



DECONSTRUCTING THE DIVIDE

A series on inequality in Syracuse and the fight for a better tomorrow

2 INSIDE | SPRING

the
Stand

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UPCOMING

What: 2021 Citywide Book Club

When: April through October

Online: Visit the Syracuse Citywide Book Club page at facebook.com/syrbookclub

Details: This series will include books for all ages and selections that reflect quality of life themes of diversity and infrastructure for healthy urban cities. "The Citywide Book Club gives us an opportunity to have community conversations on issues and topics that are important to our city," Mayor Ben Walsh said in a statement. This year, the club will include facilitated engagement online through guest blogging, Facebook Live readings and online discussions.

More Info: Contact Emma Spector by email at espector@syr.gov

CHOSEN BOOKS INCLUDE:

Adult/Civic Selections

- "Behold the Dreamers" by Imbolo Mbue
- "Between the World and Me" by Ta-Nehisi Coates
- "Soft City: Building Density for Everyday Life" by Jan Gehl and David Sim
- "New Chocolate City: Hip-Hop Architecture in Washington, DC" by Sekou Cooke

Children/Young Adult Selections

- "I'm New Here" by Anne Sibley O'Brien
- "My Diary from Here to There" by Amada Irma Pérez
- "American Street" by Ibi Zoboi

Inequity. Racism. Sexism. They rear their ugly heads in the strangest of places, like the paint on your windowsill.

As Syracuse residents like Darlene Medley know all too well, that paint is more likely to contain lead in homes located in diverse, city neighborhoods than suburbia. Medley learned that the hard way, after her youngest children tested with elevated levels of the poison.

The persistence of lead in South Side homes is directly related to inequality, says Paul Ciavarri of Legal Services of Central New York, who is teaming with residents like Medley to fight the scourge of lead poisoning. "Racism mixed with politics has produced a historic lack of balanced investment in housing infrastructure," Ciavarri tells our reporter for this month's cover story, which starts on Page 14.

The fight against lead poisoning is just one of many important stories that surfaced during a months-long investigation into inequality that The Stand has worked on in partnership with The NewsHouse and a team of more than 90 student reporters, photographers, designers and editors at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications.

The end result, which we're calling Deconstructing the Divide, will be published online later this month. It features more than 30 stories about the roots of inequality, what it looks like in our city today and the heroes, like Medley and Ciavarri, who fight for a better tomorrow.

In this issue, we give readers of The Stand an exclusive first look at some of the stories that most directly affect the South Side. In addition to the cover story on lead poisoning, you will also find several pieces on Interstate 81 — its past, future and affect directly on our community.

One looks at the prospects that the jobs generated by the I-81 reconstruction project will benefit South Side residents (Page 10). Deka Dancil and the Urban Jobs Task Force are fighting to make that happen.

We also have a preview of an ambitious project to digitally map the I-81 corridor and to overlay that map with images of the 15th Ward, the neighborhood destroyed when the interstate bisected the city in the late 1950s. Turn to Page 8 for more on that project and to learn how you may be able to contribute to the effort.

We also test your knowledge about I-81 and the jobs it could generate for the area. Take our quiz on Page 11.



— Ashley Kang

PHOTOS ON VIEW

The Stand: 10 Years In Print

Prior to the pandemic, we hosted a special reception for our photo exhibit showcasing photos from our past 10 years.

The month-long show coincided with The Stand's 2020 March Anniversary issue and highlighted one image from each year of the past decade. The show was cut

short a week into its opening when COVID-19 restrictions closed the Link Gallery, where the collection was on display.

Now, images will be back up and featured at Beauchamp Branch Library, 2111 S. Salina St., during the month of June.

The exhibit will precede the library's Summer Reading Programs for youth, teens and adults that starts June 28. By the summer, the library's public hours are expected to expand.

For updated library information, call (315) 435-3395.



South Side Development

After less than a year of purchasing the long-vacant South Presbyterian Church, couple Evelyn and Chino Ingram shared exciting updates for the property they are calling The Castle. The stone church, located at 2110 S. Salina St., will be turned into a multiuse facility able to host a variety of events that appeal to a diverse, professional crowd. The pair are working with King + King Architects for the preliminary design, which can accommodate eight conference rooms, a lounge and large event space in the sanctuary. Renovations are expected to begin this year, with the venue set to open by 2022.

For further updates on development along South Salina Street, visit mysouthsidestand.com to read "New Developments on the South Side."

| File Photo

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SCAN ME

Nitch Jones

By Sydney Gold
The Stand Reporter

Q: How did it feel when you first became a father?

A. To sum it up, it was the most amazing, scariest moment of my life.

Q. What was your relationship like with your father?

A. I really do not have one. Unfortunately, my father allowed life to get the best of him, and the relationship between my parents was not the best. I knew who he was, and I was in communication with him, but I did not have a great relationship with him. This prompted me to be adopted by my sister's father, who became my dad. And I have an amazing relationship with him.

Q. How did he impact your approach to fatherhood?

A. My dad was always present. He was always there for me. He spoiled me. He gave me pretty much everything I wanted and needed. But he also was there to educate me on the things that my father did not and that my father could not. He was able to help me to grow into a man and do things that my mother could not do. When I became a father, I was able to take a lot of those things that I was taught and put them in place. Now I give my all to my son and make sure that he becomes a great young man and a great father one day, a great husband one day and just an all around great man that individuals look forward to seeing.



MEET FATHER NITCH JONES: This youth pastor at Bellgrove Baptist Church co-parents son, Micah Jones, 6, with Alexis Jones. | Provided Photo

“Be the best superhero for your son or your daughter.”

Q. As a youth pastor, how does your relationship to your faith impact your approach to fatherhood?

A. The Bible says train up a child in the way that they should go, so that when they are old, they don't depart from it. So being a youth pastor, it actually helps me to become a major piece in a major role to my son's Christian education.

Q. Can you tell us a little about your son?

A. He is the most energetic, talented and musically inclined child. He loves to dance. He loves the arts — everything about the arts. And he is a huge Michael Jackson fan.

Q. What is a favorite memory of fatherhood?

A. My favorite would be the times that my son comes and grabs my face with both hands, looks me dead in the eyes and tells me he loves me.

Q. What has been your greatest challenge as a father?

A. My greatest challenge has been trying to break the generational curse of not being enough for my son. I know that I do the best that I can, and I am very present in my son's life. I'm very active in my son's life. But many of the generations that have come before me failed their sons in my family, and it frightens me that one day, I just don't want to be like them.

Q. Do you have advice for new dads?

A. Absolutely be the best dad that you can be. Be the best superhero for your son or your daughter that you can be. At the end of the day, the child sees no wrong and you are perfect in your child's eyes. And that is all that matters. What another one feels and what another one has an opinion of in regards to the dad that you are does not matter. The dad that you are matters to the individual that you are a dad to.

FOOTBALL RESUMES

After a long 2020 stalled by complications with a worldwide pandemic, the Syracuse Strong is ready to begin its inaugural season in the Gridiron Developmental Football League.

The **season opener** is 7 p.m. May 22, at Sunnycrest Field, 701 Robinson St., against Charlotte Colonials.

For the latest information, visit syracusestrong.com

A RESURGENCE

Syracuse Strong returns in a new league after pandemic stalled 2020



> Quarterback Jason Boltus, serving as Syracuse Strong's returning starter after the team's two-year hiatus, throws a pass during an early practice with teammates at Sunnycrest Field. | Jim McGregor, Staff Photographer

By Kambui Bomani
The Stand Intern

Ranked third in the Eastern Xtreme East Division, Strong are gearing up for 2021 season

Three years ago, the Syracuse Strong were at the top of the Northeastern Football Alliance (NFA) with consecutive undefeated seasons and a league title to its name. Their dominance as a volunteer semi-pro football team in the Central New York area was unquestioned. They played hard, fast and physical football in a semi-pro league for their passionate fanbase. The Strong's 29-1 record during their last two seasons in the NFA brought together the local community and parlayed the inevitable departure from the Alliance in 2020.

The transition from the NFA opened a more challenging and unknown chapter for the team as they moved to the Gridiron Development Football League (GDFL). The league features 35 semi-pro teams from across the country that are separated by regional divisions. The

GDFL presented a blossoming future for the Strong, who were ready to bloom during their inaugural 2020 season.

Yet, the season never came to be when the novel coronavirus hit the country like a heat-seeking missile in March of 2020. New York state was on lockdown almost instantly meaning the Strong weren't even eligible to practice as a team. By July, the GDFL folded altogether leaving the Strong out of commission for a full year. The team was finally given re-assurance early this year that their GDFL season could truly resume in 2021. In the eyes of Head Coach Ed Watkins, it was a long time coming.

For Watkins, it seemed like yesterday when the pandemic hit. Like many at the time, he was somewhat bursting with optimism that the virus would pass through the area without any feasible harm, and his team could resume GDFL play. When it truly dawned on him it wouldn't occur that way, Watkins faced the cold reality that 2020 would be the Syracuse Storm's lost season.

"New York state was a lot different than many other states," Watkins said. "Mind you we were the only two teams from the GDFL, us and the Rochester Predators,

in the New York area. We were locked, and we couldn't do anything. We already knew it wasn't going to happen for us earlier on than most teams did."

