

New nonprofit looks to showcase resilience with Harambee Liberation Month events

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Sarah Vevoda's 7-year-old daughter Jaz used to say she had "up hair," her natural Black curls growing upward instead of hanging down like nearly everyone else's around her, including her family. Sarah, who is white, says Jaz has commented on not seeing other people who look like her.

"It's very hard for her to be in a sea of white people everywhere she goes," says Vevoda, noting Jaz is darker skinned than her eldest child, who's also bi-racial, and her hair and skin are sometimes treated as curiosities by classmates. "As innocent as they are, because they're children and aren't used to being around someone who looks like Jaz ... they can say things that make her feel like she doesn't fit in, that she stands out."

It's with young people like Jaz that the HC Black Music and Arts Association means to connect. The nonprofit organization, which operates as a Dream Maker Project of the Ink People, is focused on connecting young BIPOC people to their cultural roots and each other. Starting as it did in 2020, the connections meant to foster self-esteem and resilience have become even more vital amid the COVID-19 pandemic and its

attending isolation. Throughout February, national Black History Month, HCBMAA is holding Harambee Liberation Month, with Zoom workshops and classes, as well as distanced in-person storytelling and a memorial march through Old Town.

President and founding member of HCBMAA Valetta Molofsky, who teaches social work at College of the Redwoods and serves as second vice president of the Eureka NAACP, was hearing more and more through her work as a social worker about BIPOC youth struggling with stress and even suicidal ideation.

“I had one child that told me [kids] called her dirt. That she was the color of dirt,” says Molofsky. “She thought she was ugly. ... No child should be subjected to that.”

In late 2019, Molofsky started looking for funding and helping hands to create spaces of welcome and support for young BIPOC people in Humboldt. Donations and sponsorships started coming in, and with grant-writing help from Lorenza Simmons, the organization’s youth coordinator, so did funding from Humboldt Area Foundation and Coast Central Credit Union. With that funding, donated masks and hand sanitizer — and help from local artists, educators and community members — HCBMAA held a socially distanced Harambee Youth Empowerment Workshop in August. The camp, which took its name from the Swahili word for “pulling together,” focused on African history, dance, music and art, as well as bonding with BIPOC peers and mentors, all while applying African cultural principles.

For Jaz, Vevoda says the experience was invaluable.

“The first day of the camp, when she came home she was glowing,” she says. “Just being in a group of people who looked like her was just feeding her in a way that I didn’t realize.”

Simmons will be running somatic movement and music classes for Harambee Liberation Month. She incorporates African songs and movement from Congo, Egypt and around the continent, as well as African American traditions, to help participants connect to pan-African culture and “feel comfortable in their skins ... doing that through music and art and all these different expressions to really build them up.” She’s found that many BIPOC youth “don’t have connection to African roots, or pieces are missing.” Through her classes, Simmons tries to bridge the cultures of Africa, the global diaspora and African American culture. Simmons says that connection — and just getting up and moving — has proven even more important over the last year.

COVID-19 has separated many students from vital support systems during a stressful time, but Simmons sees young people of color in particular suffering the loss after a tumultuous summer of local and national news.

“The movement and the protests were all amazing and needed, but I think with George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery — I could go on and on, just that constant flow — and with it coming to a head, it’s just overload for the youth to be able to process it,” she says. “Some of the normal places where they find connection were being lost with the pandemic.”

Kory Jones, who is teaching a three-part series this month called “Being Yourself through Deconstruction,” will be trying to fill in some of that support. The Marine Corps veteran says he’ll be sharing some of the strategies that have helped him with PTSD brought on by exposure to violence in his early years and his time in the military, as well as the racism he’s experienced in varying forms. That means breaking down some of the conflicting belief systems coming from one’s family, religion, culture and country, evaluating those beliefs and deciding what to let go.

“Deconstructing and pulling some of that back,” Jones says, “that frees us.”

Jones, who hails from Florida, understands the unwelcome feeling many BIPOC youth and adults say they experience in Humboldt. “In the South, you know where you can and can’t go as an African American person. In California, it’s ‘Oh, OK.’ But you can’t.” Jones adds, “On the East Coast it’s blatant; in California, it’s more subtle.” He says he was recently struck by his third-grade son’s admission that he sometimes worries whether his father will make it home. Even without having had a direct conversation about how easily a call to the police can escalate to violence against Black men, Jones says, “My children on some level already know what they’re dealing with. ... We need to combat that on some level to keep their self-esteem high.” For Jones, the goal is creating something like the recreation center he grew up near, “a place where you can be safe with your being as a whole ... mentally, spiritually — you have a place and you’re safe.”

HCBMAA Vice President Doug Smith, who is the coordinator of Humboldt State University’s African American Center for Academic Excellence, says he will be connecting to participants through poetry.

