

Helen and Martin Schwartz Prize Nominating Statement

The Minnesota Humanities Center (MHC) is pleased to nominate its program series *How Can We Breathe* for consideration of the 2021 Helen and Martin Schwartz Prize for outstanding work in the public humanities.



“We shouldn’t have to see one more video of a Black human being brutalized and/or gunned down by police in a clear case of excessive or unwarranted force. Anybody who doesn’t believe we are beyond a state of emergency is choosing to lack empathy and awareness.”

~ Bernice King

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

All eyes were on Minnesota as the world witnessed Mr. George Floyd’s murder in 2020. An estimated 15 million people have since marched and protested in 2,000 cities across the United States and 60 countries around the world. Cities have been engulfed in flames and communities have risen up demanding justice. The death of Mr. Floyd highlighted the significant difference in experiences with police between non-Black and Black Minnesotans.

Witnessing the impact of this horrific event on our African American communities here in Minnesota and around the world, MHC knew it had a vital role to play. As conveners, MHC has long connected our communities from all corners of Minnesota through story and narrative, amplifying the voices of our most marginalized communities. As a gateway to expanded understanding, curiosity, and learning, the humanities connect people and communities, bridge differences, interpret the complexities of our world and can positively shape our collective future. MHC was uniquely positioned to amplify Black



knowledge, bring together diverse community members, and provide a space to encourage healing, dialogue, and compassion. Amid the twin crises of COVID-19 and the civil uprisings in and around the site of George Floyd’s murder, it was incumbent upon us to be nimble and responsive, something that is not always easily accomplished. But, in May of 2020, we knew it was imperative that we be first responders to this history, pivoting in a way that put our programs on the ground and in the moment during a crisis.

The resulting programming, *How Can We Breathe* (HCWB), www.howcanwebreathe.org, was a powerful series of virtual community conversations and public engagement opportunities. By leveraging MHC’s resources, HCWB created a platform to lift up authentic community voices to help understand and reflect on the stories, histories, and perspectives of those impacted by these horrific events.

In order to deepen connections and facilitate real change, HCWB offered three main programmatic components:

1. **Content:** Pre-recorded **Story Circle conversations** and cameos that centered Black voices and experiences as featured experts, connecting them to each other and connecting participants to their knowledge.
2. **Practice:** **Virtual reflection circles** where participants reflected on and responded to the experts they heard from and connected with each other; and
3. **Connection:** Gifted **Sweet Potato Comfort Pies**, where MHC leveraged our connections to identify “Pie Partners” in the Twin Cities and four Greater Minnesota cities who each used the gift of Sweet Potato Comfort Pies to connect with five individuals who exemplify strength and resilience, either as a person affected by and/or working to fight systemic injustices in their communities.

Story Circle Conversations and cameos

Working with Sweet Potato Comfort Pie[®] (SPCP), a Minnesota nonprofit who focuses grassroots efforts in community healing, trust, and justice, we developed a program that centered the voices of African Americans in conversations about racism in Minnesota, with the goal of leading to shared actions in communities across Minnesota. Founded 2014 by Rose McGee, SPCP was created on the understanding that food connects. As the creator of the Sweet Potato Comfort Pie™ Approach, she has since taken pies across the country following devastating incidents of racial and religious violence. She has brought hundreds of people together to bake pies and have tough dialogues around race to help people and communities bridge racial divides and embrace the hard work required for racial equity.

MHC hosted four 2.5-hour virtual events featuring first responders to racial injustice: The Mamas; Elders and Youth; Artists and Meaning-Makers; and Policymakers and Community Leaders.

FOUR THEMES:



The Mamas: In the first virtual community circle of the Minnesota Humanities Center’s *How Can We Breathe* series, we learned from three Mamas who have lost a child at the hands of the police and other forms of violence. Now working to advocate and organize for change, Princess Haley, Marilyn Hill, and Mary Johnson-Roy discussed how protest and uprising can serve as a catalyst to drive systemic change in our society.



Elders and Youth: In the second virtual community circle of the MHC’s *How Can We Breathe* series, Elders and Youth engaged in dialogue surrounding America’s civil rights movements and their evolution. In this intergenerational discussion, participants and panelists explored how present civil rights work is tied to past efforts and how we might spark positive change as we move toward creating a more perfect union.



Artists and Meaning Makers: In the third virtual community circle of the *How Can We Breathe* series, Artists and Meaning-Makers discussed their role in shaping public dialogue after crisis events, specifically the murder of George Floyd. Learn how artists respond to crises, influence landscapes, drive narratives, and inform the public. Panelists and participants addressed whose work is privileged, who “owns” public artwork, and how it is preserved/memorialized.