It was the time off that Watkins admitted he didn't know what to do with. He spoke about resenting the fact that other New York city football teams got to play while he didn't but acknowledge that the moves made by the Strong and GDFL were meant for the safety of all involved.

This season, Watkins vows that the Strong will follow blueprints from various area high school football teams on what COVID-19-friendly preparations will be used for the Strong during team practice. In his eyes, the most ideal prep techniques featured during the pandemic could arguably make or break the team's re-emergence this spring.

"I've got a couple of coaches on my staff that are high school coaches and we're going to get the feedback from them on what they're doing because we still have to do protocol," Watkins said. "If we can't do what we're supposed to, then we're not going to play."

The Syracuse Strong are predicated on building the best roster possible to achieve championship success. Watkins noted his team's recruiting process is the reason the Strong have adapted a winning culture. While other teams go out and recruit players with promises of playing time and jersey numbers, Watkins says he always tells possible clientele that he'll play the best 11 on the field. From there, he relies on a familiar collective to fill out the roster for him before the season.

"The players themselves really do a lot of the recruiting," Watkins said. "They say: 'Hey, do you want to be a part of a winner?'"

Come pay with us. Don't play with that team."

The team itself will go through growing pains on the defensive side as they bring in a band of newcomers. Yet, offensively, Watkins feels the Strong will be humming as usual when they return all their key cogs from two years ago. While the offensive line will be slightly reshuffled, the Strong relish having its top three receivers and starting running back returning to the squad. The leader of that group rests on the shoulders of quarterback Jason Boltus, who Watkins values as the linchpin of the offense.

"Having him is crucial," Watkins said. "He's got a nice (professional) resume. So to have him, makes it a lot easier for our receivers."

For the Strong to return to the scene after a two-year hiatus means a lot to its fans. The Strong Faithful haven't been able to see the team play since December 2019, and to Watkins, the support has been dearly missed.

"The community means everything to us," Watkins said. "That's why we try to go out there and try our best to put on a show. Because on a Saturday evening, that's how we try to sell us."

Watkins acknowledged the Strong were a source of light within the city as the area's most successful football team. In his eyes, the team helped compensate for the lean years of Syracuse University football fandom. While he admits that the Strong won't get the crowds of onlookers like the Orange Football team, he says it's impactful for the team to have its fanbase desiring to check out local football talent.

"We've gotten great feedback from the community and the mayor himself," Watkins said. "That's been great. The support, we definitely appreciate that. We just want to put on a show."

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Onondaga CASA firmly believes that diversity among our volunteer team is critical to providing the best support and advocacy to local foster children.

We highly encourage interested individuals from BIPOC communities to apply.

SHARE MEMORIES

Visualizing 81 is a virtual storytelling exploration of the past, present and future of I-81

The project is set for a May 2021 release date.

To learn more: Visit Visualizing81.com

HOW TO SHARE

To submit, complete the form online at visualizing81.com/contact, email the team at help@visualizing81.com or call (315) 443-9811 and leave a message with the best way for the team to connect with you.

ENGAGE FURTHER

Residents and stakeholders from the East Adams neighborhood can now access up-to-date information through the new **East Adams Transformation website**.

As city partners work to develop a plan, your voice is needed and will be used to help guide the future of this neighborhood.

This website serves as a one-stop-shop for information, dates and links to meetings, videos, interactive maps and other ways to share thoughts.

To see online, visit www.EngageTheTeam.com/EastAdams



REVISITING AND REVISUALIZING SYRACUSE'S 15TH WARD

Government highway and urban renewal projects of the 1960s changed the community residing in the heart of Syracuse beyond recognition. Now, city and community leaders are reevaluating its past with hopes of reenvisioning its future.



By Violet Lazarus
The Stand Reporter

View 3D models of Syracuse, overlaid with historical photos and predictions of the future

Those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it, so the Visualizing I-81 team at Syracuse University are digging into the past for the future of the community.

The impending Interstate 81 viaduct reconstruction project has been a huge point of debate in Syracuse for several years, with community members wanting to ensure that those most negatively impacted by its replacement aren't the same ones being impacted as it comes down.

As opposed to a traditional news story, the Visualizing I-81 team is hoping to connect readers more closely with the stories of community members. The powerful visuals and interactive features make 1950's Syracuse come to life on their website.

Community members can contribute to this effort by sharing historic photos and stories from the area.

The Visualizing 81 team working to document the past, present and eventually the future of the East Adams Neighborhood through emerging VR technology includes: students Amanda Paule, Sonny Cirusulo, Molly Gibbs, Lawry Boyer, Kevin Camelo and Evan Starling-Davis, who are all Syracuse University students, along with professors Dan Pacheco, Amber Bartosh and Jon Glass.

"We have this future community that's going to be



> The Visualizing 81 team will bring to life the stories connected to Interstate 81 — its past, present and future — through immersive storytelling by combining 360-degree imagery, historical photos, holographic captures of architectural models as well as virtual and augmented reality.

built," Pacheco said. "Let's make sure that it's an equitable community. Our hope is that these immersive media explorations of the past will then bring people together to push for the kind of community that we all want."

The team is working to build the 15th Ward of the past and present through documents, pictures and first-hand testimonials. Paule combs through paperwork and conducts interviews to gain an understanding of the area's former glory; Gibbs takes pictures of the area to inform the virtual render, and Cirusuolo and Boyer use the information to take viewers through a virtual tour of yesteryear. The team is very enthusiastic to hear from community members who have memories of the past and to hear their hopes for its future as well.

The project highlights the thriving Black businesses and community spaces of the '50s, including Aunt

Edith's restaurant and Pioneer Homes.

According to the project, 400 to 500 businesses were razed during highway construction. The project also points out that there were 32 Syracuse businesses listed in the local Green Book. The main goal of this project, they say, is to focus the story on the people rather than the construction. "It can get muddled, when so much of the focus is on the infrastructure, and sort of loses sight of the people that are being impacted by those projects," Paule said.

The 81 overpass construction began in 1964 during the country's period of Urban Renewal. Like the vast majority of Urban Renewal Projects, this project cut through a Black community of economic prosperity. The overpass decimated the thriving business district that was the 15th Ward, resulting in the relocation of 1,300 to 2,200 families, most of whom wound up leaving the city.

"I call it negro removal. That is literally what it did; it decimated our communities," economist Dr. Julianne Malveaux said last month during a talk hosted by Syracuse University.

Today, where the former 15th Ward sat is now defined by the highway, with those living near the viaduct likely to suffer from noise and air pollution. While waiting for a final plan to be announced, community advocates like David Rufus from the New York Civil Liberties Union want to ensure that residents are not forgotten once again by the city and private investors during development.

"I think that anytime big business comes in and there's no care for the community, something's bound to be lost," Rufus said.

Malveaux agrees that businesses have a role to play in shaping neighborhoods, and while that role can be one of exploitation, it can

also be one of mutual benefit.

"This is not just a government thing, when corporations are in cities they can also play a major role in urban revitalization," Malveaux said. "Many of these corporations are making billions in profits, and they should be willing and able to put some of that money back into our communities."

Rufus was a child when he moved from the Pioneer Homes, so he said he personally doesn't have many memories from the area pre-81, but has heard the tales of devastation and upheaval from friends and relatives.

Going forward, as more of the plans for the area become known, the team plans to virtually create the future of the East Adams Neighborhood.

Currently, they are working on using new VR technology called photogrammetry to depict what the original AME Zion Church on East Fayette Street will look like once proposed renovations are complete.

The team is also working on ways to make their effort more interactive. Possibly in collaboration with the city, the team wants pedestrians to be able to pull out their phone, scan a code on a street sign and see a VR model of what used to exist here. Also, what may be built in the future.

All the students are enthusiastic and believe the project has the longevity to continue long after even the youngest members have graduated.

"The main goal is to bring some more understanding to the topic by having all of that time — past, present, future — all collapsed into one piece, one understanding of I-81," Paule said.

THE BLACK EQUITY & EXCELLENCE FUND

supports community-based projects for the Black community of Central New York that promote and encourage self-sufficiency and improve the physical and economic conditions that affect quality of life. It also encourages dialogue that will strengthen race-related matters and support social and educational growth in the community.

Since its inception in June 2020, The Black Equity & Excellence Fund has already distributed over \$500,000 in grants. For more information or to support the fund, visit cnycf.org/equity.



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LOCAL ADVOCATE

Urban Jobs Task Force is a coalition of organizations and residents of Onondaga County and Syracuse advocating for greater economic opportunities for the city's marginalized citizens.

UJTF believes publicly subsidized economic development should give equal economic opportunity to all residents and improve the well-being of all neighborhoods. To support this work, the group advocates for job training and job opportunities for Syracuse's unemployed and under-employed workers, especially minorities, and a report on equity in Syracuse's construction industry.

WAYS TO SUPPORT

- Become a member
- Participate in four quarterly meetings or join a UJTF committee
- Be an ally and sign-up for the UJTF email list to stay up-to-date

To learn more, visit ujtf.org or follow on social media:

- Facebook: facebook.com/SyracuseUrbanJobs/
- Twitter: @UJTFSyracuse
- Instagram: @ujtfsyracuse

WILL THEY, WON'T THEY?

