founding of the state of Alabama, the birthplace of the confederacy. I took the job for less money! I knew the opportunity and the moment in time for me, a little Black girl from Peoria, Illinois, was significant.

My office was across the hall from the Governor’s office in a space larger than some people’s home. It was surreal, daunting, scary, and always challenging. I learned so much about myself and politics. Often, there were times when I was the only woman and person of color in the room. There were people who helped me because not only was I responsible for the budgets of the state, but I also ran one of the largest state departments with 12 divisions and hundreds of staff. My mentor was a tall silver-headed man from the deep south who had worked in the finance department for 30 years. Bill Newton is one of my favorite people to this day. Although we were so different in almost every single way, he made sure I learned that job, and what I didn’t know, he stood in the gap for me.

As significant as it was for me to be the finance director, and what I think this “first” meant for people who looked like me, privilege is a strange thing. Even though I made history, time doesn’t always remember you the same way. When I left that world, I had to find my own opportunities. There weren’t professional jobs available for me because of that role like some of my male, white colleagues. It was the nature of the beast. Nothing could take away that I was the first woman to be the finance director in the Great State of Alabama, responsible for a 19 billion dollar state budget, but I hope I won’t be the last woman.
“I still look in awe and amazement at the superpowers of so many women and say, if I could only be like them. What I am, is fearless and that one superpower pushes me forward.”

How did you come to work at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation?

Jerlean Daniels, former president of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), told me about the foundation’s opportunity. Initially, I was hesitant, but the next week a recruiter reached out to me as well. I was interested in the foundation’s work, and I was deeply thrilled about the possibility, but I was also afraid it wouldn’t work out for me. The foundation is in Seattle, and I have a fabulous mother in her 80s in North Carolina. I knew I couldn’t be so far away from her. As luck would have it, I got the job and was able to onboard in Seattle and work in Washington, DC.

I took a HUGE leap of faith and left Birmingham, Alabama, en route to Seattle, Washington. I left a place where I had personal and political capital, friends, and an incredible support system, but I knew it was the right decision. I was scared because I had given up a sense of stability. I am keenly aware that nothing is guaranteed or promised to you. We don’t have these professional opportunities that last forever. As fast as they come, they can also go. I gave up everything, and I didn’t know if I would last a year or a couple of years, but I knew I had to close my eyes and jump. Guess what? I came up for air and what was revealed to me was this fantastic professional opportunity. An opportunity that has been challenging, but it has also been filled with joy and undaunting commitment to the work. I had to learn a new language, adjust how I show up in the work, challenge my notions of the field and unpack my research chops. It doesn’t negate my practitioner experience; it adds to who I am as a professional.

I love working at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and as I am writing this next chapter of my story, I am thankful I am working at an organization whose values align with my values. A place that believes “all lives have equal value”; that is powerful.

“I love being a Black woman. I love my hair, my deep hue skin, and my culture. All that comes with being Black. I love Black people and sharing our stories.”
AppleTree Audience started in February 2019, and we wanted to celebrate more of the everyday Black heroism we saw in the early learning and education space. All though to us, Black History happens every day. In February 2020, we honored Black people who contributed to the diversity, equity, and inclusion throughout the world.

Our aspirations for this prose poem, I AM FROM...February 2021 publication was to share where we as Black people come from and how it has made us who we are and why we shape the world in various ways.

Thank you all for sharing a few lines of your lives and stories with us. These poems are a seamless tapestry of the beauty of Black people. Take pride in the journey of our ancestors. Remember who we are, recognize how far we have come, and revisit how far we still need to go. You are all Black History, people who contribute their lives in service to others. We are in awe of your unique talents that you choose to use for the best interests of children, families, and communities. I leave you with the words of Marquita Davis, “I love Black people and sharing our stories.”

Sincerely,
Natasha Parrilla
Editor, AppleTree Audience
I am from the dirty South and Gullah shores. Red rice and fried okra and corn. My grandma Taylor whose strong, soft hands made fried chicken every Sunday before church and my uncles who would sneak off with half of it before it could reach the table. Her rocking chair where she held us all, now in my room where we sway her legacy to sleep, in her dreams our ancestor’s whisper. That’s where I am from.