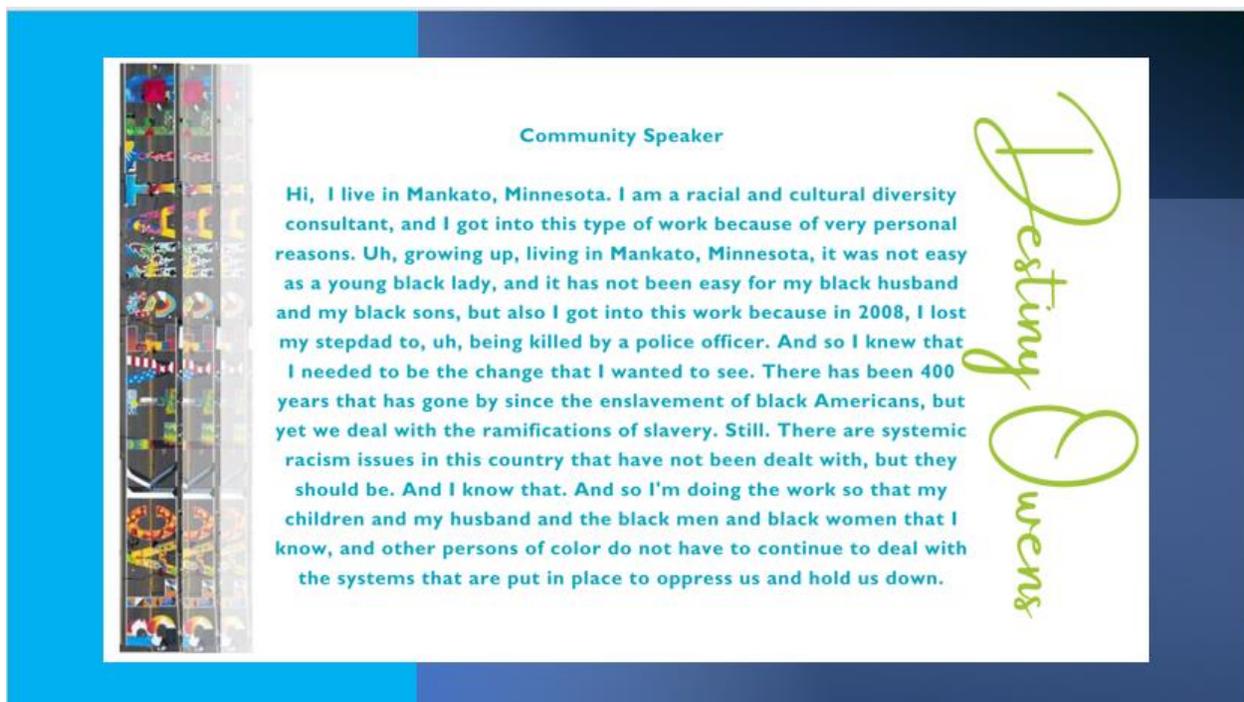


Policymakers and Community: In the final community circle of the *How Can We Breathe* series, Policymakers and Community shared their experiences in challenging systemic racism and working to create a more just Minnesota. Participants collaborated to identify strategies and resources advocates and allies for a racially just society use to ensure that African Americans are fully empowered within our democracy.

These “panels” were held using SPCP’s Story Circle format. Story Circles are a non-hierarchical way of sharing experiences and expertise. Facilitated by MHC humanities officer and SPCP founder Rose McGee, the story circles invited Black Minnesotans with firsthand experience navigating systemic racism in our state to share how they have been challenged, resisted, and made lasting change. A signature element of the Story Circle process is that participants share what they heard from other panelists and make connections between shared experiences. This culturally inclusive way of listening and sharing

stories is something that MHC has had practiced for several years working with educators interested in facilitating equitable classrooms but applying this practice with a broad public audience is newer for us.

Cameos included Black poets, musicians, and elders. We also incorporated noted scholar Dr. Brittany Lewis, who served as a respondent for two of our events. Dr. Lewis provided historical context for the firsthand experiences recounted by many of the story circle panelists during the events.