Urban Jobs Task Force continues fight for local hiring on I-81



> A view of the I-81 viaduct from Toomey Abbott Towers. Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced reconstruction of this aging highway's viaduct will begin in 2022 with plans released later this summer. | Jenn Grzyvinsky, Staff Photographer

By Michael Garcia
The Stand Reporter

Government, industry leaders and local stakeholders unite to expand opportunities

After a near decade of discussion on what to do with the aging Interstate 81, new hope comes to the city of Syracuse after President Joe Biden announced his \$2 trillion American Jobs Plan.

Mayor Ben Walsh expressed excitement for Biden singling out Syracuse and I-81 as an example of a transportation project that could rebuild communities.

"President Biden's vision bodes well for Syracuse," Walsh said. "Investing \$20 billion for a new program to reconnect neighborhoods, increase opportunity and advance racial equity and environmental justice can be a game changer for this community and can help us realize the full potential of this project."

This reconstruction project will update the existing outdated portion of the interstate, and with support from Biden's American Jobs Plan, now seems closer to a long-fought push to include local hiring for the near \$2 billion construction cost.

The Urban Jobs Task Force (UJTF), the coalition who has been in the trenches since the beginning of conversations on whether locals would work on the federally



> Dekka Dancil serves as president of the Urban Jobs Task Force. In this volunteer role, she helps the coalition advocate for expanded job training for minorities in Syracuse. | Portrait by Michael Garcia, Staff Photographer

funded project, expressed optimism about the support it has seen recently.

"I am hopeful not based on the number of players that are involved in this kind of conversation or effort to maximize local hire, but about the type of players," said Dekka Dancil, UJTF president. "I will say it still is too

Story continues on Page 12

QUIZ TIME

Test your knowledge on I-81 facts! For answers, turn to Page 27

1 New York State Department of Transportation can require 20% of I-81 jobs to go to local workers?

True / False

2 I-81 has become a recent issue for the city of Syracuse.

True / False

3 Gov. Andrew Cuomo expects I-81 construction to break ground in 2022?

True / False

4 Mayor Ben Walsh wrote to Pete Buttigieg after a tweet that the transportation secretary made?

True / False

5 The Urban Jobs Task Force does not want a project labor agreement in place for the I-81 project?

True / False

6 Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand's Build Local, Hire Local Act was passed and will ensure 50% of hired labor will be local?

True / False

7 The purpose of the I-81 Big Table is to minimize expenses for the project?

True / False

8 A report by Jobs to Move America found that including local hire provisions for federally funded projects reduces the number of bidders and has a systematic impact on bid prices?

True / False

9 During the fourth day of the State of State address, Gov. Cuomo described I-81 in its current state as:

- A. A modern transportation corridor
- B. Obsolete and poorly designed
- C. He did not address it
- D. Neither perfect nor broken

10 What initiative was created to prepare Syracuse residents for construction jobs on I-81 and beyond?

- A. Syracuse Build
- B. Syracuse Surge
- C. Construction Career Program
- D. Urban Jobs Task Force

11 What is a CWA-PLA?

- A. A contract that explains how work will be done on a project
- B. A contract that explains how work will be done on a project, including community workforce provisions
- C. Community workforce provisions added to the contract that explain how work will be done on a project



> Taken in 2019 during The Stand's annual Photo Walk, this image shows deteriorated sections along the aging I-81 viaduct.

12 In 1960, approximately 11,000 residents lived in the Black community of Syracuse. What percentage lived in the 15th Ward?

- A. 25%
- B. 57%
- C. 75%
- D. 90%

13 What health impacts does I-81 have on those who live closest to the highway?

- A. None
- B. Lead poisoning, impaired lung function, exacerbated asthma and heart failure
- C. All above, but only during construction
- D. Exacerbated asthma

Continued from Page 10

early to tell if we are going to end up coming out with this beautiful cake we want to have.”

This newfound energy started after Pete Buttigieg was nominated as U.S. Transportation Secretary. Walsh reached out after the former South Bend Mayor tweeted: *Black and brown neighborhoods have been disproportionately divided by highway projects or left isolated by the lack of adequate transit and transportation resources. In the Biden-Harris administration, we will make righting these wrongs an imperative.*

“This is especially true here in Syracuse because our city is scarred by I-81, a raised highway viaduct constructed in the 1950s and ’60s through the heart of a predominantly Black neighborhood,” Walsh said in his letter to Buttigieg. “For decades, it has marginalized people living in the neighborhood and jeopardized their health, at the same time that it contributed to the decline of our center city.”

Last year, Gov. Andrew Cuomo supported New York State Department of Transportation’s recommendation for a street-level “community grid.” Walsh expressed it will be “transformational for the city of Syracuse and the region.”

“It also gives us the opportunity to right some wrongs that were inflicted on people of color over generations,” he added. “It is my hope that under your leadership as transportation secretary, the Interstate 81 in Syracuse can be expedited, and existing federal barriers to foster local hiring on such projects can be removed as soon as possible.”

Cuomo announced during his State of the State address this year, a \$306 billion infrastructure plan includes finishing the I-81 viaduct replacement project. In the address to the state, Cuomo called the highway “obsolete” and “poorly designed.”

Cuomo expects to break ground in 2022. He recently announced the reconstruction project will be allotted \$800 million in the New York budget and construction plans will be released later this summer.

“It has seemed a long time away up until recently, and all of a sudden, we’re looking at 2022 as the anticipated start date,” Walsh said. “It’s right around the corner and there’s no time to waste.”

In a national press conference hosted by Jobs to Move America, Walsh expressed optimism about the meeting with Buttigieg’s team.

“I came away feeling very good that our values and priorities are strongly aligned,” Walsh said. “It’s just another reason we’re so excited for what’s ahead working with the Biden/Harris administration.”

The conference was called for Jobs to Move America to share its report on the Local Labor Hiring Pilot Program, which was created by the Obama Administration in 2015. The program allowed for selected agencies receiving federal money through the Federal Highway Administration or the Federal Transit Administration to be permitted to include local hire provisions in their requests for proposals for construction projects.

The program was canceled by the Trump administration in 2017 before the data for initial pilots could be analyzed. The report found that including local hire provisions does not reduce the number of bidders,

nor does it have any systematic impact on bid price.

As it stands, there has been a ban on local hiring for federally funded projects for over 30 years, dating back to the Reagan era.

One attempt to implement local hiring for the I-81 viaduct reconstruction project includes the creation of the “Big Table,” which consists of representatives from federal, state and local government; business, and organized labor and community stakeholders.

“If the ban on local hiring weren’t in place, we’d have no need for such extreme and really, nearly impossible measures,” said Dancil, who also spoke during the national press conference. “If the I-81 viaduct project, or any other infrastructure project that had federal dollars tied to it, were to start tomorrow, very few Syracuse residents will be able to work on it.”

Among the organizations with a seat at the “Big Table” is the Central New York chapter of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (CNY-CBTU), which had officially been revived January 2021. King Davis, president of CNY-CBTU and Civil Service Employee Association retiree, said one of the reasons he became involved was

because of the reconstruction project.

“I knew there were going to be a lot of jobs coming with that project alone,” Davis said. “I just want to make sure that I and CBTU were going to be a part of that (because) we know how to get our people involved in these jobs.”

The project soon gained the attention of Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand who approached UJTF to help introduce her Build Local, Hire Local Act back in 2019. The bill demands 50% of construction jobs be reserved for local hires in a five-year period.

“I am committed to working with the current administration to invest in New York state infrastructure and address systemic racism in our highway system,” Gillibrand said. “The Build Local, Hire Local Act was inspired by the legacy of I-81 in Syracuse.”

Gillibrand was the first federally elected official to be actively involved in Syracuse’s I-81 issue and endorsed the community grid replacement option in 2018.

“I thought that was really cool that she came to Syracuse,” Dancil said. “And thought that our research was important enough ... good enough to back her bill.”

With the start of a new congress this year, the bill remains in limbo.

The Walsh administration introduced the Syracuse Build program in 2018, which was modeled after the CityBuild program in San Francisco.

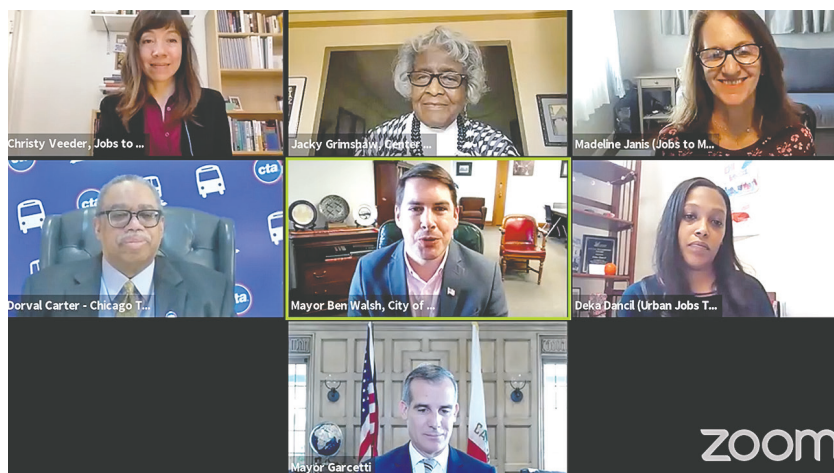
“We are trying to use Syracuse Build as the conduit for a pathways to apprenticeship program in partnership with local labor,” said Walsh, noting the effort is being led by Common Council President Helen Hudson. “It’s through this work, that we hope to break down some of those barriers ... and get people in that pipeline so they can get to work when the work is here.”

