

## **Debbie Allen: Submitted by Brittney Flowers**

As I began to discover my passion for the arts one person I continue to find inspirational is Debbie Allen. She not only wears many hats, but she wears them well. Her professional titles include dancer, choreographer, producer, director, and artistic director...just to name a few. She is a reminder for me to not put limits on the goals I set for myself.

## **Dr. Denis Mukwege: Submitted by Kasaundra Brinkley**

Dr. Denis Mukwege was born March 1, 1955 in South Kivu (Belgian Congo). He is a Congolese gynecologist and human rights activist who won the Noble Peace Prize in 2018.

I chose Dr. Mukwege this year because of his tireless work in Africa as an advocate for women and children against Rape, which is often used as a political weapon of war.

Dr. Mukwege founded Panzi Hospital in 1999, a place of compassion and loving care for victims suffering from physical, emotional, and sexual trauma.

I was profoundly blessed with the opportunity to speak with Panzi Foundation in an effort to potentially set up Kassie Care Homes in Kinshasa. The homes are for women and children, experiencing this kind of violence in the eastern side of the Democratic Republic of Congo. I hope to one day join his work.

Lastly, I am forever grateful for people like Dr. Mukwege who selflessly give their lives for humanity.

## **Kenny Leon: Submitted by Tricia Ekholm**

I was working at the Alliance Theatre in 1990 when Kenny Leon was named Artistic Director. Working under Kenny's leadership changed my view on the role that art can have in societal change, and the belief that art truly happens with artist and audience intersect and a conversation can be started. I am influenced to this day by what I learned under Kenny's leadership and hope that his work on the national stage will influence future generations.

## **Nina Simone: Submitted by Louise Gordon**

Nina Simone's veracious vocals streamed into my life when "streaming" was only used as an adjective and not a technology. It was during my freshman year in 93 (yes, it was also the last century), and like most Liberal Arts focused students of the time, I was a young woman on a quest to find my Truths. During this time, when the #MeToo movement was still going to take over 2 decades to arrive, and as a woman of color, I was (and still am) battling the scars in dealing with my own past experiences with ignorant commentaries from the uneducated peanut gallery.

But my feeling of self-worthlessness does not just stem from the petty poking, but it is deeply rooted within my own personal view of whom I see myself as, and my own issues with my own identity. As of Filipino descent I never really associated myself as being a "woman of color" as my adoptive parents are white. My identity was always through the eyes of living a "White Life," yet I had to deal with racial discrimination as if this Life was not my own.

Kids are resilient and as a kid, I dealt with the bullying and the vulgar curiosity of others, "Why do you look like that when your parents look like this?", with a shrug and an uncomfortable laugh.

My freshman year in college was a pivotal era in my own self-discovery. And the advantage of growing up during the Lo-Fi era, we had to go hunt for diverse tunes, the old-school way. Either by hanging out for hours at the record store, ripping down band flyers and my favorite, soundtracks from films that you fall in love with. It was an adventure, and it wasn't the *Now, Now*, when we can download anything, anytime. When you discovered an amazing tune that moved you, you would want to go and buy every single album of this newfound Love.

And that was Nina Simone for me.

It was while I was watching the 1993 film version of "La Femme Nikita" with Bridget Fonda. No, not the series, but the actual American version of the

1990 French film, "Nikita". Now before you go snickering about the possible cheesiness of this, La Femme Nikita is 100% about women empowerment! The plot is about a woman who basically gets trained (under the guise of some "Lady Etiquette Boutique" School) to go beat up and kill all the bad guys. So not only is this about a woman who is totally the Queen of kicking a\$% and taking names, but also, on her quest to find *Who She Is*.

So, when I heard the raspy, hoarse, somewhat uncomfortable voice, flowing out of the screen, belching out as Bridget Fonda's Nikita was probably in a middle of a well-choreographed fight scene..

"... Birds flying high, you know how I feel

Sun in the sky, you know how I feel

Breeze driftin' on by, you know how I feel

... It's a new dawn

It's a new day

It's a new life for me, yeah"

"WHO IS THIS SIREN ?!?", I screamed inside my head. I couldn't help but feel overcome with a sense of pure confidence. This was going to be MY anthem.

After the joy of finding "Feeling Good," I decided to learn more about who Nina Simone was and how she came to be such a Humanitarian Force. In conjunction with finding and listening to all her albums, I started finding out more about her impact on how she viewed our social and racial injustices during the Civil Rights movement and her decision to become an ExPat and live her final days in France. Born from a poor Tyron, NC family, she is a Revolutionary Woman who became one of the most prominent Tour De Force Female voices of our time.

Freshman year sparked my eternal appreciation and respect for Nina Simone.

Impactful Artists always create Eternal Masterpieces. IMHO, like Michelangelo's Sistine, Nina Simone's audio works of Art deserve just as much respect and awe as the Titans of the Renaissance.

