

6 a.m. 22°
9 a.m. 25°
12 p.m. 38°
3 p.m. 45°
6 p.m. 41°
9 p.m. 33°



Inside Today's Keepsake Section

Join all Americans in commemorating five decades of Black History Month, and be inspired by the experiences of 50 Difference Makers in our local Black community.

Samantha Scott Is Sumter's Top Businesswoman

By SUMMER JARRO | Daily Sun Senior Writer



Third-generation Sumter County resident Samantha Scott was named business woman of the year Friday night at the Sumter County Chamber of Commerce's awards gala.

Scott, who was elected state representative for District 52 in November, is a realtor with Connie Mahan Real Estate and

Samantha Scott

Please See SCOTT, A10

Florida Marks 50th Black History Month

IN SPORTS | B1

Elena Rybakina finally has her second major championship, outdueling top-ranked Aryna Sabalenka in three sets to win the women's Australian Open.



IN LOCAL | D6

Elsie Aldrich recently acquired a new skill that was once a childhood dream: Training her first guide dog, a Labrador named Caddie.

The Village of Sunset Pointe resident, fueled by her own personal experiences with family members who were blind, made her dream of training guide dogs happen with The Guide Dog Foundation.

IN NATIONAL NEWS | A2

POWERFUL STORM SYSTEM HAMMERS EAST COAST WITH FRIGID CONDITIONS

Blizzardlike conditions from a "bomb cyclone" struck parts of the Carolinas on Saturday and ushered in freezing temperatures along much of the East Coast, placing 240 million people under weather advisories.

IN POLITICAL NEWS

JUDGE WON'T HALT ICE IN MINNESOTA AS LAWSUIT PROCEEDS

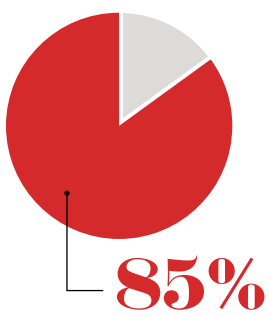
A federal judge denied a preliminary injunction in a lawsuit filed this month against an immigration enforcement surge. **A5**

IN HEALTH NEWS

U.S. LIFE EXPECTANCY HIT ALL-TIME HIGH IN 2024, CDC SAYS

Life expectancy rose to 79 in 2024, the highest mark in U.S. history, with signs of continued improvement. **A22**

BY THE NUMBERS



More than three-quarters of U.S. adults have a best friend, according to a survey by Talker Research. The average person who has a best friend said they would give two of their friends that title. Twenty-one percent of respondents spend most time with their close friends over others.



E1

Make it a Great Day!

- Weather D2
- Recreation Listings D10-11
- Recipes E1
- Reading E4
- Puzzles E5-6
- Horoscopes E7
- Advice E9



Photos by George Horsford | Daily Sun

Ocala residents Phece Frazier, left, with Kenya Thornton and her daughter, Peyton Thornton, joined hundreds of walkers and other community activists in a march to commemorate Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day in Ocala on Jan. 19.

By BREA JONES | Daily Sun Staff Writer

Unlike what most American textbooks teach, the first lines of U.S. Black history weren't written when enslaved Africans were brought to Jamestown in 1619.

The story starts here, in Florida, in 1606 — a year before Jamestown was even founded.

It starts with a baby named Agustin, the first recorded U.S. birth of African descent.

That record, discovered in 1906 and digitized by University of South Florida researchers in 2016, is one of many "Florida firsts" still lost in the "Jamestown first" narrative.

Black history in Florida is not a sidebar to U.S. events, but an engine that has driven the nation's moral and social progress. Florida is home to the first legally sanctioned free Black settlement in Fort Mose, the first Underground Railroad route, the breaking of the baseball color barrier by Jackie Robinson in Daytona Beach and the Black Lives Matter movement born from a mother's grief in Sanford.

The 1968 excavation of Kingsley Plantation in Jacksonville is the nation's first to study the antebellum South.

Incorporated in 1887, Eatonville, located 60 miles south of The Villages, is the oldest all-Black city in America.

This year, all polls point toward Florida electing its first Black governor — an office won by a Black man only three times in America's 250-year history.

It's a milestone moment as Black History Month turns 50.

Please See BLACK HISTORY, A6



Above: Daniel Colson, of West Palm Beach, portrays a militia member before a battle reenactment at Fort Mose Historic State Park in St. Augustine in June 2024. At right, Deborah Simmons, Sparkle Corbett and Latisha Simmons celebrate the restoration of the first freed Black town at the fort in May 2025.



america at 250



Members of the Mount Zion United Methodist Church of Reddick and New Covenant Missionary Baptist Church of Ocala joined local residents and community leaders Jan. 19 for the annual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day Historic March through downtown Ocala.



Photos by George Horsford | Daily Sun

The Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Commemorative Commission of Marion County organized the march that stepped off in downtown Ocala and led to the Martin Luther King Jr. Recreation Complex where the group hosted its MLK Day in the Park event.

BLACK HISTORY

Continued from A1

Only Texas is home to more Black residents (4.3 million) than Florida (3.9 million) in a nation that has remained relatively stable for the last century at 12-14% Black.

"We stand at the intersection of the past and the future," said Dr. Karsonya Wise Whitehead, president of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, whose founder is responsible for Black History Month. "We do not have to be told the story of America because we are writing it, we are telling it and we are pointing the way to it."

Today's effort to preserve Black history in Central Florida blends government initiatives with community activism. Efforts include:

- » **The Florida Museum of Black History:** A bill is nearing a floor vote to name St. Johns County as the site for this new repository of African American history.
- » **The Florida Black Heritage Trail:** Launched in 1990, this path takes travelers to landmarks from Pensacola to Key West.
- » **State Park Sites:** Sites like Fort Mose Historic State Park (first free Black settlement) and Bill Baggs Cape Florida State Park (Underground Railroad) are protected as part of the state park system.
- » **Academic Histories:** The African American History Project at the University of Florida and the State Library and Archives of Florida offer narratives, photos, film and government records documenting the Black experience in the state.

- » **Historic Cemetery Grants:** Florida provides competitive grants to help preserve abandoned Black cemeteries.
- » **Church-led education:** Amid state restrictions on teaching certain aspects of Black history, dozens of Florida churches have partnered with groups like Faith in Florida to provide lessons outside the public school system.
- » **Historic community defense:** Groups in historic areas like Royal in Wildwood are fighting to prevent the displacement of historic Black neighborhoods.

"The legacy they left behind is really blossoming," said Maggie Harrison, whose ancestors walked from Royal, a community founded by freed slaves, to worship at Mount Moriah African Methodist Episcopal Church, founded in 1868. "To see them back then in those days, and look at us now — there has been great improvement," Harrison continued. "The legacy of working in God's grace remains."

Dozens of Florida Black churches have passed their centennial, including at least four churches in Sumter County.

Adamsville Baptist Church was built in 1850 in Wildwood, and Mt. Olive Baptist, of Webster, was built in 1882. In 1875, some Mount Moriah members branched off to build their own church, the now 150-year-old Ebenezer AME Church. But Harrison, who serves on the board of stewards for Mount Moriah, still prefers the small congregation of the 157-year-old mother church. "Mount Moriah has been standing for so long as a beacon of light in the

community," said its pastor, Pamala Harrison-Bivins. "I can remember when my daddy was an officer there and my grandmother was a member. There was a time when the church was the go-to place for everything. If you needed help, or there was any kind of unrest in the community, you went to the church. It was always a place of hope and safety."

Today, its entry walls are dotted with photos dating back to the 1920s.

The pews are laced with dilapidated hymnals, some without covers, lit in the soft glow of stained glass windows engraved with family names.

Harrison-Bivins thinks the church is a great candidate for the National Register of Historic Places, which would make it eligible for more grant money, tax incentives and restoration help.

More than 20 of Florida's historic Black churches were awarded over \$3.5 million from the African-American Cultural Heritage Fund in fiscal years 2021-22 and 2022-23, with priority given to sites on the National Register of Historic Places.

That designation helped the 158-year-old Saint James AME Church in Sanford, where Julia Brunson secured \$500,000 in a Florida African-American Cultural and Historical Grant.

The church spent \$300,000 for new roof shingles and hopes to use the rest to restore the six stained glass windows in its sanctuary.

Still, it's not enough. "Those are about \$140,000 a piece, so you go \$140 times six, and you're back up to over half a million again," Brunson said. "They've never been restored or preserved. I don't believe in my lifetime I'll ever be able to get it back to the way it was."

Please See NEXT PAGE

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Continued from PREVIOUS PAGE

Restoration efforts also are underway at historically Black school buildings in Florida, including the two-room wood-frame Okahumpka Rosenwald School in Lake County.

It's one of hundreds of schools for Black students financed across the South from 1917 to 1932 by Julius Rosenwald, then head of Sears, Roebuck and Co.

The schools were formed in partnership with Black orator and educator Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute.

The facility, and its sister school in Mount Dora, are the only two survivors out of the 10 built in Lake County (there is only one still standing in Marion County and none in Sumter).

Harriet Hawkins-Livingston remembers attending that school for children who no one else wanted to teach.

"Always work hard and make sure you get your education, that was bonded by the family and the school," she said of her time there from first through fourth grades.

"The life lesson for me is, if you see something that needs to be done that would change the destiny for your people, go for it. Stay at it and just keep fighting until the end."

Hawkins-Livingston is the niece of Virgil Hawkins, a civil rights attorney whose nine-year legal battle against the University of Florida led to the desegregation of Florida's graduate and professional schools.

Virgil's parents donated the half acre of land on which the school was built before it was shuttered about 60 years ago.

"I'm really happy to say that my family helped start this

here in this small community of Okahumpka," she said. "It would mean so much to me to just walk in the building again."

That dream of the Okahumpka Community Club, many who are also former students of the school, is now close to coming true.

In 2021, the school was added to the National Register of Historic Places, and local leaders and supporters have raised more than \$450,000 to restore it.

"We are seeing things actually happen," said Hawkins-Livingston. "It's just amazing. I can't explain the feeling but, when it first started I would just ride by and feel so good to see what was going on in Okahumpka."

Club member Chip D'Amico, a retired police officer, said it's remarkable the school is still standing.

"Every sixth grade class in Lake County should come here for free to see what it was like to try to go to school in this place," he said. "It couldn't have been easy. They got what was mandated, and that's all."

Meanwhile, Florida's oldest historically Black grade school is making history once again.

St. Peter Claver Catholic School in Tampa last year became the first Catholic microschool in the state — just in time to avoid closure.

Today, the microschool serves just 65 students — 132 years after its founding — in this new model that focuses on super small class sizes and charges an annual tuition of \$9,160.

The Diocese of St. Petersburg subsidizes diocesan schools based on their need, and the state has made it possible for students, regardless of household income,

to receive scholarships for private schools.

"The original school mission, even back in 1894, was to educate the students no one else was willing to," said Principal John Davidson, of the school that was burned to the ground eight days after opening. "It was like we are this charity case type situation, and we aren't that. These kids are smart, good and come from strong families."