“It was a tool for me when I was younger going through challenges ... it was an outlet,” he says. And leaning into African oral tradition, he’ll be encouraging reading poetry out loud and connecting the work to what’s going on at school and in the community. “The history we do get about ourselves is very negative and what that does to a young child, growing up hearing only that they come from slaves,” can be devastating, he says, as can disassociation from ancestral ideals, values, tools and strategies. “Reaching into history, reaching into cultures that are not given platforms” through poetry, for example, can help reconnect kids to that well of cultural resources.

“We’re just trying to build back some cultural identity that’s been lost,” says Molofsky. “We’re resilient, right? That’s how our ancestors taught us to be.”

See the full schedule of HCBMAA’s Black Liberation Month events below and at www.northcoastjournal.com.

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HCBMAA's 2021 Harambee Liberation Month Schedule

In collaboration with McKinleyville High School's Black Student Union, Benjamin Mertz, activists and musical talent and community leaders engaging in cultural and healing activities.

Classes are open to all ages unless noted.

Please check our Facebook page for any missing Zoom links and more information on other Liberation Month events. Masks and social distancing required for all in-person events.

McKinleyville High School BSU

Monday-Friday Feb. 1-5

<https://mckinleyvillehighschool.nohum.org/>

Scroll down to News Announcements and click on Black History activities .

Below are three-week series classes:

Somatic Movement

Tuesdays 4-5 p.m.

Facilitator: Lorenza

Meeting ID: 836 7019 6916

Passcode: 778981

Being Yourself Through Deconstruction

Wednesdays 4-5 p.m.

Facilitator: Kory Jones

Meeting ID: 786 8544 3630

Passcode: FT7jtw

Teaching BIPOC Youth

(support group for local school teachers/ mentors)

Wednesdays 7-8 p.m.

Facilitators: Lorenza, Valetta and Flo

Meeting ID: 812 6888 7250

Black Women Civil Rights Discussion

Thursdays 4-5 p.m.

Facilitator: Nikki Valencia

Meeting ID: 823 2595 7803

Ujima Parent Peer Support Circle

Thursdays 6:30 p.m.

Facilitators: Valetta

Register at <https://humboldtstate.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZYqc-Ghqj4sGdzPCjCfn9mqY9FYhL1zZ7Zq>

Family Fit at Home

Fridays 5-6 p.m.

Facilitator: Andrea Jones

Meeting ID: 899 7862 2861

Community Class: Elderly Self-Care

Fridays 6-7 p.m.

Facilitator: Ms. Alice Barbee

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/85160655762>

Poetry/Lyrics Slam Night

Fridays 7-8 p.m.

Facilitator: Aj

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://humboldtstate.zoom.us/j/83060356170?pwd=WWUvNS95N1lDT09nUVdvWW1GOGY5Zz09>

Meeting ID: 830 6035 6170

Passcode: 005214

Walk in the Truth Series

Saturdays 9:30-11 a.m.

This is a four-week restorative circle series for women who have experience generational trauma, domestic violence/sexual abuse and unhealthy relationships.

Facilitator: Valetta

Register at <https://humboldtstate.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZIVfuqupjsrHtaHhPgluZ2aQtdXHjm6WhtA>

Kuumba Literacy

Saturdays on the Arcata Plaza 11:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m.

Facilitator: Andrea Jones

Redwoods Meditation/Yoga

Saturdays at 14 Union St. in Arcata noon-1 p.m.

Bring your yoga mat, water bottle and mask

Facilitator: Aj

Family Walk in the Park

Saturdays

First hike location TBA

Four-week series with Benjamin Mertz

Sundays at 4 p.m.

Feb. 7: The Underground Railroad, music of freedom and escape: profiles on Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass

Feb. 14: The Harlem Renaissance, the Fisk Jubilee Singers, and the poetry of James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes

Feb 21: Jim Crow, Work Songs, and the Blues: profiles on Fannie Lou Hamer and Bessie Smith

Feb. 28: The Civil Rights Movement - freedom songs, profiles on Bernice Johnson Reagon and Harry Belafonte

Zoom Link:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83384891002>

Special Event: Liberation March

Feb. 20 at 10 a.m.-noon

In honor of our Sistahs, Brothers and Youth that have died

Wear white and black, bring your candles and instruments.

More info will be provided on Facebook.

Arcata Liberation March (no speakers)

Feb. 20 at noon-1 p.m.

Meet at D Street Community Park. Please wear white during this silent demonstration to honor our ancestors.
Asante.

Special CPR Youth Certification

Feb. 22 at 6-7 p.m.

Ages 12-18; class size:10

This class is made possible by the COVID-19 Mental Health Grant from Humboldt Health Foundation to support youth that identify as Black, Brown or African American during the shelter-in-place ordinance. This is a first-come registration. Sign your youth up by emailing: hcbblackmusicnarts@gmail.com.