I am from the South and two generations removed from a family of sharecroppers, educators, activists, community developers, and entrepreneurs. My African ancestry means my family roots were built in the kitchen and around the dinner table with aunts, uncles, cousins, and extended family. My Grandmother, Hattie Elie Jackson was the founding principal of the first public Montessori school in the state of Tennessee. Doubletree Elementary remains a launchpad for young black leadership in the city of Memphis. As a lifelong educator, at 80 years young, she self-published the book, 65 Dark Days in ’68 - Reflections on the Memphis Sanitation Strike. I am a proud Spelman Alumna #HBCUpride and my daughter anchors me in my work to amplify black excellence and leadership. She inspires me to live boldly and unapologetically as a fourth-generation first-born daughter. That’s where I am from.

I am from Baltimore and Blackness. Fried Wings and Ramen noodles. From broken homes to building bonds. From femmes who framed the generations to follow planting flowers to fawn over. My family tree expands beyond borders and somehow always finds its roots. That’s where I am from.

I am from the “Big ‘D’” and a strong and persevering Black family that loves southern cooking brought up from Tennessee and the outdoors (by way of Florida) naturally. From the story of my 4th great grand uncle, on my mother’s side, whose name is emblazoned on the tribute to the U. S. Colored Troops. To the semi-pro baseball career of my grand-dad (father’s side), who was the coolest man I’ve ever known. Thousands of pictures and census records illuminate the DNA running through my veins. While the strong will and curiosity of teens (my kids) constantly remind me of my responsibilities. That’s where I am from.

Aisha Alexander-Young  
Vice President for Strategy & Equity  
Eugene & Agnes E. Meyer Foundation

Maia Blankenship  
Regional Site Entrepreneur  
The Wildflower Foundation

Destinae Butler  
Baltimore Youth Poet Laureate  
Baltimore, Maryland (DewMore Baltimore)

Richard Bynum  
Chief Corporate Responsibility Officer  
PNC Bank
I AM FROM...

Lauren Chisholm
Director of Implementation
AppleTree Institute For Education Innovation

I am from the City of Wind and the Piedmont Loved by G.R.I.T.S. (Girls Raised in the South) and gravy made on Dorn’s Alley and Mims’ Drive. From Rosa’s garden, we ate peach pies and cakes until our bellies grew. Until the pain of a rebel flag pushed us to the promise of the Second City. So we worked, we loved, we cried, and we carried laughter and wisdom in our hearts and hair. That’s where I am from.

Stephanie M. Curenton, Ph.D.
Executive Director, Center on the Ecology of Early Development
Associate (tenured) Professor, ELPS & CPAHD
Policy Fellow, National Black Child Development Institute
Boston University, Wheelock College of Education & Human Development

I am from the descent of Amanda Coleman & Addison Curenton. My great-grandparents who were born in the 1840s as slaves (by law) in South Carolina but whose minds and hearts were always free. That freedom of their hearts and minds survived 6-generations down to me, who in 2021 live my life in honor of their determination, grit, and faith in a better future and continues their legacy by advocating for African Americans and other Black people across the globe. That’s where I am from.

David Daniels
President/CEO
Bainum Family Foundation

I am from Ohio. I was raised on family recipes of meatloaf and macaroni-and-cheese, and my parents’ commitment of service to others. My parents always created a safe space within our home for people to have a warm meal and my father’s delicious desserts. (He was known for his apple crisp and German chocolate cake — and his passion for baking is something I picked up from him). The 15 years I had with him profoundly impacted me and shaped who I am today as a husband, father, philanthropic leader, and lifelong learner. A favorite jacket of his hangs in my closet — and it has served as a constant reminder for me for the past 30 years. That’s where I am from.

Adrienne Gaither
Art Director
AppleTree Institute For Education Innovation

I am from the Nasty Nati, Queen City of the West The Great Migration from the sharecropping Dirty South to the blue collar auto industry possibilities imagined up North. Collard greens, neckbones and Johnny cakes From Ida Mae’s austere and powerful presence to my mom’s rebellious youthful spirit, I was always pushed to be the best, to honor the sacrifices of our ancestors and celebrate the triumphant Black American experience. Never forgetting where we come from, having the humility to reach back, and being in service of others. That’s where I am from.
I am from Brooklyn with family ties deep-rooted in the South. My grandfather, an Air Force veteran, loved to grill. Instead of keeping his "secret sauce" to himself, my grandfather would grill right on the sidewalk, welcoming all of our neighbors for a meal, conversation, and companionship.