Community Speaker

Hi, I live in Mankato, Minnesota. I am a racial and cultural diversity consultant, and I got into this type of work because of very personal reasons. Uh, growing up, living in Mankato, Minnesota, it was not easy as a young black lady, and it has not been easy for my black husband and my black sons, but also I got into this work because in 2008, I lost my stepdad to, uh, being killed by a police officer. And so I knew that I needed to be the change that I wanted to see. There has been 400 years that has gone by since the enslavement of black Americans, but yet we deal with the ramifications of slavery. Still. There are systemic racism issues in this country that have not been dealt with, but they should be. And I know that. And so I'm doing the work so that my children and my husband and the black men and black women that I know, and other persons of color do not have to continue to deal with the systems that are put in place to oppress us and hold us down.

Destiny Owens

Virtual Reflection Circles

Participants witnessed the Story Circle conversations, first-hand experiences of African Americans who have been on the front lines of the racism pandemic, then joined hour-long breakout sessions to share their thoughts and connect with others. Over the course of the series, nearly 300 people participated in the sessions as audience members.

During the reflection circles, participants were asked to reflect on what they had heard through a lens of action. The prompts complemented the evening's theme:

1. The Mamas: As you heard each of The Mamas say, "It is important for YOU to take action." What is your plan of action? Or if you are already involved, please share.
2. Elders and Youth: The How Can We Breathe series is intended to build understanding of systemic racism. Based upon all that you have heard tonight, what's one element of systemic racism that is part of your story?
3. Artists and Meaning-Makers: How do you use art to make meaning in a time of crisis? What solutions are you interested in working towards?

4. Policymakers and Community: What does systemic change look like? What is your role, and what solutions can you work towards?

SPCP provided facilitators for these virtual reflection circles, using SPCP’s story circle process to host these reflective conversations for the participants. In addition to being gifted facilitators, SPCP’s cadre of moderators are community leaders, organizers, and educators who have many years of experience in both facilitation and social justice work.

Opportunities for action surfaced that included reading, learning opportunities, marches and protest actions, communicating with elected officials, and joining or supporting organizations and community groups. The action opportunities that surfaced in the breakout rooms were shared with the full group of participants through follow up emails from MHC.

Key themes that surfaced through the four virtual reflection circles included:

- The importance of action (though still a sense of uncertainty from many participants about how to proceed).
- The necessity to center Black and other non-white voices in any attempt to make systemic changes; and
- The challenges of systemic racism are larger than structural challenges. They are also cultural challenges, which is why it is important to have conversations that examine culture and not just policy.

Sweet Potato Comfort Pies



A Special Gift



Minnesota
Humanities
Center



In conjunction with each event, MHC worked with up to 10 community organizations who are fighting for racial equity to distribute 50 Sweet Potato Comfort Pies to community members in the five virtual host cities. The preparation and gifting of Sweet Potato Comfort Pies was integral to the event series, serving as a catalyst for reflective community building: Under the SPCP model, when a pie is gifted, giver

and receiver explicitly acknowledge all those who engage with and work in the systems that apportion justice in unequal measures. In the HCWB context, givers and receivers were invited to join a follow-up Story Circle: a chance to share their work, explore collaboration, and generate enthusiasm for similar work across regions.

By making connections through the gifting of the Sweet Potato Comfort Pies, MHC was able to grow our network and identify change makers in the Twin Cities and Greater Minnesota. These relationships are already becoming future partners for MHC programming in the future.

*“We are in a time where so much language seems divisive.
This is your story, my story, our story!
As I wade in the water, how will I breathe?
Elect more women!
Get more voices!”*

~ Excerpt from a community harvest poem by CreArtist Roslyn Harmon at The Mamas event on August 27, 2020. Community harvesting is capturing the actual words of people and then sharing via spoken word.

COUNCIL’S AIM and PUBLIC IMPACT

MHC had four major goals for the *How Can We Breathe* program:

1. **Be first responders** by making humanities practices more responsive to and nimbler in an ‘in the moment’ community crisis.

MHC sees ourselves as having three primary roles—convener, connector, and catalyst. In these roles, we are among the first responders when our democracy is in crisis. No democracy of the people can exist when so many of its citizens are routinely and systematically disenfranchised. The HCWB series was an opportunity for participants to engage in civic dialogue, during and after a time of crisis, while learning from those most affected by the issue, in this case police violence.

First responders provide assistance to the suffering, initiating care to aid in life saving and healing. Humanities practices, such as storytelling, discourse, poetry, and more can both make suffering visible and also aid in the healing process. Because of the urgency of the situation, MHC challenged ourselves to develop this programming quickly, to ensure our communities had every opportunity to heal. To be responsive, planning began in June and July with public events beginning in August 2020 and running through January 2021. Being nimble and responsive while maintaining other planned programs was vital and recognizing the significance of this moment in time, our team stepped up to the challenge in creating a thoughtful and impactful community-based program while continuing to provide a broad spectrum of additional work.