The program’s first cohort launched last year, but was cut short due to the pandemic.

Although UJTF wants to be prepared for when the time comes, Dancil expressed concern on rushing to train people for jobs that aren’t

“It’s right around the corner and there’s no time to waste.”

— Mayor Ben Walsh



> Syracuse Mayor Ben Walsh and UJTF President Deka Dancil spoke March 2 during the Jobs to Move America virtual press conference. Along with six other leaders from across the United States, they called for the Biden Administration to overturn the ban on local hiring for federal projects.

guaranteed because of the local hiring ban.

“We have a two-prong problem,” Dancil said. “One, we’re underskilled. Two, there’s barriers that will make it hard for them to even be required to be on the project.”

The next “Big Table” meeting is set for this spring. Some, like Davis, don’t expect much of a decision to be made anytime soon.

“A couple of us even said ‘Are we even going to be alive to see this project end?’” Davis said. “While I’m not expecting too much from them — training and getting everything ready so that when a decision is made, we’re ready for it.”

“Our hopes have been raised and dashed on the rocks so many times. We just don’t believe anymore,” said Theardis Martino, a former UJTF member and former executive director for L&M Training Center Inc. “And that’s the true complexion. That’s why you can’t put 30 people together. They don’t want to hear nothing you got to say, because they know the crab in the basket syndrome.” This syndrome refers to when numerous crabs are together in a basket and one attempts to get out, the others pull it back down.

According to the Racial Equity Impact Statement, a report UJTF created in partnership with Legal Services of Central New York, white workers are 21 times more likely to hold a construction job than minorities. Marcus Hunter, a South Side native, was fortunate to find someone to point him in the right direction for a job in construction. Still many with his complexion aren’t as lucky.

To Hunter, just by reading his name, many wouldn’t assume he is a Black. “Sometimes I feel the way my name looks, I get an interview opportunity. But, when my face shows up, people are like ‘Oh, he’s not what I expected,’” he said.

Coming out of the BOCES Construction Trades program, Hunter said he was ready to start his internship at Pioneer Homes with the Syracuse Housing Authority. There, he would be supervised by Jermaine Hackett.

Pioneer Homes maintenance supervisor Jermaine Hackett, a fellow BOCES graduate and family friend to Hunter, praised the program for its training and mentorship.

Not many have over \$8,000 to spend on tuition, but Hackett feels Hunter is a prime example of why programs like BOCES and Syracuse Build are needed.

“If you provide the right resources and energy, you can change somebody’s life,” Hackett said. “And they’ll have an understanding. It’s not just a job. It’s a lifestyle. It gives you so many options. You have potential to do whatever you want.”

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> After only a couple of months living in her rental property, Darlene Medley says a wall split when her then 3-year-old twins were playing against it. | Jessica Ruiz, Staff Photographer

By Sydney Gold
The Stand Reporter

One in 10 Syracuse children have elevated blood lead levels, simply because they have been poisoned by the very place they call home

Darlene Medley talks about her kids the way mothers do. She has nine children, the youngest two a set of twins named Rashad and Devon. She calls her oldest twin “huggy bear” and remarks upon his unparalleled sharing skills. Sometimes she gets overwhelmed thinking about how sweetly he offers a chicken nugget to her or his siblings, when she knows he’d enjoy it himself. Her youngest — a ball of energy — keeps the entire house entertained. He’s the type of exuberance boys have perfected. She’ll always see her twins this way: sweet and bouncy and bright. But lead has augmented these qualities, lessening their self control.

At age 2, Devon and Rashad, now 5, were diagnosed with lead poisoning, meaning they had a blood lead level of 5 micrograms per deciliter (mcg/dl) or higher as defined by the Centers for Disease Control. Both were likely exposed by ingesting tiny particles of lead dust, perhaps on a windowsill or a door hinge, while playing. Ingestion is common as dust clings to a toddler’s sticky hands,



> Darlene holds her two youngest boys, Rashad, left, and Devon. | Jessica Ruiz, Staff Photographer

usually finding a way into their mouth.

Their house, which in the past year has become not only home, but school, restaurant, movie theater and playground, was the main culprit. Studies show those who live in homes built before 1978 — the year lead paint was federally banned by the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission — are likely to still contain the hazard. Ninety percent of Syracuse's housing stock falls into this category. While many homes across the city have not been tested for lead dust, the ubiquity of lead poisoning among Syracuse's youth means a substantial number are hazardous, and when the city's youngest tenants grow up in these homes, lead can easily become a part of them.

The presence of lead dust in Darlene's home will impact her youngest children for the rest of their lives. But Darlene didn't know there was lead in her home until the twins were diagnosed. While testing young children, particularly at ages 1 and 2, is part of the fight against lead poisoning, it's merely reactive. Preemptive measures, like testing and remediating homes before families move in, are crucial, and Syracuse is hoping to adopt a model that leans more heavily on prevention, as seen with the passing of the Lead Abatement and Control Ordinance in the summer of 2020. The ordinance allocates funding to help test and remediate high risk homes, particularly properties built before lead paint was federally banned. But the pandemic has slowed its implementation, preventing some of the in-person training required to certify city employees and hire new ones. The first position, for Lead Paint Program coordinator, was posted March 3, eight months after the ordinance was signed into law.

Darlene's sons were diagnosed with lead poisoning after a routine test for toddlers conducted during their annual Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) wellcheck. Results arrived by mail a month later. At first, she didn't even open the envelope because it wasn't marked as urgent, she said.

Darlene initially ignored the letter, but after envelopes continued to pour in, she took a closer look, and learned her young sons had been poisoned by lead.

Darlene is just one of the hundreds of Syracuse parents who receive this news annually — that the shelter they believed to protect their children has in fact poisoned them. In 2019, roughly 500 children in the city of Syracuse were found to have elevated blood lead levels. This number isn't an aberration. For decades, the city has grappled with high instances of childhood lead poisoning. In 2016, Syracuse was ranked firmly among the 15 regions with the highest rates of childhood lead poisoning.

Flint, Michigan, didn't even make the list.

Syracuse is facing a public health crisis, a fact Darlene knows all too well. More than one in 10 Syracuse children meet the threshold for a lead poisoning diagnosis, putting them at risk for poor attention, decreased executive functioning, poor performance in school, high propensity for risk-taking, increased aggression, lower IQ and hearing and speech problems, to name only a few effects.

Oceanna Fair too has battled alongside her family against the lead crisis, first as a young child and now as a grandparent.

Growing up, she watched her younger brother struggle with lead poisoning. Even now, she is responsible for his care. "He can not function on his own," she said. "He needs someone to pay his bills. He needs someone to remind him of simple tasks, like to remember to take a shower."

Lead poisoning permanently changed the trajectory of her brother's life, and with it, her own. Yet, Fair's connection to the lead crisis runs deeper.

"We figured things should have gotten better 40 years later," she said. "Fast forward, and my granddaughter gets poisoned in our home. For us, it's like a slap in the face. Why wasn't this taken care of? Why are we still still dealing with it in such high amounts in the city and on this side of town?"

After years of watching her own family face the effects of lead, Fair became a community activist. She explained that lead poisoning is a tenants' rights issue, a struggle often between landlords and renters.

"I cannot sell you a car from a lot without brakes. If you drive down the street and have an accident, there are repercussions for me. I could lose my license to sell cars," Fair said. "Yet the one consumer product that most families spend a majority of their income on, housing, is the least regulated product out here. Families are stuck."

Both Fair and Darlene are involved with an organization called Families for Lead Freedom Now, a coalition of community members fighting to end Syracuse's lead crisis. Darlene is the West Side Branch Manager. The group came together in 2019 after Legal Services of Central New York hosted events around the issue. Paul Ciavarri, a community organizer at Legal Services, explains the organization got involved after noting the issue's consistent overlap with issues of racial and economic injustice.

"Childhood lead poisoning is distributed unequally and contributes to greater inequality within a community that is already facing lots of inequalities," Ciavarri said. "Racism mixed with politics has produced a historic lack of balanced investment in our housing infrastructure. And so we have unsafe, unhealthy housing that the most marginalized communities of our society have been placed into."

Despite the work of groups like Families for Lead Freedom Now, Fair still feels that families are struggling to be heard by both property owners and the city government. "Nobody is listening to these families that are going through these issues," she said. "Often you got landlords blaming the

"Racism mixed with politics has produced a historic lack of balanced investment in our housing infrastructure."