Now that I live in the District of Columbia, I still find special memories along the sidewalks of the city, among the neighbors giving greetings, on the playgrounds with my daughter, and from the flavors wafting from the food trucks and neighborhood restaurants. That’s where I am from.

Christina Henderson
DC Councilwoman At-Large
Council of the District of Columbia

I am from Harlem and Saint Nicholas Public Housing Projects to be exact. Where my grandmother’s sweet potato pie and infamous stuffing could be smelled coming off the elevators; Where my uncle’s friends would sing “the Weaver family” in jest as we passed by. Harlem, the little neighborhood, with the big voice that would help me find mine and shape my stamp on this world.

That’s where I am from.

I am from "The Big Easy” and Creole gumbo, spicy jambalaya, and powered sugar golden brown beignets. I am from my grandmother’s heavy handmade quilts with mismatched patterns and frayed edges, forever lost in the floodwaters of Hurricane Katrina.

Despite the dismantling of our past, we survived to share what was left - each other - in our nightly prayers, reminiscing thoughts, and loving hearts. That’s where I am from.

Crystal Hill
Chief People Officer
AppleTree Institute for Education Innovation

Kathy Hollowell-Makle
Executive Director
District of Columbia Association for the Education of Young Children

I am from the District of Columbia, raised on 2nd and Kennedy Street. I am the daughter of a U.S. Postal Worker who still works on her feet. Lifted up by family and blessed in community – I grew up running free. From Mumbo sauce to GoGo music to our people, I love everything about D.C. As a student, I learned that the struggles of others were also ours to bear. “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," Dr. King declared. Now as I serve my community, these words sing in my mind like a psalm.

That’s where I am from.

Janeese Lewis George
DC Councilmember Ward 4
Council of the District of Columbia

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That’s where I am from.
I AM FROM...

Atyani Howard  
Chief Program Officer  
New Teacher Center

I am from the City of Big Shoulders and a warm patchwork quilt stitched with the thread of many hues. Soul filling traditions like Hoppin John and Collard Greens on New Year’s Day and a bountiful garden of vegetables grown on the front lawn. From the gritty city buses and a sense of peace and possibility born of a day with my mother at Rainbow Beach. Rippin’ and runnin’ in a sundress on a summer’s day until the street lights came on. From aunts and uncles standing in the gap teaching me to do the same. The circle of laughter, love, music, and acceptance of all calls me home to myself. That’s where I am from.

Tamika Joyner  
Associate Director of Community Relations  
Rocketship Public Schools

I am from your Nation’s Capital! Washington, DC but raised by Southern Belles who hail from 4 black cities in Georgia. Having this kindred connection to Georgia’s 1st Black Senator who grew up in Savannah, GA, and participated in the Upward Bound program at Savannah State University, where I graduated with my Bachelor’s Degree. In the city where my daughter holds her name, Savannah. That Senator’s mother grew up as a teen where my mother grew up as a teen, Waycross, GA. Laughing at family dinners of collard greens with neck bones and macaroni and cheese from my Grandmother who’s daughters moved to D.C. from GA one by one with plans to escape her eyes, yet she then followed so they all ended up here together still! My mother’s high heeled, sliver, sequined, platformed boots that only came out for me to wear when she played “Bette Davis Eyes” on the record player. The light of those Southern Belles was shining when Rapahel took his oath with Kamala in the city where I was born. That’s where I’m from.

Cemeré James  
Interim President/CEO  
National Black Child Development Institute

I am from Rockford and Little Rock from a family tough as rocks. Étouffée on Christmas Eve and Loreen’s three-layer chocolate cake on my birthday. From Dave Dorsey who walked in chains from Virginia to Georgia during the Civil War with a man who thought he was Dave’s master. Miriam’s family stories spanning 14 generations and Matriarch Mayme 93 years old with 93 living descendants, 5 generations of love and laughter. That’s where I am from.

Makeda Mays-Green  
Vice President Nickelodeon Digital Consumer Insights  
Nickelodeon

I am from the Constitution State. Southern roots and African culture, combined to create, Tasty mac n’cheese and dad’s simmered collard greens. Grown from love and tenacity flowing through our genes. From a crowded kitchen table, we pause to reminisce, About the events and ancestors, we heartily miss. Stories of struggle and triumph are exchanged, As hope for our future is proclaimed. Dreams stitched in my soul, serenaded and sung. That’s where I am from.
I AM FROM...