## **Gaye Adegbalola: Submitted by Lindsay Smith**

When I was in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, shy and awkward with a love of reading, I was moved to an accelerated reading group in English class, only to discover that I was the only student in the group. It was one of the best things that ever happened to me because my teacher was Gaye Adegbalola, known to her students as Ms. A. Ms. A had gray hair that was cut into a triangle shape, and she carried herself with a combination of confidence and joy; I thought she looked like a royal Egyptian hieroglyphic come to life. She wore clothes and jewelry that looked nothing like what other teachers wore. She was an enthusiastic reader and teacher who encouraged me to read anything and everything that interested me, but what interested me most was her. I asked her as many questions about herself as I could get away with; I learned that she had a son in high school and that she was learning to play guitar (I was both fascinated and horrified by the callouses on her fingers).

Our paths crossed again in high school, where she had become the guidance counselor. By then, her son had gone to college, and she had started a band. I had begun to write songs by then, and she always found me when she had exciting news to share; I remember very clearly running into her in the cafeteria, where she said, "Lindsay, I want to show you our first review! You will delight in it." (I did. It was a great review.) I went to see her perform, and it seemed clear to me that she deserved to be a star, since I had always been in awe of her. Soon, I had a new guidance counselor because she had quit her job to be a full-time musician. In the decades since, I have seen her perform in Atlanta many times, and she has always remembered me.

When I began my own music career after college, whenever I doubted myself or thought I was moving too slowly to ever achieve my goals, I always remembered that Ms. A had been a teacher and a guidance counselor and had raised a child before embarking on her music career at age 40. I always remembered that, when I met her, she hadn't even known how to play guitar yet. Most importantly, I always remembered that she was authentically and uniquely herself – unapologetic about being black, and a woman, and a mother, and pursuing her own dreams. I couldn't have asked for a better example.

## **Barbara Ann Johnson: Submitted by Kelly Tonina Cooper**

I am luckier than most to have had the pleasure of growing up with a great-aunt like mine. My great aunt Barbara was one-of-a-kind. Not only did she inspire me to pursue dance and acting (she was my first chauffeur to and from rehearsals and performances), but she supported me through many other momentous life-firsts. She taught me how to drive, how to organize my closet, and the value of shedding 'good tears' once in a while. Some of the toughest lessons she impressed upon me involved my place in this world as a Black woman, how self-care is healing and when self-discipline will see me through the toughest times in life, especially when life isn't fair. As the proprietor of a women's shelter, she was always helping others and I will be forever grateful for her nurturing and love that taught me to treat others with the same respect and kindness I would want for myself.



## **Joseph Times: Submitted by Amber Times**

I would like to celebrate, Joseph Times, my 3rd great-grandfather who was forced to take the last name of his enslaver, Standback at birth in 1850. In 1865, he fled South Marion County (Buena Vista, GA) along with his mother and 8 siblings. Joseph later found a new place to live, a new job, and a new last name. Times, as a representation of the struggles and hard times while escaping enslavement. The story of my last name has always given me a sense of pride and a deeper connection to my loved ones who sacrificed more than I can fathom to simply exist.

## Susan L. Taylor: Submitted by Natasha Harris

For our Black History Month, I thought of the person that has always been an inspiration to me, Susan L. Taylor. Mrs. Taylor is the former editor-in-chief of Essence Magazine from 1981 – 2007. She always showcased up-and-coming Black artists, entertainers, and businesspeople. She made the magazine what it is today, a media outlet for Black excellence. After leaving Essence, she went on to create the National CARES Mentoring Movement. Their mission statement reads “*The **MISSION** of the National CARES Mentoring Movement is to secure, heal and transform the lives of impoverished Black children by inspiring, recruiting and mobilizing masses of caring Black men and women to mentor and nourish them. Our national volunteer affiliate network connects adults to local youth-serving organizations. Our national group-mentoring programs focus on the emotional, social, and academic development of our children and the wellness of the adults who parent, mentor and educate them.*” Not only do they focus on mentoring our youth, but they also have programs that specialize in raising children’s self-esteem, working on STEM skills, and even programs that help adults with workforce readiness.

On a personal note, I was gifted one of her books titled “In the Spirit: The Inspirational Writings of Susan L. Taylor and it changed my entire perspective in life. Her words and stories uplifted me when I was in a very pivotal stage in my life. While I have never had the opportunity to meet her, her words have made a significant impact on my life.

## **Debbie Allen: Submitted by Princess Jackson**

Debbie Allen inspires me as a Black dancer and choreographer because she has shown me that anything is possible and she has also shown me that success in this field is attainable as a Black woman. Her success as a dancer, actress and producer, who now owns and operates a thriving dance academy (highlighting the beauty of us as Black dancers) inspires me to strive for the same success.

## **Queen Latifah: Submitted by Nicole Walters**

When I was younger there were not a lot of YOUNG black women in the mainstream media that I saw myself in or wanted to aspire to be like until I saw Queen Latifah on MTV rapping U.N.I.T.Y. At that moment her look, style, vibe, and personality sparked something inside of me. To me she was so relatable regardless of what role she played from Living Single, Set It Off, Chicago, etc. She's an entertainer, talk show host, philanthropist, and activist that is constantly giving back to her community and that just leads by example.

## **Jimmie Herrod: Submitted by Western-Li Summerton**

As a pianist, we learn to 'sing' our melodies like a vocalist would. Jimmie Herrod is a friend and vocalist that inspires me in this way. Not only is he a phenomenal performer, composer, and songwriter, but a source of wisdom and guidance in my own pursuit of musicality. I would not be the artist I am without his support and voice.