Public impact: MHC provided a public forum for dialog that helped people process issues together through humanities practices and knowledges that included story, scholarship, and reflection, and gathered participants’ input to create a list of opportunities to make change.

"What we have done - is each event got better and better and more rich and people were being transparent. When people are able to be transparent and vulnerable – that is what power is. If you can team with people who are transparent and people can be vulnerable, not only helps me create a new skill set to connect and engage from every community and helps with facilitating skills. They [participants] came ready to talk and pour hearts out."

~ Brian Fullman, ISIAH Field Organizer, Sweet Potato Comfort Pie Facilitator

2. **Catalyze cross-regional collaboration** and embed humanities content and practices among Black-led social justice initiatives and allies in Minnesota's five largest urban and rural communities of Duluth, Mankato, Rochester, St. Cloud, and the Twin Cities Metro area. Representing all regions of Minnesota, these communities have networks throughout the state to reach as many Minnesotans as possible.

The pre-planning for the HCWB series involved MHC staff developing a systems map of organizations, institutions, and individuals that we have worked with in the past and are hoping to work with in the future. MHC engaged several of these organizations and individuals as panelists, speakers, pie gifters, and participants. The intention is to develop relationships that MHC will continue to learn from, partner with, and amplify over time. It is our plan to continue working with these partners (and others) to catalyze the emergence of a denser network of African American individuals and organizations working across Minnesota.

Public impact: MHC welcomed representatives from 88 Minnesota organizations as attendees and 35 organizations as pie gifters during the HCWB series. These organizations are being contacted to participate in future programming, both as planning partners and participants. In the fall of 2021, MHC is launching its partnership with Love & Struggle—a Black-owned Mankato-based organization that has developed the WRITE on RACE to be RIGHT on RACE™ program, a humanities-infused community curriculum designed with rural Minnesota residents in mind. WRITE on RACE moves participants from reading and conversing about race to action planning for specific communities. HCWB helped MHC identify our partners for this longer-term program.

3. **Center and amplify Black voices**, voices of people who have been working on the ground to dismantle anti-Black systems and practices for decades.

MHC was able to use our positional authority as the state's humanities non-profit to amplify these important conversations, speakers, and organizations so that those with firsthand experience navigating systemic racism in our state are seen and heard as the experts they are. As a convener, we were able to pull in audience participants from many key traditionally white-led institutions as well as members of the public who were interested in the topic. By centering Black voices as experts, and amplifying their messages to non-Black audiences, MHC was able to provide a platform for essential information about lived experiences to be part of Minnesotans' understanding of the events leading up to and following the murder of George Floyd.

Public impact: Through HCWB, MHC developed relationships and worked with 35 community members, as panelists and speakers; many of whom are continuing in the role of speaker and advocate for systems change in Minnesota and around the country. The most powerful instance

of this is how Marilyn Hill, one of The Mamas from the first conversation, has been inspired to speak with greater confidence and more publicly on behalf of other mothers who have lost children to police violence and aid them in reopening their children’s cases or finding other paths to justice for their children and healing for themselves.

MHC also now has an archive of voices speaking about Black experiences with police violence and other topics (such as appropriation of art, voting rights, and interactions with the education system) that can be used for future programmatic use, by MHC or other partners.

4. **Connect for action** by linking the public with opportunities to take action in furthering our mission of a more just society.

The HCWB series helped participants relate humanities concepts and disciplines to their own lives—bridging the academic knowledges of and the lived experiences of systemic racism in Minnesota. Opportunities for action, including resources, themes, and collaborative opportunities identified by speakers and participants during the series were shared with all participants.

Public impact: Through the series themes, participants brainstormed, discussed, and outlined action steps for moving forward. For example, in the Policymakers session, participants learned how to connect with BEAM—Black Excellence Around Minnesota, a Mankato-based organization that carries out cultural diversity training and community organizing in a Greater Minnesota community; they were directed to an article about how the Ramsey County (the county where St. Paul is located) Board of Commissioners called racism a public health crisis, and how they could participate in “The Power of History Turning Tragedy into Triumph” program from the Emmett Till Legacy Foundation—from a family member of Emmett Till who was one of the story circle panelists. Overall, 98 opportunities for further learning and action were shared with participants.

Overall, MHC measured success by: 1) the number of participating individuals and organizations; 2) the expressed interest in future events or initiatives; and 3) the number of participants committing to ongoing planning and development of a cross-regional network. The ultimate goal is lasting and fruitful connections among cross-regional actors and the emergence of shared frameworks for locally tailored but broadly strategic action.