Jamie Miles
Chief of Schools
AppleTree Schools

I am from the home of the North Carolina Yam Festival and a strong church-going close-knit family. Fried chicken, chicken bog, and fresh collard greens. From sleeping at a truck stop during our family vacation because mom forgot to make reservations. Gospel music, 8 tracks, record players, bag phones, walkman. A collection of Ebony magazines on the bookshelf. That’s where I am from.

Lenora Robinson Mills
Chief Operating Officer
DC Public Charter School Board

I am from Richmond, Virginia, and what many call “The South.” Fried fish and cornbread muffins. From a mother who sacrificed so that her children would have more with firmness and grace and quiet strength. An out-of-tune piano with broken keys still making beautiful music throughout the house. That’s where I am from.

Arthur Mills IV
Chief Operating Officer
New Teacher Center

I am from Atlanta and the blessing of good southern home training mixed with high expectations. Dad’s turnip greens, Mom’s sweet potato pie, and tender Texas brisket. From my grandfather and namesake, a revered segregated Dallas high school principal. As our family’s first Morehouse man blazed a path for his students to follow with his grave Green Book in tow, heading west from Texas to California to spend seven summer vacations writing in Blue Books at USC. Of three generations, a terrific tapestry of recipes, yearbooks, diplomas, service, and love. A living legacy in our home, our kitchen, and my office, forever top of mind. That’s where I am from.

Dana Mitchell
Middle School Assistant Principal & Head Cheerleading Coach
District of Columbia International School

I am from DC, the Carolinas, and apparently Cameroon and the islands. From mac’t cheese and candied yams, chipped beef on toast, and occasionally, sardines. From Great-Grandmama Rosie who tended the farm in Virginia and cooked feasts for breakfast and dinner, but not lunch. Who told Mommy and her sisters to “pick a peach from the tree to hold you over ‘til dinner.” From a stately Grandma Sarah whose painted afro portrait and cheekbones make it hard to deny our Cherokee and African heritage. From and of survivors. That’s where I am from.

Jamie Miles
Chief Operating Officer
New Teacher Center

I am from Richmond, Virginia, and what many call “The South.” Fried fish and cornbread muffins. From a mother who sacrificed so that her children would have more with firmness and grace and quiet strength. An out-of-tune piano with broken keys still making beautiful music throughout the house. That’s where I am from.
I AM FROM...

**Thomas Mitchell**
Chief Digital Officer
Mitchell Strategies

I am from Suitland, Temple Hills, and D.C. with BBQ chicken and salmon. From Trips to Forestville Mall with my brother trying to hang out with my brother’s friends at church. To pictures of family members on the coffee table next to the big white Bible. That’s where I am from.

**Natasha Parrilla**
Director of Communications & Early Learning Initiatives
AppleTree Institute For Education Innovation

I am from Katherine and Oneal Davis. Aunt Walt Lee’s baked macaroni & cheese & grandma Baby Lou’s finger-licking fried chicken. Uncle Cleveland’s humor, Aunt Angie’s courage, & Aunt Annie & Mary’s kindness. The fearlessness of Uncle Joe and the perseverance of Aunt Luana. Family times in daddy’s blue Cadillac and Aunt Kealin’s adventures around the world. Vintage albums of a family I’ll never know or see but they look like me. That’s where I am from.

**Skylé Pearson**
JK/Early Years Coordinator
St. Stephen’s & St. Agnes School

I am from Harlem, New York City, and from loving parents. I am from memories of mixing or licking the batter of German Chocolate cake and Lemon Meringue pies. I am from a great grandmother who left Montgomery, Alabama with my nana, a young girl of twelve in tow. I am from the Bible that my dad carried through the Vietnam War. I am from a beautiful family photo filled with joy as we cruised the Caribbean. That’s where I am from.

**Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley**
U.S. Representative for Massachusetts 7th Congressional District
U.S. House of Representatives

I am from Chicago and the diaspora. The loving arms of my mother, my shero, who gave me my roots and my wings. Held on her hip in tenants’ rights meetings. Raised in the pew of my granddad’s store front church. My story is her story, the story of Black women in America. Etched into the journal she left behind for me, alongside the speeches of Shirley Chisholm and the words of Ella Baker. That’s where I am from.
I AM FROM...