The microschool model has become especially popular in Florida after the state passed a law in 2024 that allows for buildings such as performing arts venues, libraries and theaters to be used as schools for just a few dozen students.

Arizona and Florida are widely considered the states with the highest number of microschools, and the National Association of Black Microschool Leaders headquartered in Lakeland.

It's a future for a school with deep roots in the past.

St. Peter Claver has educated more than 2,500 students, mostly Black, who came from a nearby public housing complex that has been replaced with luxury apartments.

Davidson grew up in downtown Tampa's historic Central Park neighborhood just three blocks away from the school he is now in his second year leading.

"Sometimes we are looked at as a mission with a school versus a school with a mission, but if you want a good education, you go to St. Peter Claver Catholic school," he said. "I made it known the second I got here that's what I'm aiming for. Our students know they're loved, and that's the biggest thing."

Please See NEXT PAGE



Photos by George Horsford | Daily Sun

Restoration efforts are progressing at the Okahumpka Rosenwald School building, shown above in April and then November 2025. Below, Harriet Hawkins-Livingston, the niece of Civil Rights activist attorney Virgil Hawkins, attended the school in the 1950s. The building was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2021.



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america at 250

Continued from PREVIOUS PAGE

Broken.
Sunken.
Nameless.
Shaun Wethington, of the Village of Mallory Square, noticed Evergreen Memorial Gardens Cemetery's deterioration nearly five years ago.

Overgrown grass, damaged grave markers and some headstones being swallowed by the ground.

"We have a whole history in that cemetery," she said. "The fact a human life was lived, it should have some dignity. It looks like they were just thrown in a field and no one cares anymore. There are souls out there who meant something and still mean something to us. Those are our loved ones."

Trips here are a family reunion for Wethington. Her father, mother, step-father, grandmother, uncles, cousins and close friends all are buried at the historic Black cemetery that predates the 1950s.

She's been coming here since her grandmother died 23 years ago, and has been shocked to see it fall into disrepair in recent years.

"It's just absolutely heart-breaking and really horrific to see," she said. "The further you go back into the cemetery, you will see all kinds of trash, even tires. Those of us who could go out there try to clean up, but we couldn't do the whole thing. That's how it got out of hand."

Kathy Wright said she's had the same devastating experience visiting the graves of her mother and grandparents.

"I remember in August just starting to just cry," she said. "There's no way I can allow my family to be out here in these conditions. I was out there cleaning my mother's and my grandparents' graves when I ran into one of my classmates from high school who drove out to visit his mother's grave. We started talking about the situation, called a couple of other people and realized we all had the same concerns."

Evergreen cemetery is one of the more than 3,000 historical Black cemeteries that are 70 to 100 years old in Florida — many of which have been neglected, abandoned or erased.

State records show the company managing Evergreen was dissolved in September 2025, leaving Wright and a community group of about 60 volunteers to perform frequent cleanups.

It's a similar situation in Crystal River, where Andrea McCray learned that Hurricane Idalia in 2023 dislodged bodies from their graves at Crystal Memorial Gardens Cemetery.

"The cemetery was not well cared for," she said. "All of my ancestors are buried here. My mother, my father, my grandmothers and aunts. Nearly everyone."

It's a statewide issue and "the overwhelming majority are Black," said Antoinette Jackson, USF's anthropology chair who chaired the state's Abandoned African American Cemeteries Task Force and created the Black Cemetery Network.

"Segregation was implemented all the way down to the cemeteries," Jackson said. "The Black Cemetery Network is a memorialization and place of reference to show how history is maintained. I call it a living archive because it's a labor of love that continues."

Small organizations are working to restore Black cemeteries throughout the state, she said, fueled by the Abandoned African Cemeteries grant that provides up to \$50,000 to organizations doing this work.

During the first two years of grant funding in 2024 and 2025, \$970,380 was awarded to 22 applicants.

McCray's Friends of Crystal Memorial Gardens Cemetery Inc. earned \$81,000 in the 2025 fiscal year to help restore the cemetery that dates back to 1818. Ground-penetrating radar scans found 25 lost gravesites there last summer "and we didn't even finish the whole row," McCray said. "What we were able to find is monumental."

The next step is a flood study to keep the cemetery from becoming a retention pond.

"I have the church records that show that we have been here before the county was incorporated," said McCray. "These are the people who built Crystal River and the county. They were the backbone, the builders, the business leaders, the teachers of the community and we are over 50 years late honoring them. This cemetery must be preserved because this is the city's history."

Two hours to the east, in Sanford, thousands of blank concrete markers stretch across the Page Jackson Cemetery.

It's all that could be done in 2021 by the Central Florida Cemetery Project (CFCP).

The group's mission: to honor the more than 2,000 nameless bodies buried at the historic Black cemetery originally just known as "Colored Cemetery."

Pasha Baker, CEO of the Goldsboro West Side Community Historical Association, said burials at the cemetery date back to the 1700s.

"The cemetery proves that Black people have always been here," she said. "This ground has enslaved people buried here, and we'll never know their names because they don't have headstones. But those are our pioneers. They deserve respect."

Only 800 out of the 3,000 people buried in the city-owned section of the cemetery are identified by the names on the headstones.

Legends laid to rest here include:

- » Drew Bundi Brown, Muhammad Ali's trainer who helped coin his famous phrase, "Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee"
- » Harlem Renaissance writer Zora Neale Hurston's mother and brother
- » Sanford historian Altermese Smith Bentley
- » Edna Cross Burton, member of the all-Black 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion
- » At least 47 veterans who served in the Civil War, World War I and II

"Fixing the wrongs done in the past now is monumental," said Jennifer Eve, president of CFCP. "When we first started, it was a place of utter destruction. There were vaults broken into, headstones that looked like a sledgehammer was taken to them. There was an utter lack of respect that was appalling."

The nonprofit has worked with the city since 2018 to raise sunken headstones, repair and clean damaged markers and identify unmarked graves in 9 acres owned by the City of Sanford.

Last March, it identified another 150 graves.

Now, part of the cemetery has been cleaned with the city covering basic mowing.

"But we have so many more graves to mark," Eve said of 6 acres of the cemetery on property owned by the historical association since 2016. "It will take a while."

Almost 90 miles north at San Sebastián Cemetery in Saint Augustine, a blue waterproof tarp covers one above-ground brick grave smashed open by vandals.

Although Willie Cooper doesn't have family buried here, he feels a duty to preserve it.

"When we inherited it, you couldn't even tell it was a cemetery because it was so grown over," said Cooper, president of the West Augustine Improvement Association that acquired the abandoned cemetery from the City of St. Augustine in 2018. "We signed up to take this on and don't have the luxury of walking away. It was a two-day job minimum just to cut the grass."

The nonprofit tends to both San Sebastian and Pinehurst cemeteries, two of Florida's oldest African American cemeteries dating back to the 1840s and 1880s.

Now a serene space where unique headstones rise against the backdrop of mature trees, it was once thick with the tentacles of tree roots hiding the markers



Photos by George Horsford | Daily Sun

Crystal Memorial Gardens Cemetery, Crystal River: An angel with a broken arm marks a grave at this cemetery founded in 1884 by the oldest Black church in Citrus County.



Panasoffkee Cemetery, Lake Panasoffkee: This cemetery, which dates back to at least 1888, houses broken grave markers and unidentified remains under piles of limerock.



San Sebastian Cemetery, St. Augustine: Carved chains denote graves of enslaved people in this cemetery dating back to 1853, where a tree has grown through some headstones.



Pinehurst Cemetery, St. Augustine: Graves date back to the 1840s at one of Florida's oldest segregated cemeteries, where some headstones are sinking into the ground.



The Oak Tree Union Colored Cemetery, Taylorville: The graves of at least 200 unidentified people are spread throughout this cemetery established between 1895 and 1900.



Wild Cow Prairie Cemetery, Webster: This cemetery was founded in 1849, where American flags and orange marker flags signal the burial grounds of an enslaved people of the Green plantation.



Oak Hill Cemetery, Royal: Restoration work at this cemetery, founded in 1865 by former slaves after the Civil War, includes the need to clean and repair broken headstones.



Page Jackson Cemetery, Sanford: Cement blocks mark the sites of unidentified remains at this burial ground known as "the Colored Cemetery" when founded in the mid-1800s.

for simply "slave."

A \$39,160 Abandoned African Cemeteries grant in 2025 was used to confirm the cemetery boundary line and find more than 90 unmarked graves.

"We'll have to move the boundary line," Cooper said. "We are constantly finding new graves."

Each year the nonprofit hosts the MLK Day of Service Community Cleanup and Restoration Day to repair the damage done.

"The lack of respect some have for other people's loved one's is astonishing," he said.

Florida is currently uncovering a hidden landscape of "erased" African American cemeteries that were paved over or abandoned during the Jim Crow era.

Among those found by archeologists like Jackson:

- » Lincoln Memorial Park in Miami, one of South Florida's most significant Black cemeteries, currently facing neglect.
- » The historic Oaklawn and Evergreen cemeteries in St. Petersburg — which now sit under a VIP parking lot and Interstate 75.
- » The 1901 Zion Cemetery in Tampa, discovered beneath the Robles Park Village public housing complex built in the 1950s.
- » St. Matthew Baptist Church Cemetery in Clearwater, found under a FrankCrum staffing firm parking lot.
- » Ridgewood Cemetery in Tampa, where about 250 graves were found located on the grounds of King High School.
- » Balboa Cemetery in Panama City, which is now partially covered by a Goodyear tire shop, contrasting with the well-maintained White Oakland Cemetery nearby.

"I am very happy with the work we did," Jackson said. "It was a challenge, but the grants really do help. I feel like the state stepped up to the plate and became a meaningful model of how to bring dignity to the dead and help people memorialize their loved ones."

While the birth of America's first Black child, Agustin, was recorded on the first page of our country's Black history, there is no known historical record of where or when he died.

As the child of enslaved parents, it is unlikely his life was chronicled.

But William Tucker, the first documented child of African descent born in the English colony in 1624, is believed to be interred in the Tucker Family Cemetery in Hampton, Virginia.

The land was purchased for \$100 in 1896 by a group of six Black men, including Thomas Tucker, William's ninth-generation descendant.

That cemetery is nestled behind Aberdeen Gardens, now a neighborhood of 158 homes built in 1934 as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal.

The seven-street community is the only federal resettlement project designed, built and occupied by Black Americans.

Today it reflects an integrated America: 52% Black and 31% White.

The Tucker family still holds the deed to the 2-acre site and continues to write a more complete account of America's Black history.

Several family members still live in middle-class Aberdeen Heights — median income \$71,000.

Every summer the Tucker family hosts a commemoration here, a quarter mile from the plantation where their ancestors were enslaved.

Since 2017, they have found more than 100 more unmarked graves.

They are marked with simple white crosses.

Staff writer Brea Jones can be reached at 352-753-1119, ext. 5414, or brea.jones@thevillagesmedia.com.