— Paul Ciavarri

To hear Sydney Gold's four-part series produced in partnership



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TIPS FOR PARENTS

1. Make a plan with your doctor such as:

- Take a second lead test
- Request developmental assessment to test child for learning and development problems

2. ID lead in the home

- Find and fix lead as soon as possible
- Have home inspected by a licensed lead inspector
- Don't remodel or renovate until home has been inspected; repairs like sanding or scraping paint can create lead dust

3. Clean up lead dust

Lead dust forms when old paint cracks and peels

To clear:

- Use wet paper towels to wipe up lead dust
- Clean around windows, play areas and floors
- Wash hands and toys often with soap and water. Always wash hands before eating and sleeping
- Use contact paper or duct tape to cover chipping paint

4. Eat healthy

Foods with calcium, iron and vitamin C may help keep lead out of the body

— Source: Centers for Disease Control

families. They're saying it's a housekeeping issue. It's not a housekeeping issue when I have chunks of paint peeling off the outside of my house. That's an issue for the homeowner."

Fair isn't the only one who struggles to access the necessary resources to keep her home safe. Darlene says her home is "falling apart." Beyond the lead paint, which has been detected on doorways, windows, outside and in the soil, the wood on her porch is half rotten. The banister up to the front door shakes under weight. Half of the concrete steps leading to the entrance are cracked, getting "worse and worse" each year, she said. "One of the stairs looks like it's actually about to just fall at any given moment."

"And that's just walking up [to the house]," Darlene described.

Inside there's exposed electrical outlets where "you can see the wire." The walls are thin enough to "literally rip off a piece." Darlene has contacted her landlord and the Syracuse Division of Codes Enforcement on several occasions, but ultimately saw few of her requests met.

Repairs are crucial, but they are still a reactive measure for families already facing the effects of lead poisoning — massive, various and often unpredictable impacts on the body and mind.

A POISON

When it comes to lead exposure, poisoned is the word, a fact Sandra D. Lane, professor of public health and anthropology at Syracuse University, highlights emphatically. Lane has spent years researching the impacts of childhood lead poisoning and partnered with local government to offer her expertise on more than one occasion.

"There's no normal or expected amount of lead in our bodies," Lane said. "Lead is a poison."

The concerning lead level is 5 micrograms per deciliter of blood, Lane says, noting deficits can also occur to children with lower levels of exposure. She stressed that lead poisoning in childhood results in "long-term effects throughout the whole lifespan."

Brianna Howard, a SU student pursuing a master's degree in public health, researches the effects of lead poisoning alongside Lane.

"Lead poisoning is irreversible," said Howard, stressing there is no cure or way to reverse the chemical's effects.

As a woman of color from New York City, Howard was drawn to the issue of lead poisoning after noting the racial divide for both the living conditions and health outcomes among Syracuse residents.

"The biggest thing is that most vulnerable populations happen to be children of color," said Howard, noting that these children are at the mercy of those responsible for their care. "Their parents, of course, but

also their community, government and schools."

Still, as Lane says, "Children of color didn't rise to the level of 'important enough' on the legislative agenda" to be protected from this preventable illness.

The fact that lead poisoning is a pediatric issue is also crucial to understanding the crisis. Dr. Travis Hobart, medical director of the Central and Eastern New York Lead Poisoning Resource Center, explains children's brains are rapidly developing around the ages of 1 and 2, the same age most become exposed.

"They're building hundreds or thousands of new neurons every day," he said, "And lead interferes with how their brain is going to develop."

After exposure, a child's developmental path is permanently altered, with lead's effect quickly taking hold quickly. One correlation doctors identify is between early exposure and academic performance.

Lane was once asked at a speaking engagement why the district's poor reading performance — only 20% of third graders read at grade level — hadn't sparked a larger movement to end lead poisoning.

"I said, 'think about the kids who are reading below grade level. It's kids in the city school district, disproportionately kids of color ... there's low expectations, very low.'"

Lead's effect on the body goes far beyond academic performance. "As children progress, (the impact of lead poisoning) becomes clearer and is associated with



> An analysis by Sandra Lane found the cost to local taxpayers of ongoing lead poisoning tops \$500,000 per year in Medicaid, special education and juvenile justice expenses. | Renée Deemer, Staff Photographer

increased risk-taking and decreased executive function, which is the ability to make a plan for your behavior and enact that behavior,” Lane said. Her studies have found males experience “higher rates of arrest for every additional 5 micrograms per deciliter of lead in their blood,” while young women “have elevated rates of teen pregnancy.” Older adults even report “higher rates of kidney disease.”

Hobart adds lead poisoning can cause anemia, stomach pain, constipation and gastrointestinal symptoms, and points to a growing body of evidence suggesting lead as a trigger for high blood pressure and heart problems as adults. This is on top of evidence that Blacks are 40% more likely to have high blood pressure as adults, yet another way lead poisoning compounds existing issues for communities of color.

“We also have a horrible problem with neighborhood violence ... especially in neighborhoods that are impoverished, disproportionately affecting the community of color,” Lane adds. “It’s clear that at least part of that is likely attributable to lead poisoning.”

What comes next for Syracuse’s medical community is creating systems to prevent this crisis from progressing. Anna Kanter, a medical student at Upstate Medical University who has worked with both Lane and Hobart, is in the process of developing research questions to collect data for a “lead scorecard” to be published annually, tracking Syracuse’s progress in addressing childhood lead poisoning. She says this scorecard could equip families with information on the crisis while at the same time holding the city accountable as it proceeds with implementing the ordinance.

ABATEMENT AND CONTROL

Summer 2020 marked an important milestone for the city of Syracuse. In July, the Syracuse Common Council approved the Lead Abatement and Control ordinance to decrease the rate of lead poisoning among city youth.

The lead ordinance was a long-fought battle. While the city has been aware of the high rates of lead poisoning for years, passing meaningful legislation to address the issue took years.

This doesn’t mean there haven’t been efforts to fix Syracuse’s lead problem until now. In 2008, Lane, along with SU colleagues, presented the Syracuse Common Council with an analysis of what lead poisoning cost Syracuse annually. Also at this time, the housing bubble burst and the country dove deep into a recession. Passing an expensive bill that might place a financial burden on landlords wasn’t seen as financially prudent. For many years, Syracuse relied on federal grant money to address lead poisoning, receiving a total of \$38 million between 1994 and 2015. That grant paid for the renovation of 2,586 homes, but it was cut five years ago. After that money dried up, comprehensive reform around lead exposure needed a champion.

Enter Councilman Joe Driscoll.

Driscoll ran for Syracuse Common Council in 2018. Ending lead



> Councilman Joe Driscoll decided to tackle the city’s lead poisoning crisis after reading a study in the *Journal of Pediatrics* that found Syracuse had the nation’s highest percentage of childhood lead poisoning. | Renée Deemer, Staff Photographer

poisoning was a central pillar of his campaign.

“The issue of poverty and inequity in Syracuse can be such an overwhelming problem,” Driscoll said. “It seems really hard to know where to begin. But the lead crisis to me seems to be one that’s preventable. There are steps we can take that are not impossible or moonshots.”

In two years he was able to turn this pitch into action, championing the lead ordinance until it finally made it through the Common Council with a unanimous vote. But crafting the ordinance itself was also a challenge. While lead poisoning is a solvable problem, it’s not an uncomplicated one.

“To completely remove every drop of lead from a house can sometimes be as much as \$50,000 to \$60,000,” Driscoll said. There are plenty of properties in Syracuse with a total value in this range, “so to try to convince a landlord to put more money into repairing the house than they purchased it for is a hard sell.”

Cost was a major concern for the lead ordinance, along with predictable questions about how to tackle this issue intelligently and effectively. Luckily, a strong model existed. In 2005, Rochester passed legislation to prevent lead poisoning among children, resulting in a 80% reduction of cases 10 years after implementation.

The Rochester model allowed Driscoll to anticipate obstacles Syracuse’s lead ordinance might face, like financial concerns or pushback from landlords. Dr. Katrina Korfmacher at the University of Rochester has studied lead poisoning and Rochester’s lead plan extensively. She met with the Common Council to offer advice before the implementation of Syracuse’s plan. Korfmacher stressed the importance of a community coalition and working with partners, which can offer an accountability mechanism to the process. When community members understand what’s going on and their role in the plan, she said, they can then better evaluate compliance, feedback, and adaption.

“It’s very much like trying to blaze your path through a deep forest,” Driscoll said. “And someone has gone before you with the machete.”

The city government also found partners in the nonprofit sector,

ON THE SIDE

LOCAL SUPPORT

Founded in 2019, **Families for Lead Freedom Now** is a family-led coalition for those directly affected by childhood lead poisoning in Syracuse.

Mission: Be a conduit for parents, families and communities to speak out, voice concerns, raise questions and share ideas so smarter decisions get made in the fight against childhood lead poisoning. Members provide mutual support and help to organize for a greater leadership role for parents in this struggle and help set public health priorities.

The group welcomes new members.

To contact: Email Leadsafesyracuse@lscny.org, call (315) 703-6557 or visit online at leadfreedomcny.org

HOW TO GET TESTED

New York State requires all children be tested for lead poisoning at ages 1 and 2. Only a blood test can tell how much lead is in a child's body. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention determines what follow-up is needed based on the amount of lead found.