About the Partners

Minnesota Humanities Center

Focused on the future of our state, we bring the unique resources of the humanities to the challenges and opportunities of our times. We work in partnerships across the state to build thoughtful, literate, engaged citizens. Through the humanities, this Center builds community and brings into public life the untold stories that deepen our connections to each other. The Humanities Center: engages all Minnesota communities in imagination, creativity, and innovation toward a vital and prosperous future; partners with schools and community members to increase academic achievement for all; builds the



capacity of partner organizations to conduct high-quality and meaningful programs for the public; and creates and provides vibrant and engaging public programs that support community decision-making.

Sweet Potato Comfort Pie

Sweet Potato Comfort Pie’s mission is to advance racial justice and equity, heal damage caused by race-based trauma and elevate marginalized voices and experiences. We achieve our mission in three ways: by using the powerful Black cultural food tradition of making and delivering sweet potato pies; by facilitating story-circle dialogues with intentional listening and authentic sharing; and by building multicultural alliances/relationships that deepen commitment to racial justice work.

Communities

HCWB partnered with five Minnesota communities in 2020: Duluth, Mankato, Rochester, St. Cloud, and the Twin Cities Metro. Through events and network building activities, we will engage these communities to advance equity for African American Minnesotans and are welcoming all Minnesotans of all races and backgrounds to consider the role that they as individuals play in the systems which sustain anti-Black and other racist practices and outcomes in Minnesota.

Financial Structure

The *How Can We Breathe* series operated in 2020 and into 2021 through the generous support of private, state, and federal funders. These include a generous grant of \$50,000 from the Andrew Mellon Foundation and the Federation for State Humanities Councils. The National Endowment for the Humanities also contributed through general operating support to the Minnesota Humanities Center as did the State of Minnesota through the Minnesota State Appropriations Legacy Funding.

The model of *How Can We Breathe* was structured to allow for new programming to grow out of the series. As new programs are developed, new funding relationships and partners are identified and developed.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit the *How Can We Breathe* project for consideration for the 2021 Helen and Martin Schwartz Prize.

Partners List

The Mamas Partners

- Jamela Pettiford – Featured Vocalist (opening)
- Mary Johnson-Roy - Son, Laraminun, killed by gun violence in 1993
- Princess Titus Haley – Son, killed by gun violence in 2010
- Marilyn Hill – Son, Anthony, Killed by police in 1997
- Dr. Brittany Lewis—scholar respondent

Elders and Youth

- Dr Josie Johnson – Elder; Retired VP University of Minnesota
- Jerome Treadwell – 11th Grade Highland High and Featured Musician (opening)
- Louis Alemayehu – Elder, Poet, Minneapolis
- Dr. Mahmoud El-Kati - Community Elder, Retired Professor Macalester College
- Azeria Stagg – 11th Grade Highland High School St. Paul
- Delores Henderson – Retired Principal, St. Paul Public Schools
- Lauretta DawoloTowns – Teacher, Roseville Area Schools
- Leslie Redmond – President, Minneapolis NAACP
- Nathaniel Khaliq - President Emeritus, St. Paul NAACP
- Aiysha Mustapha – Family and Engagement, Robbinsdale Area Schools
- Anthony Galloway - Executive Director, Arts-U.S.
- Helene Francis - 12th Grade South High School Minneapolis
- Claudie Washington - Community Activists Duluth, MN
- Dr. Brittany Lewis—Scholar Respondent

Artists & Meaning Makers

- T. Mychael Rambo – Featured Vocalist (opening)
- Christopharaaron Deanes - ROHO Collectives
- Hawona Sullivan Janzen - UROC (Urban Research and Outreach Engagement Center)
- Rekheth Si-Asar - Publisher, In Black Ink Publishing
- Tina Burnside - Co-Founder, Minnesota African American Heritage Museum and Gallery
- Lee Green - Owner of Greenhouse Grafix

Policy and Change Makers

- Bukata Hayes – Director of Greater Mankato Diversity Council
- Junauda Petrus-Nasah – Guest Poet (opening)
- Keith Ellison - Attorney General State of Minnesota
- Rena Moran - State of Minnesota House of Representatives
- Alberder Hampton Gillespie – President, Black Women Rising
- Deborah Watts - Co-founder and Executive Director, Emmett Till Legacy Foundation
- Chauntyll Allen – Director, Black Lives Matter Minnesota
- Sandra Means – Past member Rochester City Council
- Destiny Owens - CEO of Black Excellence Around Minnesota
- W. Toni Carter - Chair of Ramsey County Board of Commissioners