America at 250

In this month's Keepsake Section: Join all Americans in commemorating five decades of Black History Month, and be inspired by the experiences of 50 Difference Makers in our local Black community.



Shanda Taylor-Boyd

Taylor-Boyd, 63, a “go-bird” of the Village of Pine Ridge, is a former U.S. Army Captain and former nurse. She is a spokesperson for the Disabled American Veterans, Camp4Heroes, and Villagers for Veterans. She is holding a jar containing soil from the site in Pennsylvania where her great uncle, Zachariah Walker, was burned alive by a lynch mob in front of 4,000 people. She is also flanked by photographs of her in dress blues, laying his remains to rest in August 2025 — 114 years later.

“I just believe in the miracle of justice and the power of love — that is what this is all about. A legacy of love, not a legacy of lynching, hatred or resentment, but forgiveness. We are moving forward, and want everyone to be a part of it. I also try to make a difference by singing the national anthem at events to help injured and ill veterans escape for a few moments to bring them joy. I am especially empowered by the lyrics ‘and our flag was still there.’ My message is always about spreading hope, because hope is the driving force that fuels a legacy of love.”

— Stories curated by Brea Jones, Daily Sun

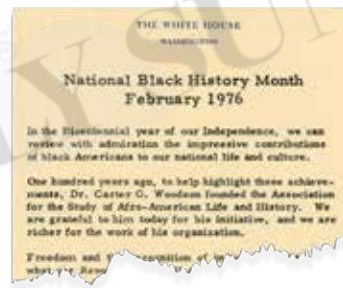


The African American Club Of The Villages

The African American Club of The Villages is one of the oldest clubs in The Villages. The non-profit was formed in 1999 to sponsor social and cultural activities that promote goodwill and friendship. TAAC participates in civic activities such as the Sumter County Adopt-a-Precinct Program, and it provides scholarships to local high school students. Each year, in addition to the student scholarship luncheon, the group hosts Black History Month, Women's History Month, a Juneteenth celebration and a Winter dance. For more information, visit taclub.org.

50 Stories for 50 Years Of Black History Month

Today marks the golden anniversary of Black History Month, signed into law on Feb. 10, 1976, by President Gerald Ford in America's bicentennial year of independence. That moment itself was 50 years in the making after historian, author and activist Dr. Carter G. Woodson introduced “Negro History Week” in 1926. Woodson chose February to honor the birthdays of two prominent abolitionists: Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln. Today, leading into America's 250th birthday, President Donald Trump has proclaimed February as “an occasion to celebrate the contributions of so many Black American patriots who have indelibly shaped our Nation's history.” The Daily Sun joins that celebration by sharing the stories of 50 Black residents of our community who've made a difference for future generations.



Portraits by George Horsford, Daily Sun

america at 250

Shelly Williams

Williams, 75, of the Village of Dunedin, is the founder of Single African American Sisters Supporting, Informing, Empowering (SASSIE). She is holding a photograph of her mother.

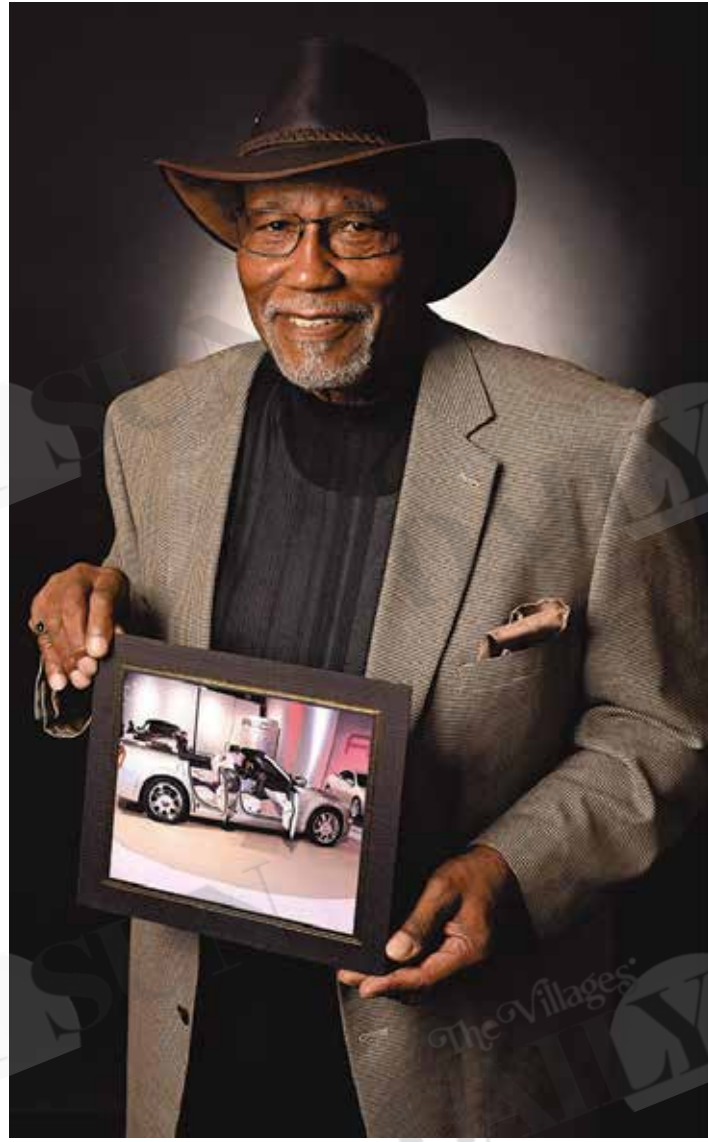
“During my first year of teaching as a 22-year-old educator with a master’s degree in business education, I was placed in a school in a district where poverty shaped much of what happened in the classroom. One of my keyboarding classes stood out right away. It was a group of mostly African American students and, unlike my other classes, this one had been labeled by the school as ‘low-achieving.’ That didn’t sit right with me. From that day forward, they worked. They didn’t always love it, but they worked. They learned that someone expected something of them, and they rose to meet that expectation.”



Reggie Hayes

Hayes, 85, of the Village of Sabal Chase, is a retired U.S. Air Force veteran and the photographer for the Sophisticated Gents of Florida and The African American Club of The Villages. He is holding a prototype of a 2001 Chrysler convertible he helped design.

“I made a difference in a 3-year-old little girl by the name of Tiona Graham in Detroit. Her mother was young with five kids by the age of 21. My wife and I got involved with her through our church Christmas program, serving under-privileged families for Christmas. We bought Tiona presents and toys. Everything we did with our grandkids, she did with us. It made a big difference in her life because she went on to school and became a nurse. We still keep in touch with her and her family. Now she is 33 years old and doing very well.”



Bettye Stevens Coney

Coney, 85, of Leesburg, is a historian, a former Lake County public school teacher and former Senior Equity, Cultural Proficiency and Educational Consultant. She is holding a book of her family genealogy.

“Anyone who knows me knows that I feel a sense of duty to provide education to my community and youth. I refuse to accept that some of our young people are a lost cause because I have seen many cases where appropriate changes made a positive difference. It is important for those of us who are the researcher and keeper of the faith and knowledge of facts to uplift our world with truth. We live in a multicultural society where all cultures should be respected. I am proud of my roots and heritage as my family taught me, and I teach my offspring, we are from ‘good stock.’”



Michelle Coley

Coley, 65, of the Village of Newell, is a retired management analyst for the National Institutes of Health and a member of The African American Club of The Villages. She is holding a retirement gift from the NIH.

“The work we did at The National Institutes of Health for The Health in Buildings Roundtable was important because it lent itself to the health of occupants working inside of buildings as it relates to light, air, water and space. A lot of things have changed, and more people are now working inside their homes. Some of that information becomes relevant for those who can use it in their home to ensure they have a healthy and safe space. I hope the science of health in buildings continues as it is still relevant to those who work inside of commercial buildings.”



La'Wana Harris

Harris, 55, of the Village of Belvedere, is the founder of her own publishing company, Jaden Israel Books. She is holding a children's book about a character named Eddie the Friendly Golf Cart that she created about a golf cart in The Villages.

“My mantra is that ‘I am a distribution center, not a storage facility.’ When I couldn’t find books featuring Black and Brown main characters for my grandson, I decided to write some books myself to celebrate these cultures. I had 10,000 books translated into Haitian Creole and distributed them to schools and orphanages throughout Haiti. Seeing children read his story has inspired my grandson. The publishing rights to the Jaden Israel Books series will be transferred to him on his 18th birthday to help build generational wealth.”



Fred Griffin Jr.

Griffin, 38, of Leesburg, is the president of the West Leesburg Community Development District, founder of Touching Heart's Group Homes and executive board member of the Sophisticated Gents of Florida. He is holding a Lake County Schools Alumni Hall of Fame trophy.

“It’s my mission to influence the next generation to give back to the community with volunteerism and activism. When I look around the meetings of the 11 different organizations I serve in Lake and Sumter counties, I notice I am the youngest person in the room. Our elders are aging, and we have the ability to step up to continue the work they started. I’d highly recommend (parents or grandparents) get a mentor for the youth in their life. Get plugged in with your passion and turn your passion into purpose.”



Pamala Harrison-Bivins

Harrison-Bivins, 70, of Wildwood, is the pastor of Mount Moriah African Methodist Episcopal Church and was the first Black woman elected as Wildwood city commissioner. She is holding an award from the Florida League of Cities for 25 years of service to Wildwood.

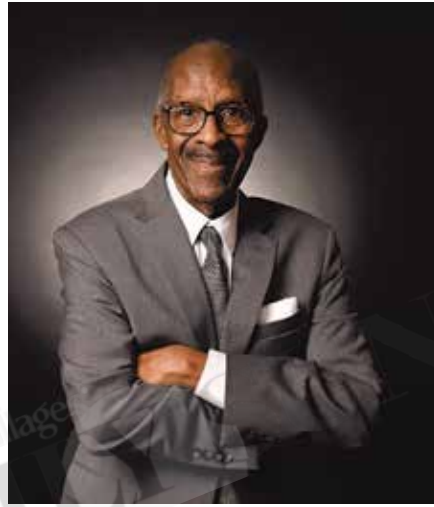
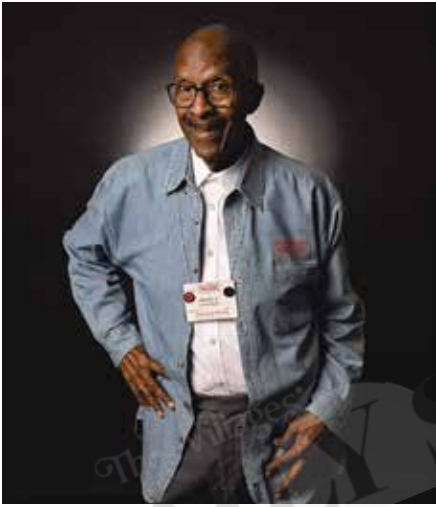
“Because of my presence as a commissioner, I hope other women of color will have a desire to go into the political arena. At the time I qualified for the seat, there needed to be more diverse representation. I wanted to see activities for all ages and all people. I wanted to see the west side of Wildwood given more consideration with upkeep and beautification. I believe the city will continue to expand upon the accomplishments already made and will do so in a spirit of excellence. I love my city, the City of Wildwood.”