Natasha Prince, PsyD
Assessment Specialist
AppleTree Institute for Education Innovation

I am from Divinity and humanity
Pizza slices and ackee and saltfish
From Sonia, daughter of Daphne, grand-daughter of Ms. Ethel
Women grounded in faith and rooted in community
Trips “back home” always generate excitement: familial laughter, stories of times gone by, old friends gathering in small spaces, pots clamoring, and delicious food abounds.
Sunday dinners at mom’s house.
That’s where I am from.

Kiesha Rattray
Director of Program Strategy and Delivery
New Teacher Center

I am from the Queen City and a legacy of strong black women. Authentic southern cuisine creators and connoisseurs. From family talent shows to mac-and-cheese cooking competitions, our collectivist culture unites us and our resilience in the face of oppression, adversity, and racism is embedded between generations. The matriarch of our family has gone before us, her strength, faith, and resiliency live on in our hearts.
That’s where I am from.

Ronald Rice
Senior Director of Government Relations
National Alliance for Public Charter Schools

I am from the city of bricks, Brick City, Newark, NJ, and from a family of strong, intelligent African-American men and women named Rice. Collard Greens, barbecued chicken, meatloaf, and homemade biscuits from scratch by my grand-aunt, mother, and nana. The three family queens of scrumptious dreamy food. Postcards and crystal from Germany and France, pictures of dinner dresses and tuxedos. Our first dog and a 10-speed bike from Christmas number 12 are all in my mind and deep in my heart. Where the good thoughts live and leave to visit my lips to make them smile.
That’s where I am from.

Victor Rodgers (Slangston Hughes)
Artistic Coordinator
DewMore Baltimore

I am from a city of steel and mill smokestacks. Hearts filled with hope and faith to create a better day. Chicken fried and baked based in love that tastes better than the store-bought version on any day. Our purpose driven from family roots strong as my grandmother’s frown and that’s the truth. Drop a meal on the ground and still pass it around to eat. Made of magic hands and memories from 3rd to Chambers Street. My mother’s pictures fill the wall like graffiti written on our heartbeats.
Since day one yes blessed to be.
That’s where I am from.
I AM FROM...

Paula Young Shelton
1st Grade Teacher, Georgetown Day School
Author, Child of the Civil Rights Movement
Board Member, AppleTree Schools

I am from Atlanta and New York, the south and the north. I am from Nigeria and Ethiopia and Scotland and Poland and although ancestry DNA says 50% African 50% European I am 100% African-American. I am from my mother’s land of Alabama and my father’s land of Louisiana. I am from an endless bowl of macaroni and cheese and collard greens for good luck, and seafood gumbo, hot and steamy, and raw oysters that slide down your throat. I am from Aunt Sukie that smoked a corncob pipe and wallpapered her cabin with confederate money. I am from Gram Daisy who put off marriage so she could teach because married women weren’t allowed to work. I am from Grandmother Idella who lost her job when she demanded that the superintendent pay black teachers the same as white teachers. I am from my mother Jean who taught K to college and fought for children around the world to get a good education. I am from generations of strong black women whose strength is in my bones, whose love is in my heart, whose spirits fill my soul. That’s where I am from.

Dominique Spencer
Director of Education Services
Jubilee JumpStart

I am from DC. Uptown to be exact. I’m from somewhere in Africa that my body has yet to find, but my heart and soul never left. I am from a place that has a Mayor for life, where there were deep laughs and loud voices, turned up music, and shouted names. Daily dinners and Saturday cleanups with WHUR. Book smarts and city slick reigned supreme. I am from silent prayers and “I love you” written behind the eyes. I am from fried chicken and mumbo sauce, and collard greens and caramel cake and red beans and rice, and potatoes. Everything from scratch, I’m from food that comforts the soul. I am from cousins, so many cousins that were as close as brothers and sisters. I am from cookouts for every reason and no reason at all. From grilling everything you had until there was nothing left. From playing outside as early as possible and staying up as late as we could. I am from a wall full of pictures and a box full of memories forever stored in my walk, my talk, and my love for our people. That’s where I am from.