To find out if your child needs a lead test, call your child's doctor or Onondaga County residents may call (315) 435-3271.

before and after the lead ordinance passed. Peter Dunn, president and CEO of Central New York Community Foundation, explains that for every dollar spent on lead prevention, “anywhere from \$20 to \$200, is recouped.” A 2009 study in Environmental Health Perspectives drew a similar conclusion, finding: “Each dollar invested in lead paint hazard control results in a return of \$17 to \$221 or a net savings of \$181 to \$269 billion.”

CNYCF’s work around lead poisoning has roots in the foundation’s interest in the issue of concentrated poverty. “The more we learned about the impact of where people live and the issues that they confront, (we saw) how that has an extrapolating effect on issues of poverty, of literacy, academic performance, violence, all sorts of indicators,” Dunn said.

In response, CNYCF made a public commitment in 2018 to provide \$2 million in funding over a five-year period, specifically focused on childhood lead poisoning in Syracuse. More recently, CNYCF announced a \$300,000 grant from the Mother Cabrini Health Foundation on March 9, which is in addition to the foundation’s funding and will be used to remediate and replace lead paint-ridden exterior doors and windows in rental units.

Now approved, Driscoll is excited to see the ordinance in action, though the coronavirus has slowed implementation. The city planned to hire a Lead Paint Program coordinator, as well as several staff members, to conduct necessary inspections and repairs. This role was not posted until March. As of March, Driscoll hoped to see 12 open positions in the code department filled. Whether some of those roles will be dedicated lead specialists or all of the new hires will be equipped to inspect and remediate homes with lead, among other code viola-

tions, will be up to the coordinator.

In order to effectively implement the ordinance, city employees must take an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) approved Renovation, Repair and Painting (RRP) training to ensure employees are properly equipped to remediate homes. This training must be completed in person, a challenge in the age of social distancing. Another major facet of the implementation stage are home visits from the Syracuse Division of Code Enforcement, to find out exactly which properties contain lead. “You obviously have a COVID risk there with all of the code inspectors going into strangers’ homes,” Driscoll said.

The Division of Code Enforcement has continued to operate during the pandemic, despite furloughs and limited staff. “There’s still things that are happening, like someone’s plumbing is leaking and the landlord’s not dealing with it. Codes has to go deal with that,” Driscoll said. Health and safety is another obstacle. Inspections require staff to go in and out of numerous households, a major risk during the pandemic. “What if one of them gets infected and then they’re going into other people’s homes?” Driscoll said. “It’s all really messy.”

The pandemic created financial issues as well. “We’re talking about a potential \$42 million budget gap for the city,” he said. “We had worked with the mayor’s office to broker an extra million dollars to the Codes office, or at least three-quarters of a million, to help with implementation, and it’s just super uncertain times.” To reduce spending, Syracuse scheduled furloughs, cut budgets, scaled back on all nonessential services and scheduled four citywide shutdown days to try to make the budget work, but in these difficult financial times, “it’s



> The twins sneak a peek of mother Darlene as she takes a smoke break. | Jessica Ruiz, Staff Photographer



> Before the pandemic, Darlene Medley and members of Families for Lead Freedom Now gathered to protest for Syracuse landlords to take accountability for lead poisoning connected to rental properties. | Jessica Ruiz, Staff Photographer

hard to talk about a four-, five- or six-person expansion of a department,” Driscoll said.

While the pandemic has forced the city to reroute its implementation plans, Driscoll and his team haven’t stopped working on this issue.

“We’re looking for all of the gaps in the system and trying to make sure it rolls out in a way that’s effective,” he said. This includes coordinating with academics like Lane to gather “the metrics to see how effective the program will be when implemented,” hiring a lead coordinator, a new city position specifically focused on the lead crisis in Syracuse, and finally getting homes inspected and remediated.

GOING HOME

Darlene shares a story about her sons. When she first moved to Syracuse two years ago, she was taking them to a store, and her oldest twin, Rashad, started talking to an older man.

“The gentleman walks up to me and says ‘You know, I’m not trying to tell you how to raise your kid or get in your business, and I mean no disrespect, but you should pay attention to him when he’s telling you something because he can really articulate himself. He can do really good with telling a story,’” she recalled. “He said, ‘And you know, FBI and things look for stuff like that.’ My baby was 2 years old.”

Darlene’s never forgotten that conversation, or the exceptionalism her kids displayed. In that moment, someone had recognized something special in her son, something remarkable enough to make him strike up a conversation with a complete stranger. Now, Darlene is often told that

her kids will “never reach their full potential,” but she refuses to accept her children will be held back. No amount of lead will keep her son from becoming a federal agent or dreaming any dream.

“That man said the FBI looks for people like that. So why not. I’m going to keep pushing him. And when you get to that point, when you feel like you’re so excited, and you’re going to stumble over your words, and it’s going to get hard, I’m going to be right there to tell him to calm down. Take a breath. And that he can do it,” Darlene said, choking back tears.

Her belief in her sons doesn’t blind her to the challenges they face. Rashad is still an excellent communicator, but, she said, the lead has caused him to develop a stutter.

“He’ll start stuttering really hard when he gets excited, so I have to make him completely stop, catch his breath, and breathe through the words so he can get through it,” Darlene said. “Because if not, he gets frustrated. He won’t say anything at all and completely shuts down.”

The younger twin’s energetic nature has become harder and harder to manage.

“He can’t sit still. No matter what,” she said. “So I have to keep him active. I have to keep him doing things.”

Watching her kids’ behavior change has been hard. She knows they’re fighting something beyond their control.

“You can look in his eyes and tell that he doesn’t mean it. You can look in his eyes and tell that he’s trying his hardest,” she said, describing all the times she’s told Devon to calm down, to stop moving his hands. “I’ll look at his face, and my baby is really trying his hardest to control it. But he can’t. He really can’t.”

ON THE SIDE

LASTING IMPACT

The **Central New York Community Foundation** has committed to invest a minimum of \$1 million through its Black Equity & Excellence fund. The support focuses on building community dialogue, increasing the capacity of Black-led organizations that are supporting historically underserved communities and sustaining projects that counteract systemic racism.

Twenty-seven efforts have been funded thus far. Some recent South Side recipients include:

- **Black Cub Productions:** \$25,000 to host a 10-week program for seventh to 12th-grade students to learn video production and creative storytelling skills
- **Jubilee Homes:** \$50,000 for its Build to Work workforce development program, which helps bridge the gap between “employers’ wants and workers’ needs” through hands-on case management
- **Women of PEARLS:** \$11,000 for its Black women empowerment program, which addresses the economic, professional and health disparities faced by Black women

To read a full list of recipients, visit cnycf.org and search for “Black Equity”

BLOW TO BUSINESS

How the pandemic affected local, Black-owned business operators



> Phyllis Moore, owner of Joe’s to Go located at 415 W. Onondaga St., pivoted during the pandemic to offer takeout only in order to keep her restaurant open. | Elizabeth Billman, Staff Photographer

By Kate Minutillo and Gianna Prudente
The Stand Reporters

Small business owners tell how they carried on and advocated for support of their businesses

Black-owned businesses were disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the National Bureau of Economic Research, which reported that by mid-April, business dropped by 40%.

For restaurant owner Phyllis Moore of Joe’s to Go, located a few blocks west of downtown Syracuse, her business was cut in half.

“Fortunately, we did not have to close,” she said, noting the primarily takeout shop was already understaffed. “Had we been fully staffed, we would have had to lay off.”

In a local intake survey conducted by the Upstate Minority Economic Alliance (UMEA), 85% of respondents said their businesses were affected by the pandemic. Even before the pandemic, Black-owned businesses

were suffering a lack of access to capital as a result of inherent biases, said Me’Shae Brooks-Rolling, executive director of the UMEA.

“The concept of inherent bias is trying to make all business owners fit into one cookie cutter when you’re looking to disperse capital and making assumptions about those businesses,” she said. “It just creates all types of barriers.”

The pandemic compounded issues for many Black business owners who did not have a relationship with banks prior to the pandemic, Brooks-Rolling said. This made it even more difficult for them to access stimulus payments or Paycheck Protection Program funds.

Of 70% of business owners who applied for assistance during the pandemic, 53.8% received assistance, 38.5% did not and 3.8% did not hear back, according to UMEA’s survey.

“I received money one time, and it was so small because I didn’t have the taxes that showed I was in business because I just opened in January,” said Tiara Love, owner of Experience the Love on South Salina Street. “A lot of the things that were being offered were phenomenal.

I just wasn't able to take advantage of it."

Love was forced to close her shoe boutique in March of 2020, followed by a three-month shut down during the pandemic.

"I wouldn't have anticipated two months into this business venture that I would be closed for three months," said Love, who didn't open again until June of 2020. "I am resilient enough to believe that all these businesses will bounce back or they'll be very prosperous moving forward."

The pandemic's especially hard impact on Black-owned businesses has caused a push nationwide, and here locally, for consumers to show support.

El-Java Abdul-Qadir, director of the South Side Innovation Center, said the effects of the pandemic, like joblessness, and health risks, brought attention to socio-economic inequalities and forced people to be more conscious of how they spend their dollars.

"People have started to educate themselves around unconscious bias and discrimination. Because of that, people have been empowered to make decisions about where they're spending their money and how they're supporting businesses owned by people of color," said Abdul-Qadir, also a Social Science Ph.D. student at Syracuse University studying urban entrepreneurship and economic development.