Ire Bethea

Bethea, 72, of Ocala, is an Ocala city councilman, president of the Ocala Rotary Club, chairman of the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Commemorative Commission and a deacon at New St. John Missionary Baptist Church. He is holding an award from the Marion County Black Archives.

“I had a lot of great people in my life and was always told; ‘If you aren’t a part of the solution, you are part of the problem.’ I’ve been engaged in service for 50 years. In my fraternity, Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc, I’ve been blessed to be a part of starting a new chapter. Alongside me are men in their early 20s, 30s and 40s. I think that I have been a beacon of light in their lives, and I’m trying to prepare them to be actively engaged. Instead of just being a part of the fraternity, they can become leaders.”



Walter Martin

Martin, 84, of the Village of Ashland, is a former GMAC executive, a CDD 5 supervisor, an AARP Tax Aide volunteer and a member of The African American Club of The Villages. He is wearing attire for the "Way, Way, Way Off Broadway Players" theater group.

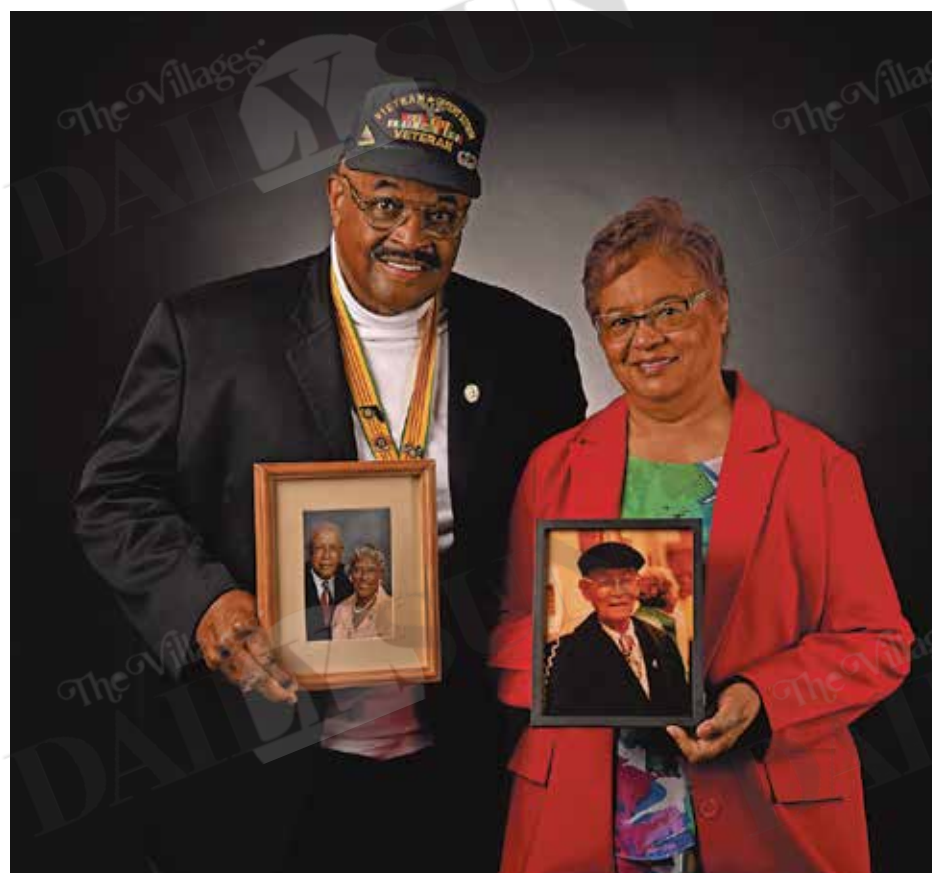
"I've lived in The Villages for over 21 years, and it's my belief we as Black people should make an effort to be involved and be seen. We are not excluded, but we believe we are not really included. That's true in all of life. As a supervisor for The Villages Community Development District 5, I don't do what I do for recognition; I do it because it's the right thing to do. I hope I inspire the youth to get out there and be involved. You will be accepted. Live well enough and people will remember you for what you did."



Cynthia Wilson-Graham

Wilson-Graham, 62, of Ocala, is the lead curator for the Marion County Black History Museum at Howard Academy Community Center. She is sitting with family photos from the early 1900s to 1950s.

"The thing I think about is bringing awareness to those unsung heroes of local history. Effie Carrie Mitchell Hampton, the first black woman physician in Florida; Edward D. Davis, who championed equal pay for teachers at the cost of his own job; Virginia Ferguson, the first woman licensed as a boat captain by the U.S. Coast Guard in Florida and first black female captain at Silver Springs; the black horsemen who contributed to the success of many triple crown winners; and local civil rights leaders. It's important to share stories to show how local history can connect and contribute to world history."



Harry and Connie Lumpkin

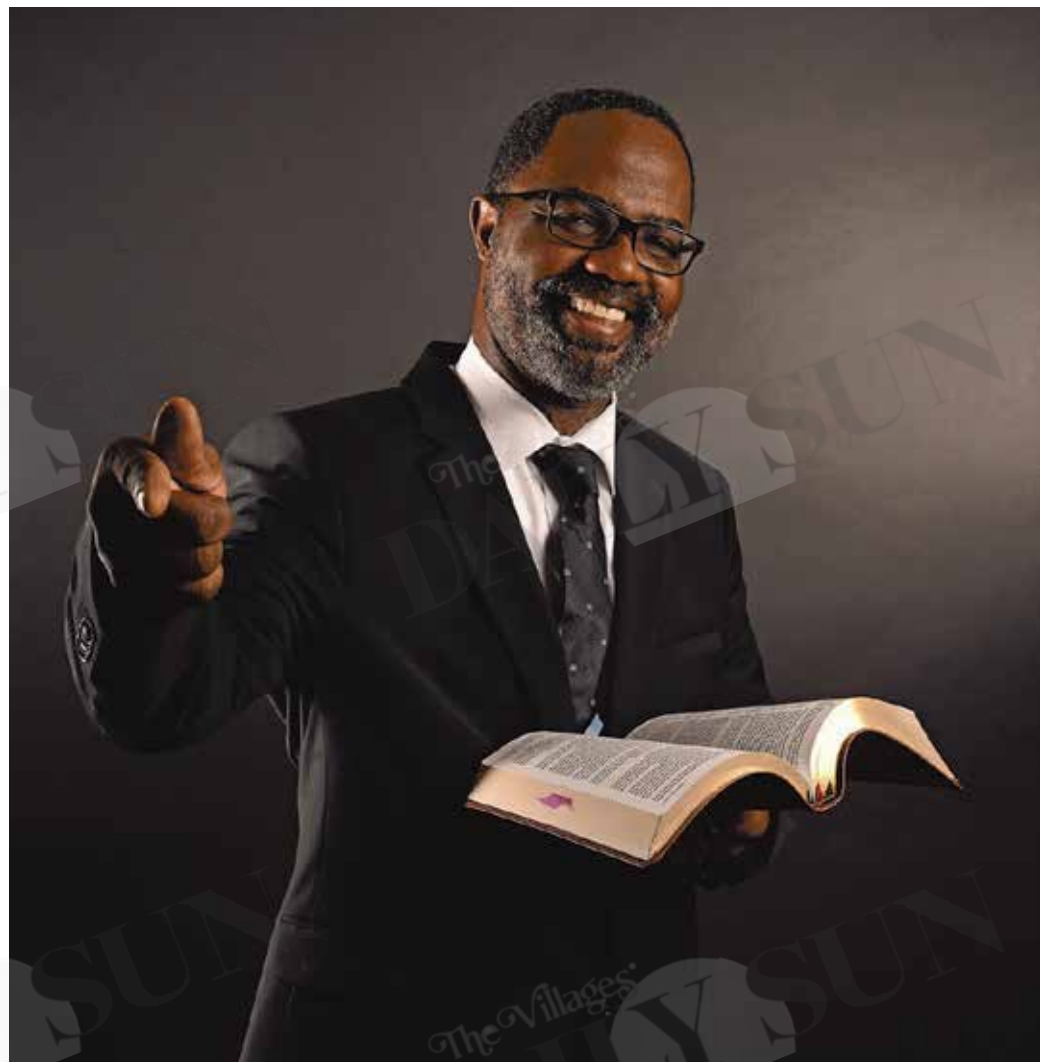
Harry, 78, and Connie, 76, of the Village of Hadley, are vice president and president, respectively, of the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Commemorative Committee. They are also president and vice president for membership, respectively, of the Baby Boomers Club of The Villages. Harry, a retired U.S. Army colonel, is former president of The Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 1036 and The African American Club of The Villages, of which the couple are members.

Said Harry: "As a professor at West Point Military Academy, I was able to integrate the first group of women into the academy. It made America aware that women are as proficient in leadership, honor and duty as their male counterparts." Added Connie, "I was working with the Department of Defense as a civilian and rose to being a GS-15, which is really hard to do having to move around so much."

John Christian ▶

Christian 53, of Leesburg, is a five-time former mayor of Leesburg, 19-year Leesburg city commissioner, executive director for the Community Development Corporation of Leesburg (CDC) and founding pastor of Christian Worship Center.

“My biggest impact was with the construction of the Leesburg recreation gym. It’s a place for the youth to gather and play unrestricted. That was one of my first big items as a Leesburg commissioner. Things we talked about that we didn’t have as youth, I was able to make happen. I think growing up in Leesburg, we had areas that were disinvested in by our city. My faith, also being a pastor, allowed me to see past what was not there and what could become. So, hopefully, that will be an inspiration for young boys and young girls growing up in this city.”



◀ LeAnn Mackey-Barnes

Barnes, 50, of Ocala, is a Marion County Judge. She is holding the Judge Robert K. Rouse Jr. Pro Bono Service Award.

“In 2004, I accepted the position of county court supervisor at the public defender’s office. That decision placed me in a position to help develop the Marion County Veterans Treatment Court, the Mental Health Court and a juvenile expungement program. This brought vital resources to our veterans, those struggling with mental health challenges and our youth. My hope is that this work continues to provide support and opportunity, and that my journey creates lasting impact and serves as a reminder to future generations that perseverance matters. I want to inspire others to pursue their passions with resilience. It’s not often in our timing but God’s timing.”

Debra Stevenson

Stevenson, 72, of the Village of Charlotte, is a former president of The African American Club of The Villages. She is holding a handmade outfit from Uganda.

“While driving my sons to their summer camps, I noticed many underprivileged children in East Windsor, New Jersey, weren’t participating in structured activities. So I started the summer enrichment program. It lasted for 15 years, and we hired certified teachers to teach math, reading, language arts, science and physical education. Friday would be field trip day. We also had a free food program. Every spring break we would take some children to visit Historically Black Colleges and Universities, so they could see people like them in college to inspire them to maintain skills they learned during the school year.”