Katiana Ward
Executive Vice President
Nifty Sports Inc.

I am from Atlanta and New York, the south and the north. I am from Nigeria and Ethiopia and Scotland and Poland and although ancestry DNA says 50% African 50% European I am 100% African-American. I am from my mother’s land of Alabama and my father’s land of Louisiana. I am from an endless bowl of macaroni and cheese and collard greens for good luck, and seafood gumbo, hot and steamy, and raw oysters that slide down your throat. I am from Aunt Sukie that smoked a corncob pipe and wallpapered her cabin with confederate money. I am from Gram Daisy who put off marriage so she could teach because married women weren’t allowed to work. I am from Grandmother Idella who lost her job when she demanded that the superintendent pay black teachers the same as white teachers. I am from my mother Jean who taught K to college and fought for children around the world to get a good education. I am from generations of strong black women whose strength is in my bones, whose love is in my heart, whose spirits fill my soul. That’s where I am from.

Teri Thompson
Senior Vice President Commercial Real Estate Relationship Manager, Wells Fargo Bank
Board of Directors, CREWDC
Board of Directors, Jubilee JumpStart

I am from the home of Stax Records and strong Black women. Hamburger steaks and gravy from the 4th daughter of Charlie and Lily Mae. On the streets of New Chicago Christmas cards and Easter pictures on my mother’s living room wall. That’s where I am from.

Paula Young Shelton
1st Grade Teacher, Georgetown Day School
Author, Child of the Civil Rights Movement
Board Member, AppleTree Schools

I am from Silk City and the Garden State. Learning how to cook baked macaroni and cheese and black-eyed peas and don’t forget collard greens with ham hocks. Memories of us running around the house causing havoc. Pictures were Mommy’s favorite decoration in our home. They journeyed from the living room and into the kitchen. I love the city I’m from and everything about my roots, my people, my heritage that I absolutely adore. That’s where I am from.

Katiana Ward
Executive Vice President
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I AM FROM...

**Tonia Wellons**
President/CEO
Greater Washington Community Foundation

I am from Ivor, Virginia. A little town in Southampton County where my family is eight generations strong. Up from the horrible institution of slavery, we endeavor to create a more perfect union. Service, family, and festive celebrations centered with food, music, prayer, and dance are core to who we are and what we do. Route 460, Lane Town, the Young Farmers Club, and Gilfield Baptist Church. These are the places where the memories were made and I carry them with me everywhere I go. Home is where the heart is. That’s where I am from.

**Rashida Young**
Chief School Performance Officer
DC Public Charter School Board

I am from Indiana, and my ancestors were strong men and women from West Africa. Brought to America and forced into bondage in Texas and Mississippi. Their perseverance, love, and legacies live in my heart. I am my father’s daughter, proud of his past, in which he and all ten of his siblings endured the segregated south and graduated college. On my walls are the black and white photos of family that came before me — those who had grit and, despite discrimination, became pilots, engineers, school principals. That’s where I am from.

**Leslie Wilson, Ph.D.**
Professor and Associate Dean
Montclair State University

I am from the north but my roots are further south. I was born in the city that never sleeps, you say its name twice as it tickles the mouth. I was raised by the village, the wind, and the streets. I danced to the music and grew up listening to the beats. A community that spawned a renaissance of musicians, artists, writers, and poets. Aunts and uncles cooked lots of Caribbean meals and treats. They gave us inner strength, courage, and a sense of the past that guided us forward and encouraged us to do our best. They told us countless tales and that encouraged me to write about those who made a difference in the lives of the rest. I salute the journey of my people by being a historian. That’s where I am from.

**Juanita White**
Director of Family & Community Engagement
AppleTree Schools

I am from Brooklyn, NY. A tree-lined street complimenting the rows of Brownstones. Where my mother and father welcomed everyone to the little UN-our backyard or front stoop-everyone coming together to activate the spirit of family and community. A community that filled in the blanks with truth about our history over Friday potlucks and summer block parties. A variety of dark and light hues making a colorful and inviting quilt like the ones made by my maternal grandmother and aunts that represented the various patterns of strength that to this day show who we are: a strong colorful bunch of community. That’s where I am from.

**Rashida Young**
Chief School Performance Officer
DC Public Charter School Board

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CELEBRATING BLACK HISTORY MONTH