In recognition of these inequalities, many private companies and industries went on to make commitments to Black-owned businesses as well as consumers.

Following the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement this summer, Brooks-Rolling said she received a number of calls from patrons looking for businesses of color they could support.

"I think that was a very pivotal moment," she said. "It was a good start, but we're interested in a paradigm shift that motivates or encourages non-minority consumers to support minority businesses on a regular basis."

Karen Loftin, a Syracuse resident, said it's important for consumers to be conscious of where their money goes.

"That awareness amongst people makes healthier communities, healthier families, healthier business conscious, economic power," she said. "It brings a lot of culture to the community as well. It allows people to socialize better because they're not struggling economically."

Loftin said because communities need to be able to rely on themselves, she advocates for others to support Black-owned businesses.

"I push it for the same reason that I hope every other Black person pushes it," she said. "I think it's a product of the long struggle that our people had to go through, and I think it's important to always remind ourselves that we're always going to need each other in the community."

As a way to boost community support, Indaria Jones, founder and CEO of The Creators Lounge located on Syracuse's South Side, pioneered Buy Black Saturdays, a local initiative where Black vendors sell



> Tiara Love, owner of Experience the Love located at 2309 S. Salina St., was able to remain open despite the pandemic's impact. Among her specialty clothing items for sale, she now sells face masks. | Elizabeth Billman, Staff Photographer

their products at pop-up shops located curbside on South Salina Street. Vendors pay no fees and marketing is funded and produced by the lounge.

"It's just been really great, because it brings back the community part to the South Side," Jones said.

The lounge is also working to overcome the challenge of buying Black through Black Syracuse, a social directory highlighting Black-owned businesses, events, housing, and food. As another means to directly benefit businesses in the community, The Creators Lounge received \$11,000 from the Black Equity and Excellence grant through the Central New York Community Foundation. The fund itself was created this past summer and supports community projects that will help encourage self-sufficiency and improve economic conditions within the Black community.

Initiatives through The Creators Lounge are just one way Black business owners have seen support.

As a local business owner, Moore said she thinks local initiatives have encouraged the community to support Black-owned businesses and that she is "very grateful" for the support she's received.

"The county executive would have his staff call in orders, and we would take them and drop them off. They did that a couple times," she said. "We also had some Black fraternities and sororities come and support."

Love said she hopes to see more support of small and Black-owned businesses from the Syracuse community even after the pandemic.

"The Syracuse community in general needs to support Black businesses, small businesses, period. That is not even a question," Love said. "It's just something that needs to be a way of life."



> **Breena Walsh**, 11, says safety measures are enacted, even at recess.

Schooling during a global pandemic

Fifth graders reflect on what has changed the most during their 2020-2021 school year

Thirty-two Syracuse Latin School students in Ms. Kristina Russo's fifth-grade class spent four weeks as part of an enrichment project on photojournalism. Their goal: to capture what school life is like now.

Paired with each image, student photographers share their thoughts on the required protocols in place to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus — from signs posted in hallways, on doors and in classrooms that serve as constant reminders to stay socially distanced, wear a mask and wash hands to views of bagged, premade meals ready for pick up.

“Our fifth-grade photojournalists explored in and around the school to capture images that would tell their story,” Russo said.

This project was inspired by The Stand's annual Photo Walk and recent contributions from other city students reflecting on how the pandemic has impacted their daily lives.



> Two classmates, Jane Klivak, left, and Makayla Billue, collaborate to share ideas and images, all while masked up — even while outdoors. | Catie Evans



> People take bagged food home because of COVID-19, says **Katie Ervin**, 11. The district provided five-day meal kits for families twice a week so students in both pods could have meals to bring home. Cafeteria staff worked hard to ensure this happened smoothly.



> Clockwise from top left, **Catie Evans**, age 11, said “The cleaning supplies capture how much we sanitize all day at school now.” **Betsy Austin**, 11, says this year students must have their temperatures taken and are required to wear masks. Students can bring backpacks, but are not allowed to use the desks. “Our backpacks get heavy!” **Didalmy Valentin-Gonzalez**, 10, said “We have signs, like this one, in the building to remind everyone to wear masks so no one gets sick.”



> “School during COVID-19 is fun and OK,” said **Ishan Thomas**, 11. “But we can’t go most places like the gym or cafeteria. We can’t even drink water from the fountains. It’s hard times.”



> “Even in the hallway, we must stay a few feet apart. This can be difficult when large groups of students are in school,” said Ms. Russo. “Our custodians work hard to keep railings and other surfaces clean and sanitized every day.”



> This photo shows how it has been for recess since the pandemic, says **Arionna Simms**, 10. “You can see kids playing soccer with their masks on and being as safe as possible.”



> We all have classes on our computers, and we even do PE. online, says **Makayla Billue**, 10. This photo shows Mr. Serrao, our PE. teacher, doing a class online.



> “Gym class is way different this year because it is a video and not in person,” said **Daniela Mecum**, 11. The gym, instead, was used as a storage space for furniture and items that could not be kept in classrooms due to the need for more space to socially distance and limit touch surfaces that could potentially pass germs.

ON THE SIDE

OPERA STYLINGS

Most opera singers fall into a certain voice type, which helps them to be cast in roles. A singer's type not only depends on their vocal range, but also the quality and power of their voice.

FEMALE SINGERS MAIN VOICE TYPES:

- **Soprano** — the highest voice type for female singers
- **Mezzo-soprano** — lower than soprano
- **Contralto/Alto** — lowest female voice

MALE SINGERS MAIN VOICE TYPES:

- **Countertenor** — The highest in the male voice range, this also falls within a woman's voice range
- **Tenor** — Most often the highest male voice in an opera
- **Baritone** — most common male voice in an opera
- **Bass** — comes from the Italian word basso, which means low

— Source: *English National Opera*

HOMEGROWN OPERA

How Gregory Sheppard challenges norms and diversifies the genre

By Reggie Seigler
A Friendly Five Columnist

Now as community outreach director at Syracuse Opera, he's bringing his passion back home

If you ask most people what a bass is, they might tell you that it's a stringed instrument that holds down the low end in popular music. Of course, if the question was written on paper some might say it's a fish. But since this is a music column, we won't consider that answer, unless of course they're talking about "Big Mouth Billy Bass," the singing fish. Then we'll give them partial credit.

There is another kind of bass, too. It is the lowest singing (and speaking) range of the human voice. Upon hearing it, many will immediately think of singers like Melvin Franklin of the Temptations, Barry White or maybe even Alvin Chea of the vocal group Take Six. Since very few people can vocalize in that range, the sound is unique and easily distinguishable.

Gregory Sheppard is a bass singer, however, he has another uniqueness about him. He is a professional opera singer.

You might ask, what's so unique about a bass singer in an opera? Many operas have bass singers. Greg is an African American who grew up in the projects. There aren't many African Americans from the projects who sing opera. That is kind of unique. At least, I thought so.

But Greg quickly ran off the names of eight or 10 Black opera singers to me. Some I had even heard of before. The list included Paul Robeson, Robert McFerrin, William Warfield and Todd Duncan. And there were women, too, like Leontyne Price, Marian Anderson, Jessye Norman and Audra McDonald. Most came from much humbler beginnings than the Central Village Housing Projects.

I have many memories of Greg growing up, as he and I both spent our pre-teen years living two doors apart. He attended the Tucker Missionary Baptist Church and began singing in the choir and taking piano lessons. He knew at an early age that he liked singing but also realized that his voice was not especially suited for the typical popular music of the day.

Greg eventually gravitated towards opera. He sings in multiple languages, including French, Italian, Russian, German and English. He was encouraged to pursue it professionally by his instructor Patti Thompson at Syracuse University. He has performed at operas and concert halls across the United States and in Europe, including



> Gregory Sheppard, who grew up on Syracuse's South Side, began his opera career nearly 30 years, debuting with the Syracuse Opera. | Provided Photo

but not limited to, the Syracuse Opera, Glimmerglass Opera, Central City Opera House in Colorado and the New York City Opera.

But how does a Baptist church singer gravitate towards opera? What similarities do both have, if any? What is the draw?

"The opera is very dramatic," he said. "It has a lot of very good singing. The Baptist church is very similar in that way."

Greg said the bass singer in an opera usually plays a very dramatic character like the villain or the over-protective father figure. The villain I could believe, maybe, but how can a Black man perform the role of the over-protective father of a white, German or French child? Especially in front of the typical audience at an opera house. How would that go over?

"It's about suspension of beliefs," he said. And that's all he said, leaving the rest up to me to ponder.

It hasn't been all glitz and glamour, Greg added. Over the years, he's lived a lifestyle similar to many

professional artists, sometimes working day jobs between gigs and doing what was necessary to persevere. He once taught himself to type and landed a job as an administrative assistant at a law firm. He says it was nice because the job allowed him take time off when he needed to perform. But it eventually reached a point where he had to choose between paying the rent or paying for professional coaching or voice lessons.

"Most of the time, I sacrificed the rent," he said.

As time moved forward, he began to balance his singing career by teaching in his private studio and at New York University and Columbia University. He currently teaches at John Jay University.