◀ Pamela R. Springer

Springer, 83, of the Village of Bradford, is the 2025 Associated Skin Care Professionals Industry Icon of the Year, founder of the Skin and Make Up Institute of Arizona, first plus-sized model for Essence Magazine and a member of the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Commemorative Committee. She is holding some of her modeling photos.

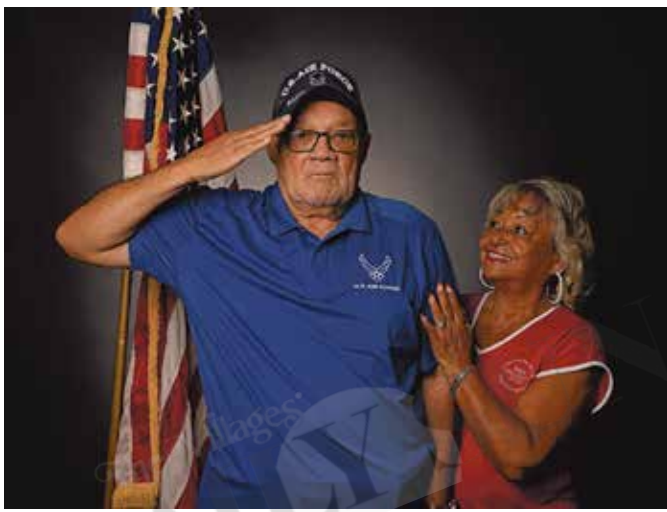
“Opportunity knocked and I answered the door. I became a fashion show producer for major retail stores, and when California went into a recession and most of the stores went into bankruptcy, I chose to go back to school. I opened a 6,500 square foot aesthetic school from the ground up, which I sold 15 years later. The secret to my success was finding a niche market I was passionate about. All I can say is, my life decisions have brought me much joy!”

Semeion Richardson ▶

Richardson, 45, of Leesburg, is the founder of Artist With A Purpose, the first Black-owned art gallery in the tri-county area. She is standing with her colored pencil artwork titled “A Lady’s Respect.”

“The time I made a difference was by starting Artist With A Purpose. That was a seed and catalyst for change, and it started with the gallery. My goal is to bring more culture and diversity, not just for older but also the younger people. It’s also important to talk about mental health, so I want to bring more mental art programming. Right now, we have reached 3,000 kids or more this year with my spoken word and poetry. The studio was built for the community, not for me. I want the community to come out, make art, do more workshops and have an open space for everyone to be creative.”





Ron and Toni Booker

Ron, 82, and Toni, 73, of the Village of Winifred, are members of The African American Club of The Villages. Ron, a U.S. Air Force veteran, is also an instructor with the R&B Line Dancers and Toni is a solo vocalist. They are each holding photos of their parents.

Said Ron: "As the father of four girls, it's my job to see that they're going to be strong, independent women. I taught them to have faith in the Lord and faith in themselves with whatever they aspire to do. You can't do anything in life by yourself. It takes the faith of your religion and the faith of your family." Added Toni, "After I finish singing, people tell me how I touched them or brought back memories of a loved one, especially if I'm singing a gospel song. We try to involve ourselves in as much as we can."



Rita and Bill Holliday

Rita, 73, and Bill, 72, of the Village of Pine Hills, are members of The African American Club of The Villages, of which Bill is a former president. They are sitting with family photographs.

Said Rita, "My parents were determined to provide my sister and me the education they were denied. As a high school teacher, I was determined to provide my students with dreams for achievement. I was positioned to excel watching my parents help others and advocate for education and social justice." Added Bill, "My mother was a single mother of four after my father passed. Her greatest accomplishment was getting all my siblings and me a college education. She later got her own college education after us. As I stand on the shoulders of others, it's only right for me to be a pillar for the new generation."



Ruth Reed

Reed, 84, of Ocala, is an environmental activist and president of the Neighborhood Citizens of Northwest Ocala, Inc. She is holding a photo of her grandmother who was a Cherokee midwife from the 1800s, a rendering of a community center built on the site of a former charcoal plant she was instrumental in closing and a banner carried in a Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. parade.

"The coal plant soot was coming into the house so constantly that I started sleeping with a wet washcloth on my face. It wasn't just me, there were others suffering in the community and getting respiratory illnesses. If you are really concerned about your safety, you can find resources to help you do what you need to do. You have a right to clean air, water and soil as an American citizen."



Priscilla and Reggie Woodson

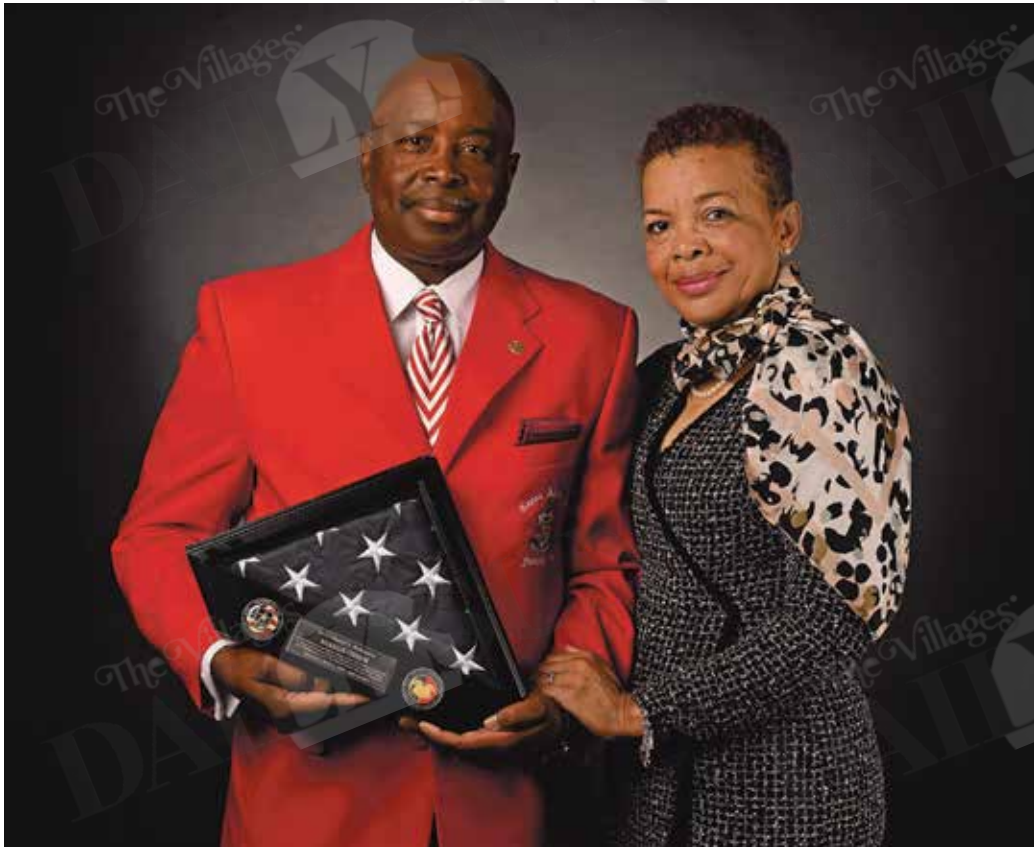
Priscilla, 65, and Reggie, 68, of the Village of Pennecamp, are members of The African American Club of The Villages, of which Priscilla is assistant treasurer. The couple are co-chairs of the Friendship Golf Tournament Scholarship Fundraiser.

Said Priscilla: "I remember growing up wearing cardboard in my shoes. I pursued my dream of going to cosmetology school and opening a shop, going to college and obtaining two degrees. Just because you're told 'no' all your life doesn't mean you can't pursue your dream." Added Reggie, "I worked to provide power to Washington, D.C., with Potomac Electric Power Company where we started a golf tournament and raised money for the children's hospital and low-income students. I want the youth to understand the importance of giving back."

Sisters Milele and Phyllis Archibald

Milele, 80, of the Village of Amelia, and Phyllis, 76, of the Village of Silver Lake, are members of The African American Club of The Villages. Both are founding members of Single African-American Sisters Supporting, Informing and Empowering (SASSIE). Phyllis is also a former administration chief for the Community Emergency Response Team.

Said Milele, "We grew up in Harlem, descendants of West Indian parents who did not finish high school but insisted that we did. I was the first in my family to go to college and study law at the University of California in Berkeley." Added Phyllis, "I earned my BA and was a state ombudsman to a nursing home in Brooklyn. My hope is for future generations to understand that life is not only about self, but how you treat others around you."



Darryl and Leslie Robinson

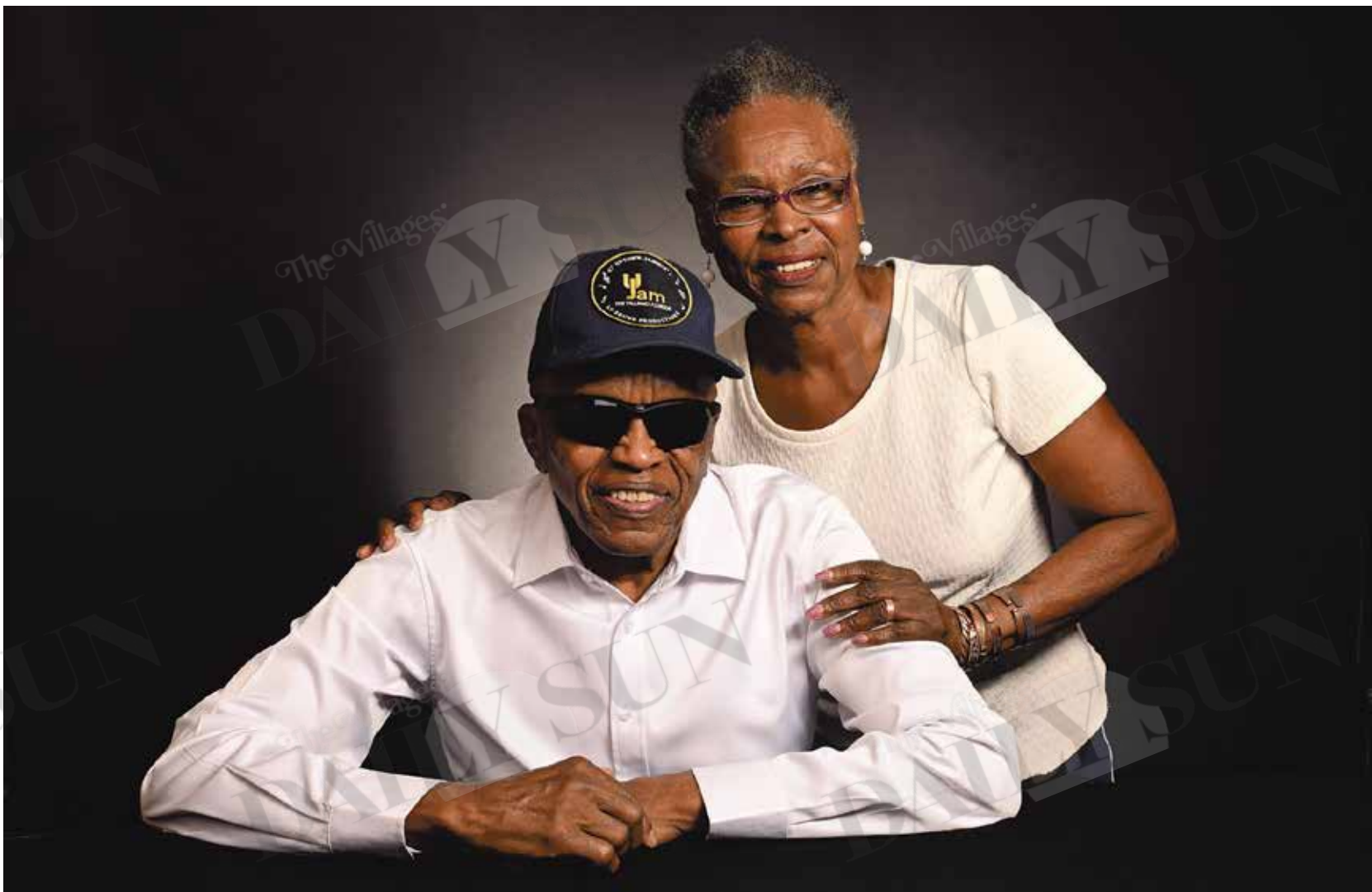
Darryl, 63, and Leslie, 62, of the Village of DeLuna, are members of The African American Club of The Villages. Darryl is also a lifetime member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Inc. Darryl is a retired special agent with Homeland Security and a U.S. Army lieutenant colonel, and Leslie is a retired teacher in exceptional student education.

Said Darryl, "Service to others makes me the man I am. My faith provides me with biblical knowledge, wisdom and understanding. My mother told me to 'run as fast as you can, as far as you can and as long as you can, because one day you won't be able to run anymore.'" Added Leslie, "From my mom I learned, 'It's not what you do or say, it's HOW you do what you do and what you say.' My life has taught me that you're in charge of your own destination."

Lawrence and Mamie Parker

Lawrence, 82, and Mamie, 76, of the Village of Piedmont, are members of The African American Club of The Villages and co-founders of Uptown Jammin. Lawrence is also a co-founder of the Sophisticated Gents of Florida. He is a retired architect of the capitol as a building inspector for senate buildings.

Said Lawrence, "We started a shadowing program where non-skilled trades people worked alongside licensed and skilled trades people." Added Mamie, "When I retired, I volunteered with Mariner Health and was able to inspire young ladies who were having a difficult time to have a positive outlook and work together. For any young person in a similar situation, I would say they need to learn to work together. It's important to listen to each other and don't be so easy to judge."





Marsha Jefferson

Jefferson, 82, of the Village of Palo Alto, and known as the "Pickleball Princess," is a member of The African American Club of The Villages. She is wearing her Florida Senior Games medal she earned in pickleball.

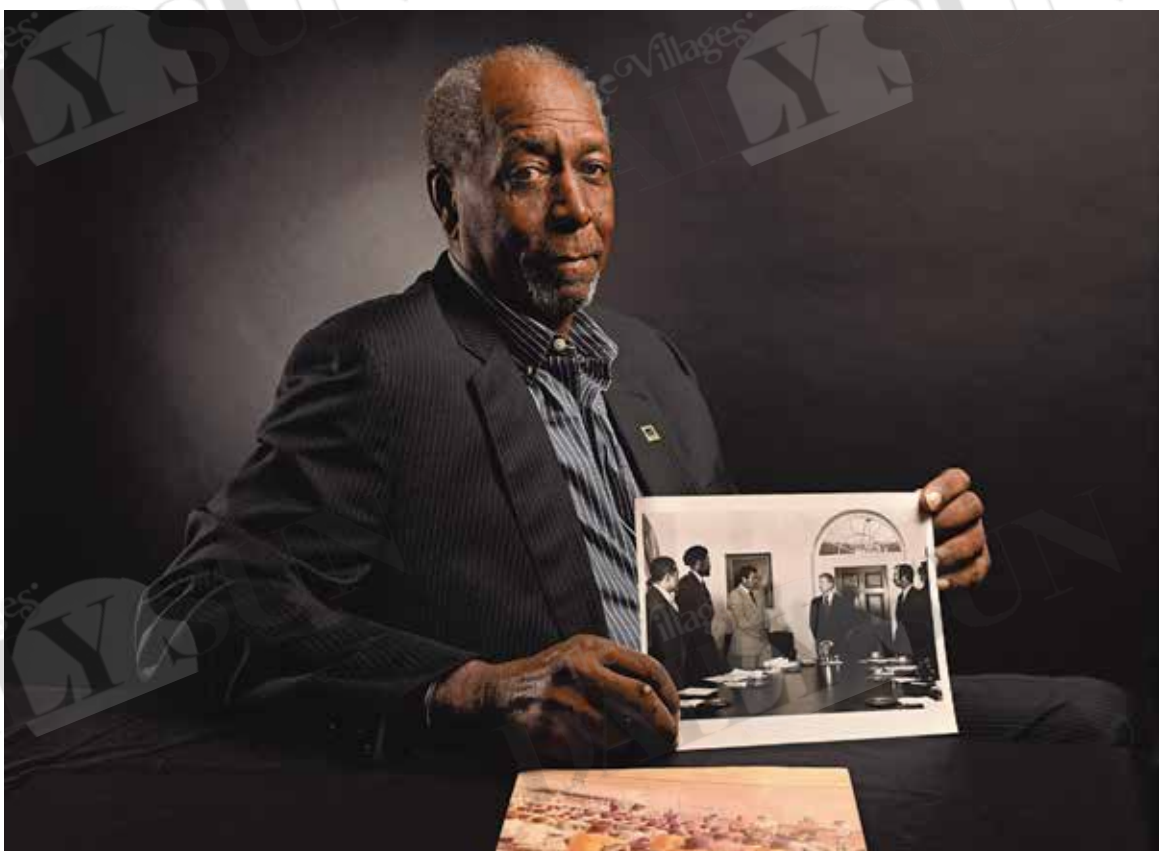
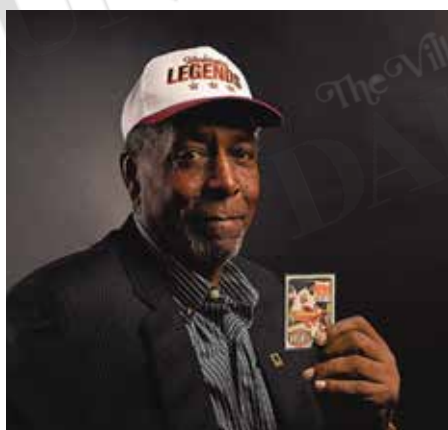
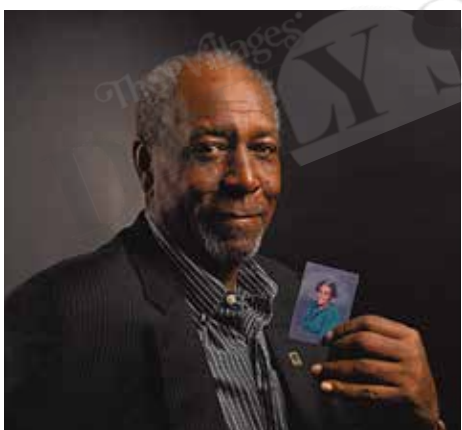
"I would say I made a difference through how I raised my son, Marvin. I raised him to be a good person and taught him to be self-sufficient by teaching him how to sew and how to cook. I taught him based on how I conduct myself, to make sure you're not a person who will be harmful or mean and are kind to everyone giving them a chance. That's my personality and the way I carried myself. When I moved to The Villages 27 years ago, I just talked to people and that's how I made friends."



Joan Sampson

Sampson, 71, of the Village of Pennecamp, is a retired high school counselor, member of The African American Club of The Villages and a mentor with New Covenant United Methodist Church at Wildwood Middle High School. She is holding diplomas earned by family members in the 1930s.

"My family instilled in me a legacy of service. I remember one student who said I showed him how to believe in himself. He's now an estate attorney with a wife and two lovely girls. A spirit of service to me looks like someone who actively involves themselves with helping others. It's the teacher who stays late to help a struggling student, or someone who participates in a food drive or community clean-up project. They have a genuine desire to help others without expecting personal payment."



Bryant Salter

Salter, 75, of the Village of Sabal Chase, is a member of the Sophisticated Gents of Florida and The African American Club of The Villages. He is holding a photo of his mother, memorabilia from his time playing for three NFL teams and photos from his time as a U.S. Foreign Service officer.

"One place I accepted to work was South Africa. In South Africa, while I was in Cape Town Black Africans weren't allowed to leave the squatter camps. A local minister and I took food and blankets to the camp, but after we left, the police would come and take it away. After the third night, I decided to stay in the camp to protest any police intervention. When the police didn't show up that night I left the camp to leave my post in South Africa if no immediate changes were to happen."

Beverly Tucker ▶

Tucker, 88, of the Village of Santiago, is the founder of the Rhythm and Blues Line Dancing Club and a member of The African American Club of The Villages, Single African-American Sisters Supporting, Informing and Empowering (SASSIE) and the Samba Ladies.

"I was a part of a Rhythm and Blues dance club when I lived in Baltimore. When I got down here, I saw they only did country and western line dancing. So, I called my girlfriend, who was still in Baltimore, for 20 tapes of our dance group. When I started the group in The Villages, there were 29 Black people and one white person. For young people today, if there's something they want to do, they have to put the initiative together to do it. Success takes willingness to do the work, gathering people and carrying it forward."



◀ Vivian Hudson

Hudson, 80, of the Village of Liberty Park, is a member of The African American Club of The Villages. She is holding a photo of her parents, who were sharecroppers in South Carolina.

"I'm really close to my family because that is how our parents raised the six of us. Four of us live in The Villages, and we get together weekly to have dinner. Recently, my nephew's son, Jaden, was sitting across from me, and he said he was ugly. Jaden is extremely handsome. I said, 'I'm your aunt and I don't want you to ever refer to yourself with that word again.' I want him to know that it's so important to be kind to yourself. I like to say that you have to 'think about what you think about' to change your mind. It's made a big difference in my life. And I hope Jaden changes his mind."

Shaun, Mother-in-Law Doris and Husband, Shawn Wethington

Shaun, 65, a nurse, and Shawn, 62, an insurance agent, of the Village of Mallory Square, and Doris, 100, of the Village of Fenney, are all members of The African American Club of The Villages. Shaun is founder of the Lake, Sumter and Marion Counties Section of the National Council of Negro Women, Inc. Shawn is vice president of the Sophisticated Gents of Florida, a supporting member of the NCNW and a trustee with Shiloh Baptist Church of Orlando.