Recently, Greg was asked by the Syracuse Opera to become a member of its board. His official title is the director of community outreach and engagement. The role is important as the field of opera seeks to re-organize and build diversity in all areas. Additionally, Syracuse Opera wants to develop a more diverse audience, so it will be trying some

new and innovative things to attract attention to the genre.

Although he lives in NYC and his family has all moved from Syracuse to other places, he still comes home to visit his childhood church and to sing with the Syracuse Opera. He has done this regularly while maintaining a residence in the city since he moved there in 1986. So, accepting the appointment to the board of the Syracuse Opera was a perfect fit for him.

The questions I had for Greg were many, but several answers came from just one of his statements: "It's about suspension of beliefs." In other words, if I can suspend my belief that a Black child from the projects could never grow up to be an opera singer, then I just might.

Reggie Seigler is a South Side resident and regularly writes the "A Friendly Five" music column. If you have story suggestion, contact Reggie at reggie@softspokenband.com or (315) 479-9620

How Syracuse Shaped Jaquiel Bullock

By Kamal Morgan
The Stand Intern

Local R&B musician reflects on his personal journey and how it shaped his latest SAMMY-winning album

Jaquiel Bullock, formerly a youth advocate at Westside Academy at Blodgett Middle School, was driving a 12-passenger van full of middle schoolers. He searched for his aux cord to connect his phone to the vehicle's speakers but couldn't find it. He settled on the radio, and heard an advertisement for a singing competition at Singer's Karaoke Club. Bullock, who was studying for the LSAT and feeling the stress of preparing for law school, decided to go and enter to relieve the pressure of studying.

At the competition, he sang John Legend's "All of Me" and felt something he hadn't felt in years. Something he'd been ignoring.

"There is a feeling when you are in your zone, and you're doing something you were meant to do," said Bullock, reflecting on that moment.

Afterwards, he wrote his first song, "I Can Fly," and produced his first album, "The Natural Project," which won him his first SAMMY (Syracuse Area Music Award) Award in the R&B category in 2019. It was monumental because he finally felt Syracuse, a city that shaped him and his music, recognized his talent.

His latest album, "Summer Nights in the Southward" released last August, won him a second SAMMY in best R&B album this year. This album encapsulates his personal journey and emotions from what triggers him, excites him and makes him cry. He says it serves as a blueprint for anyone who listens to feel confident to make it out of the same circumstances he did in Syracuse.

"I want you to feel empowered," he said. "I wanted it to be the journey of a Black man coming from that kind of environment, and to show you exactly where you can be by the end of the album."



> Jaquiel Bullock says his musical journey started when his grandfather, Raymond Bullock, heard him sing along to Whitney Houston's "I Will Always Love You" from the backseat of the car. | Provided Photo



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FEATURED PLAYERS

• **Manny Breland** — During his senior season in 1957, he led the Syracuse Orange to an 18-7 record and their first NCAA Tournament. Manny remained in the community and became the city's first Black science teacher, vice principal and principal. He also coached two of his high school basketball teams to sectional titles. Manny was inducted into the Syracuse Sports Hall of Fame in 1992.

• **Breanna Stewart** — Started playing basketball for Cicero-North Syracuse High School when she was in the eighth grade. She went on to become a four-time collegiate women's basketball champion and a two-time WNBA champion.

• **Earl Lloyd** — Fighting through name calling and racial strife and bias, he helped lead the Syracuse Nationals (Nats) to the city's first and only professional national championship in 1955. He was known as the "Jackie Robinson of the NBA."

• **Dolph Schayes** — A member of the same championship team was selected 12 times as an NBA All Star. He led the Nats to the playoffs 15 times and was named one of the NBA's top 50 players. He was inducted in Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame.

Iconic Mural coming soon



> The building at 333 E. Onondaga St. is set to feature four Syracuse sports notables later this summer. | Provided Photo

By Reggie Seigler
A Friendly Five Columnist

This downtown effort is being led by Jazzfest director to imprint Syracuse basketball icons

Frank Malfitano is seeing things. He sees the south east wall of a six-story building at 333 E. Onondaga St. in Syracuse as a huge mural, and he wants us to see it, too.

The mural, he says, will pay homage to four Syracuse residents who through their achievements in basketball “helped to put Syracuse on the map.” They are Earl Lloyd, Manny Breland, Breanna Stewart and Dolph Schayes.

Frank has manifested things before and brought them into being, so don’t discount this. He once saw Syracuse as a city deprived and deserving of the best free summer-time-entertainment available, so he went to work and built one of the largest free jazz festivals in the Northeast. He saw the need for the talents of many of our local music artists to be recognized, so he created the SAMMYS (Syracuse Area Music Awards). He also saw that many of the stars that brighten the skies of our nightlife were ignited from a spark against the pavement right here in Syracuse, so he created the Syracuse Walk of Stars.

When Frank sees something inspirational, he runs with it. “I had seen some of the great murals in other cities,” he said. “I thought, we could use great art like that here.”

He selected Los Angeles based muralist Jonas Never to do the work because of his expertise in memorializing

sports figures and pop culture icons.

“His work speaks for itself, and there’s no question that it’s great,” Frank said. “Never was rated by the BBC to be one of the top muralists worldwide.”

Why these subjects?

“Syracuse is a basketball town,” he began. “These athletes were pioneers in the sport. Manny Breland was the first Black scholarship player on the men’s basketball team at SU and Earl Lloyd the first African American in the NBA. Dolph Schayes, a Jewish athlete, is rated as one of the top 50 basketball players of all time; and at 26 years of age, a white woman, Breanna Stewart, holds multiple championships at the collegiate and professional levels and an Olympic gold medal. She is also an outspoken advocate for social justice.”

Frank sees the project as a way of bringing people together around art to help bridge the social divide that is currently happening in our country and in our city.

“It bridges the boundaries of race, gender and generation,” he said. “It reflects our make-up as a community.”

So, when is this all going down?

“The work is planned to begin sometime in July or August, when the weather permits. There’s still a lot of coordination and planning involved — permits, travel, lodging, lifts, materials supplies — and then there is the issue of paying for it all,” he said.

So far, there are some major sponsors on board including Price Chopper and National Grid, but he still needs to raise about \$75,000 to complete the project. If more money can be raised, he plans to do even more murals. To contribute, email info@syracusejazzfest.com.

I-81 QUIZ ANSWERS

From Page 11

- 1. False:** As it stands, there is no requirement to hire local labor for this federal project.
- 2. False:** I-81 has been an issue since its construction in the 1950s. The interstate cut through the historic 15th Ward, displacing many Black and brown working class residents in Syracuse.
- 3. True:** Cuomo expects to transform the obsolete and poorly designed I-81 viaduct in Syracuse into a modern transportation corridor. The state will continue environmental and public reviews this year.
- 4. True:** Mayor Walsh wrote to the transportation secretary after he tweeted, "Black and brown neighborhoods have been disproportionately divided by highway projects or left isolated by the lack of adequate transit and transportation resources. In the Biden-Harris administration, we will make righting these wrongs an imperative."
- 5. False:** The coalition aims to have a project labor agreement in place for the I-81 viaduct reconstruction project to ensure local hiring. In an Op-Ed, Gregory Lancett, president of the Central & Northern NY Building & Construction Trades Council, stated "The use of a PLA is the only way to require that local labor is utilized and that money spent on the project stays local."
- 6. False:** The bill never made it past the introduction phase and remains in limbo.
- 7. False:** The purpose is to find innovative ways to maximize local hire on the project.
- 8. False:** The report showed that local hiring did not reduce the number of bidders or had a systematic impact on bid prices. During a national press conference hosted by Jobs to Move America, Deka Dancil, president of the Urban Jobs Task Force, said: "If the ban on local hiring weren't in place, we'd have no need for such extreme and really, nearly impossible measures. If the I-81 viaduct project, or any other infrastructure project that had federal dollars tied to it were to start tomorrow, very few Syracuse residents will be able to work on it."
- 9. B) Obsolete and poorly designed**
After its completion, 103 acres of the 15th Ward were razed to make way for the elevated highway that now bisects the city and separates the Upstate Medical University and Hospital from the city's most impoverished neighborhoods.
- 10. A) Syracuse Build**
The Walsh Administration plans to use Syracuse Build as a conduit for a pathways to apprenticeship program in partnership with local labor.
- 11. B) A contract that explains how work will be done on a project, including community workforce provisions**
The terms stand for Community Workforce Agreement-Project Labor Agreement, which are work provisions with a community focus.
- 12. D) 90%**
The neighborhood became the focus of an urban renewal project that included the construction of the I-81 highway, which ripped through the heart of the 15th Ward, displacing a total of 1,300 residents.
- 13. B) Lead poisoning, impaired lung function, exacerbated asthma and heart failure**
Syracuse City School District asthma rates are higher than the state average, and respiratory disease is especially prevalent among Black people in the region. Notably, asthma hospitalization rates in SCSD were among the highest in New York state.



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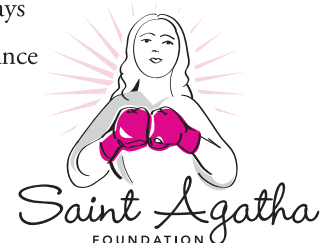
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