Said Shaun, "It's my calling to make positive change." Added Doris, "I was the first Black female singer for the St. Patrick Cathedral Choir. We were summoned to sing for President Bush and in Rome for the former Pope." Added Shawn, "If you're determined not to let anyone stop you and have the discipline to succeed, that's what will take you far."



Candace Chatman ▶

Chatman, 44, of Leesburg, is the founder of Virginia Samuels Cares, Inc., a nonprofit that helps disadvantaged communities. She is sitting with a photo of the organization's namesake, her grandmother, who she refers to as her Angel Mom.

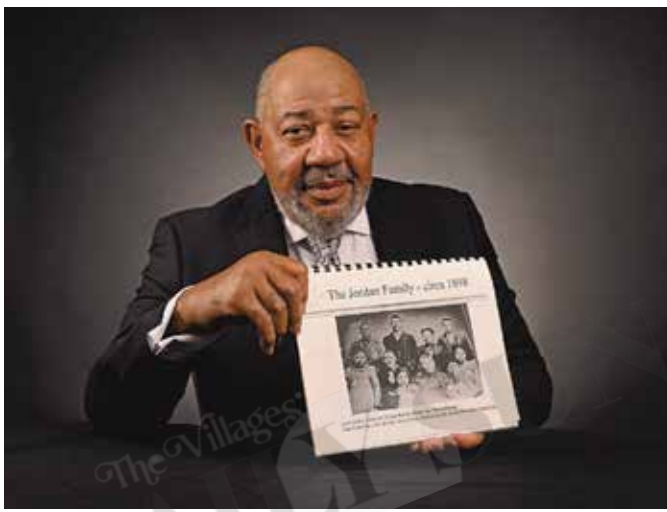
"I am able to help people facing difficulties including homelessness, surviving a stroke, mental illness or incarceration to help them become economically self-sufficient. Recently I had a woman reach out to me. She was living in a house with no water and no lights, even though she was going to work every day. I felt the need to sacrifice for her. I believe because I was able to show her care it will positively impact her and her 1-year-old son. Small acts go a long way and to see the actual impact lets me know I'm fulfilling my purpose in life."

◀ Dr. Carrie Dixon

Dixon, 75, of the Village of DeLuna, is president of The African American Club of The Villages and a member of several veterans organizations including the American Veterans, Disabled American Veterans, Military Officers Association of America, American Legion and the Tri-County Women Veterans Club. Before retiring, Dr. Dixon had an extensive career in education and administration.

"God said, 'Your difference was getting that doctorate degree in psychology.' I realized my accomplishments weren't just for me, they were for the community. I kept pushing because there was no way I could explain to my parents, my church, my community that I quit. I'm proof that a Black girl on welfare can rise up to overcome all obstacles to get a degree and open a private practice that was sustained for 30 years. If I can do it, any child can do it."

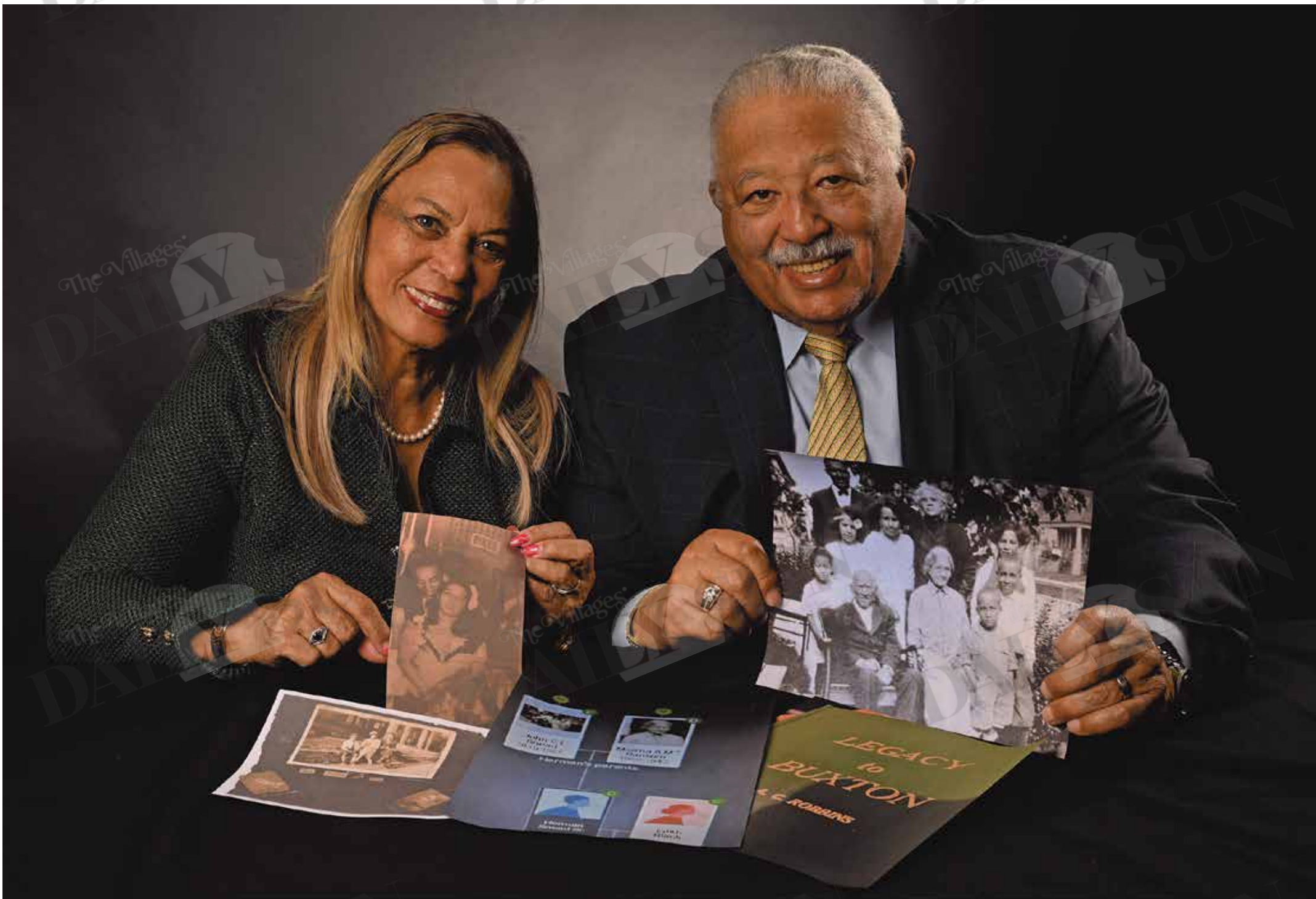




Jim May

May, 77, of the Village of DeLuna, is a member of The African American Club of The Villages, The Sophisticated Gents of Florida, American Legion, United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organizations (UNESCO). He is holding a family photo from 1898 and awards from the Truman Heartland Community foundation and UNESCO.

"In the Kansas City Blue Spring area, I was the first Black man to sit on the planning commission. I was also a city councilman, on the board of directors for the Economic Development Corporation and chairman of the Land Bank. When Kansas City was looking to install an interpreter center to assist nearly 2 million people for the 2026 World Cup, I was responsible for acquiring the building and the remodel. It's important to be involved in your community. You have to be courageous, ask questions and make a move forward."



Constance Roseberry Clark-Snead and David Snead

Constance, 83, and David, 82, of the Village of Springdale, are both retired school superintendents and members of The African American Club of The Villages. Constance is a member of the Spicy Ladies Group and the Delta Sigma Theta Ocala Alumnae Chapter. David is a member of the Sophisticated Gents of Florida and Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.

Said Constance, "I wanted my schools to be recognized as superior schools. I used several models to promote proficiency and included high performing teachers in the decision-making process. That's what made the faculty strong." Added David, "I organized 5,000 volunteers to create the Clean, Safe Healthy schools initiative for safe environments for students. Education is the key to everything. Education gives an individual confidence that they can compete and succeed."



Carol Abrams

Abrams, 81, of Summerfield, is a retired E6 staff sergeant U.S. Army veteran and the co-host of the Spicy Ladies Group.

"I think the biggest difference I made was setting up the Workplace Violence Program at Fort Hood, Texas, that makes federal employees feel safe in the workplace. That was very important to me, that women can come to a protective environment and earn a living. It was created to keep all the employees safe, but the women stand out because they have the least amount of protection, even today. Before I arrived at Fort Hood, one lady was killed by her husband. We trained the managers on how to help employees recognize when a dangerous situation was forming in the environment. The more we trained them with language and behaviors, the safer the environment became."

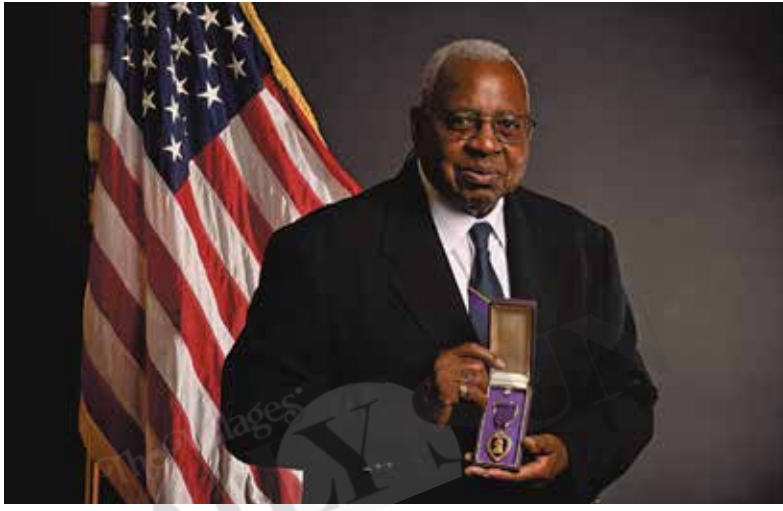


Elsa Connor

Connor, 79, of the Village of Piedmont, is a retired program manager for The Young Women's Resource Center in Des Moines, Iowa. She is co-host of the Spicy Ladies Group.

"I created support programs for all ages under Health and Human Service agencies as well as one for teen moms for 10 free, confidential and voluntary support groups for over 100 mothers. I did that for 18 years to inspire young women to not let any adversity stop them from reaching their goals. I provided encouragement, support and contact with community resources with emphasis on finishing school, getting a job, housing, positive parenting and life skills. Mentors can best make a difference by accepting people where they are, then providing nonjudgmental support that helps them reach their goals."

america at 250



Reginald Nealy

Nealy, 77, of the Village of Piedmont, is former commander of Chapter 795 of the Military Order of the Purple Heart and is a presenter with The Villages Honor Flight. He is holding his purple heart medal and a custom purple heart cane.

“As the commander for the military purple heart, I wanted all of my men to get a personalized Purple Heart cane from The Indian River Woodcarvers. I saw they got theirs first, then it was time to get mine. Putting your men first is what a leader does. Last year, when I went to the West Chester University 50th reunion, where I taught criminal justice for 26 years, I had a bunch of students tell me they hadn’t had a Black male professor before and how impactful it was. That included my son and daughter who were my students. My son was a police officer for 32 years and my daughter became a criminal attorney.”



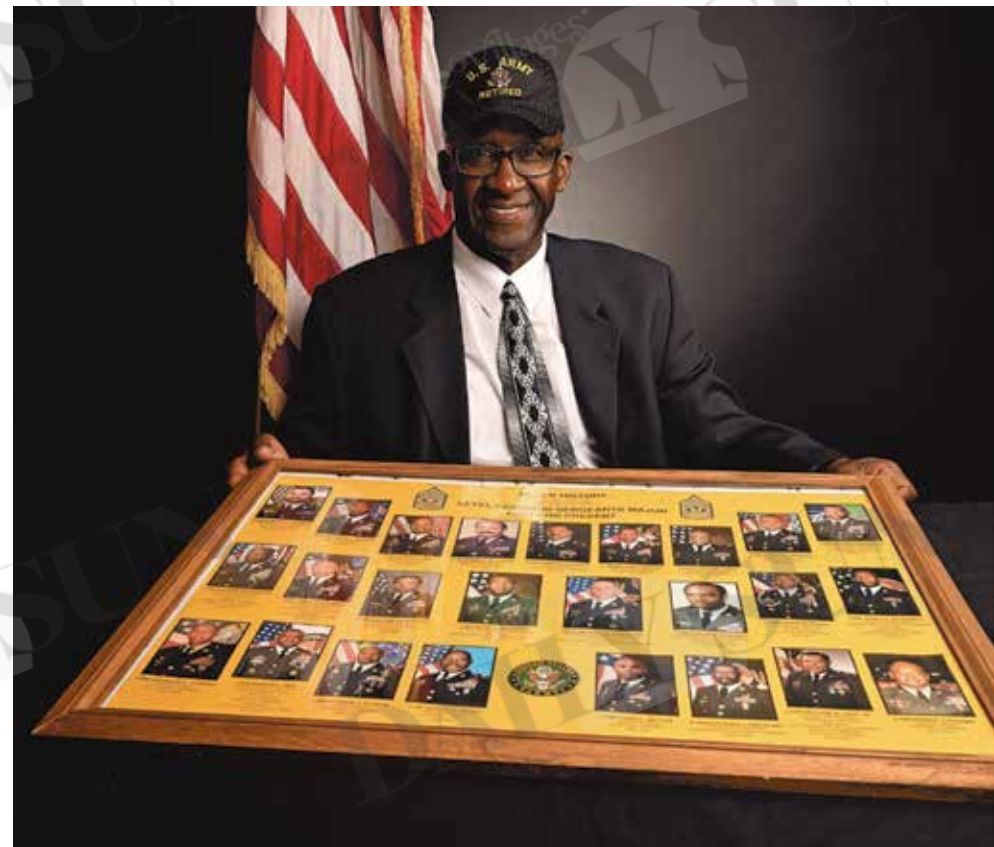
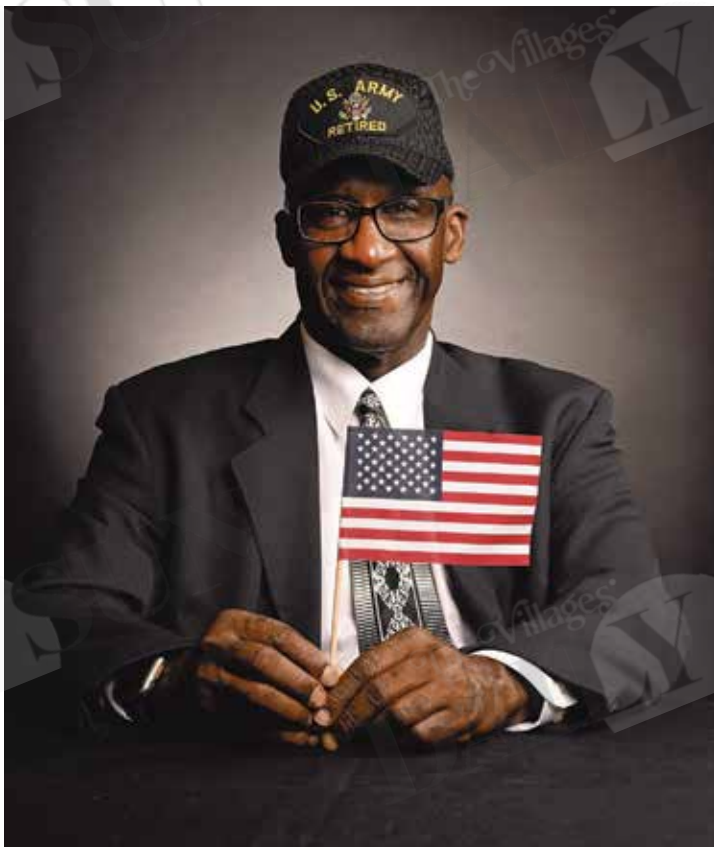
Glen Lomax

Lomax, 74, of Belleview, is a motivational speaker and leadership coach with an extensive career in organizational development, marketing, and human resources training. He is president of the Sophisticated Gents of Florida. He is holding a photograph of an ancestor who fought in the Civil War.

“The moment I truly felt I made a difference was during the 12th Annual Sophisticated Gents Scholarship luncheon. It was powerful to provide inspiration and tangible resources that help students navigate challenges ahead. These young people are the future leaders of our country, and with education, they will be equipped to make a meaningful impact. We must all find creative ways to help our students stay on the course. Education will continue to be the tool that empowers them to shape their futures.”

James McKinney

McKinney, 75, of Belleview, is a former Command Sergeant Major of The Army Training and Doctrine Command. An inductee of both the Army’s Sergeant Major Academy Hall of Honor and the Army Field Artillery Hall of Fame, he has served as a board leader of the Sophisticated Gents of Florida.



“In the service, I set the daily example to treat everyone with dignity and respect. After retirement, I wanted to recognize African American command sergeants major throughout Black history who served at the four-star level. There are 24 of us, including myself and my twin brother, Gene (shown in the far right photo). For young soldiers, it’s as important now as it was in my era to treat them with respect. That’s how you get the best out of them. You want to leave the command in better shape than when you arrived.”

Lorraine Harris

Harris, 79, of The Lofts of Brownwood, is a published author and lifetime member of the Florida Writers Association and founder of The Write Corner. She is holding photographs of her two uncles and father who are all World War II veterans.

"I published my first book 'Not The Norm, A Small Town Story' at age 60 after my husband convinced me to write about my hometown. So I'm a late blooming author. After I had my second book published, I started The Write Corner. It's how I've met other people and made the biggest difference in my life by helping them tell their stories. I've helped about 20 people become published authors. There are so many people who have stories to tell but just didn't know how to get started or how to write it. My motto is, 'I share because I care.'"



Ten Opportunities to Honor Black History Month

Movie Screenings in Ocala

Spend Feb. 7 at the Appleton Museum of Art, 4333 E. Silver Springs Blvd., Ocala, for a free screening of "Quiltmaker's of Gee's Bend" at 11 a.m. and "The Quilting Women of Gee's Bend," at 2 p.m. The films share the story of a group of Black Alabama women who wove their success making traditional quilts.

Read-In Event in Ocala

Join with members of the Marion County community in celebration of literature, films, music and art that represents Black history. Performers will participate in the free event at 2 p.m. Feb. 16 at the Sankofa Public Library in the Mary Sue Rich Community Center at Reed Place, 1821 NW 21st Ave., Ocala.

Parade & Festival in Eustis

Come together for a community parade sponsored by the Eustis African American Heritage Celebration Committee, Inc. celebrating Black History Month on Feb. 21 at 10 a.m., then after the parade stops at Bates Ave., enjoy a festival with live music and vendors at Carver Park, 2214 East Bates Ave., Eustis.

Reading Challenge in Tavares

Read books written by Black authors or about Black history at the Tavares Public Library, 314 N. New Hampshire Ave. No. 3099 in Tavares, from Feb. 9 to Feb. 28. The challenge is open to anyone older than ninth grade. A short book review for each book read will be entered into a raffle to receive a prize.

Festival in Mount Dora

Experience the sounds and flavors of Black history and culture during the free Mount Dora African American History Festival. The event features live music, entertainment, food vendors and more to bring the community together starting at 10 a.m. Feb. 14 at Cauley Lott Park, 1717 N. Highland St., Mount Dora.

Art Exhibit in Orlando

Explore 52 pieces by 28 Florida-based visual artists from Feb. 3 to March 31 honoring the impact of labor on the Black experience at a display at Orlando City Hall, 400 South Orlando Ave., Orlando. The opening reception, featuring live entertainment and hors d'oeuvres, is from 5 to 8 p.m. on Feb. 3.

Spoken Word in Orlando

Hear from former Orlando Poet Laureate Shawn Welcome, local students and nationally known spoken word performers in a free 90-minute spoken word showcase at 8 p.m. Feb. 13 at the Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts, 445 S. Magnolia Ave., Orlando. Seating will be first come, first served.

Live Tour in St. Augustine

See "I Lived Here, As Well," an interpretive tour of people who lived in the Ximenez-Fatio House Museum, 20 Aviles St., St. Augustine. Characters include Louisa Williams, an enslaved woman freed by Union troops in 1862. Tours are 10 a.m. Thursday to Saturday from Feb. 5 to Feb. 28 at \$25 per person.

Flight to Freedom in St. Augustine

Put yourself in the shoes of runaway slaves fleeing to Fort Mose, the first free Black settlement founded in 1738. Glimpse the original "Underground Railroad" in tours at Fort Mose Historic State Park, 15 Fort Mose Trail, St. Augustine. Tours are every 15 minutes starting at 9 a.m. on Feb. 26, 27 and 28.

Battlegrounds in St. John's County

Tour of historic locations across St. Johns County where battles for freedom and civil rights took place. The free tour is 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Feb. 25 and departs from Fort Mose Historic State Park, 15 Fort Mose Trail, St. Augustine. Visit Hastings, Armstrong, West Augustine, Lincolnville and Fort Mose.

Black History Month at 50: About This Daily Sun Special Report

During the past year, Daily Sun reporter Brea Jones and senior photojournalist George Horsford spent 12 days traveling nearly 1,000 miles to document preservation efforts in Central Florida's historic Black communities. They journeyed to 11 towns including the birthplace of U.S. Black history in St. Augustine on the East Coast, the former slave plantations of Crystal River on the West Coast, and Eatonville — the oldest all-Black city in America — in between. They then identified 50 difference-makers in our local Black community, and spent about 50 hours over four months taking their portraits with artifacts from their own inspiring histories. The project was edited by Senior Managing Editor Denise Ritter, designed by Senior Managing Editor Adam Rogers and directed by Executive Editor Bonita Miyagi.

