African American Voices from Joliet's Southend
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Second Baptist Church, Mt. Zion Baptist Church, the National Hook-Up of Black Women Inc. Joliet Chapter, and Warren-Sharpe Community Center are at the forefront of Joliet’s Black civic engagement. They have provided Joliet’s residents with a sense of belonging, advocacy, and community. They greatly enrich Joliet and the region.

Reclaiming the African American Narrative

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Leading the Community

The organizations featured are all on Joliet’s Southend. Today, African Americans make their homes throughout Joliet. Yet for almost 200 years, they were concentrated into the south and east part of the city due to societal norms that included institutional racism and exclusionary practices.

Second Baptist Church

Founded in 1880, Second Baptist Church is the oldest of the four organizations. The church, like Joliet itself, became a hub for newly freed Blacks before the Great Migration (1916 to 1970). Pushed by segregationist policies, these migrants moved for a range of reasons that included increased individual freedoms and hopes for economic prosperity. Many, however, continued to face obstacles based on racism.

In a city of many church spires and religious organizations, Second Baptist Church became a prosperous spiritual home in Joliet’s Southend. The church leadership and members met their community’s needs, expanding to provide after school homework help, food pantry, and employment resources. Second Baptist Church continues to prove itself as a community leader.

Mt. Zion Baptist Church

Driven by the needs of the growing Black community, religious leaders from Second Baptist Church, Mt. Olive Baptist Church, and Shiloh Baptist Church joined together to found Mt. Zion Baptist Church in 1947. As more Black families moved into the region, many moved further south of the city center into unincorporated Joliet.

In 1961, Rev. Dr. Isaac Singleton answered a call to lead the church, and he served there for the next sixty years. He brought energy and encouragement to the congregation and built resources for his underserved community. Under his leadership, members replaced the original one-room building, which lacked water and sewage, into a $1.8 million complex with an education wing, organ, and development center. It remains a busy hub of activity.

National Hook-Up of Black Women Inc. Joliet Chapter

Building on the momentum of the national organization established in Washington, D.C. in 1974, Dorothy J. Campbell founded the Joliet Chapter in 1991. The dues-based organization supported Black women by being advocates in support of the arts, health and wellness, education, and human service programs. NHBW gathered women from all walks of life together into one organization. Located on the east side of the Southside, they have played an important role in the African American community. NHBW, Inc. Joliet Chapter was instrumental in launching the organization’s national “Reading for Life” literacy program and T.O.P. (Teens Overcoming Pressure) Program, combating illiteracy and teen dating violence respectively, while promoting education and healthy relationships.

Warren-Sharpe Community Center

Striving to make the world a better place, Warren-Sharpe Community Center grew out of the determination to create opportunities for Black youth in the midst of an economically struggling neighborhood. Named for two local Black leaders who fought segregation in the 1950s and 60s, Clarence Warren and Mary Sharpe, the Center was founded in 1994 by community activist Kathleen Bolden (1937-1994). The Center’s efforts to create youth-friendly spaces for recreation and education in the Black community, and continues to advocate for youth empowerment, environmental justice, food security, and racial equity through its programs.
Historically, African Americans were excluded from many parts of American cities through formal and informal practices. This was true in Joliet, and the Southend has become identified with the community and is where the four organizations are located. Redlined by insurance companies, this led to a lack of investment and low property values. Located along the Des Plaines River and the former route of the Illinois and Michigan Canal, the area was also historically subject to periodic flooding. Given its proximity to industry and the railroad, residents lived with urban pollution. In spite of these challenges, Black residents improved the area with numerous shops and services.
Working Together for the Common Good

These organizations offer rich and varied programs promoting community engagement, conversation, and joint action. Members often participate in more than one of these groups which foster support systems and a family atmosphere. This extends to the support of locally owned black businesses. In fact, Joliet, like other communities had a Brown Book, similar to the nationally recognized Green Book for travelers, that identified Black-owned businesses. This provided mutual benefit to the organizations, notably by advertising in their publications. This network included Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Black fraternities and sororities.

Knowing that young people represent the future, the organizations engage children and young adults through many of their initiatives such as after-school programs, holiday celebrations, and sports. Inspired by First Lady Michelle Obama’s White House Garden, the children of Warren-Sharpe Community Center planted an urban garden. They grew vegetables, cooked meals, and fed the community. As the center wrote, “[I]n a neighborhood with more guns than jobs, the kids created a garden of hope.” Other efforts for school-aged children include GEMS (Growth, Education, Motivation for Students) at Second Baptist Church and Mt. Zion Baptist Church’s Christian Youth Praising Christ. The National Hook-Up of Black Women, Inc. sponsors multicultural arts and leadership programs inclusive of The Boys Dance Crew, in partnership with The Generation Dance Company, and Fearless Females, a youth leadership development program. Each organization provides a range of programs that extends to the more senior members in the community, linking the generations.
Civil Rights: Advocating for Equality

For some people, the civil rights movement is something they studied in school. For these organizations, however, it is part of their lived experience. Their members proudly advocated for equality. Their first-hand experiences within the movement continue to motivate older members and drive them to pass on their memories to the next generation.

Rev. V. M. Herron of Second Baptist Church encouraged the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to visit Joliet almost a year prior to his assassination. The Rev. Dr. Isaac Singleton of Mt. Zion Baptist Church, also worked in the Civil Rights movement, which led to a friendship with Rev. Jesse L. Jackson Jr. Jackson became a regular guest of the church and would occasionally speak to the congregation.

The National Hook-Up of Black Women's National Founder, Dr. Arnita Young-Boswell, was a Civil Rights Activist who directed the women's division of the 1966 March in Chicago led by the late Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. Some of the late Whitney Young Jr., she befriended the late Fannie Lou Hamer, who is now the organization's Shero. NHBW annually bestows the “Fannie Lou Hamer Award” to a woman who has exemplified the trailblazing spirit by fighting for social justice, equality, and the right to have a voice.

Warren-Sharpe has a special relationship with community activists. Judge Raymond Bolden and his first wife Kathleen Bolden provided transformative leadership and were active in civil rights. Judge Bolden led the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Joliet chapter and became Will County’s first Black Assistant States’ Attorney during the volatile 1960s. The organizations continue to advocate for the African American community and for equality.
Bridge to the Future: Community Engagement

In the 1970s Joliet and the region experienced rapid deindustrialization. In fact, by the 1980s Joliet’s unemployment rate rose to over 20%, twice the national average. Changes in the global economy fell particularly hard on Joliet’s Southend. Industrial jobs, which had been a mainstay of the community for 100 years, closed or had massive layoffs. Those with resources relocated to other areas, which led to an emptying out of the neighborhood. The once thriving community along Chicago Street saw increased poverty, drug abuse, and violent crime.

While these four organizations face major challenges, they continue to be beacons of hope. With community service at the heart of their efforts, their paid staff as well as volunteers manage programs for the education of youth and the well-being of older community members.

By knowing the past, we can better plan for the future. The study of these organizations encourages community-led efforts to improve educational opportunities and healthcare and identify other needs in the community. This exhibit serves as an invitation to volunteer, work with, or creatively partner with these organizations. You can join Joliet’s African American community in building a bridge to a brighter future.
What We Do: Community-Engaged Learning

Listen!

This was the word that guided our work with the community at Lewis University. Starting in 2022 and into the following year, students interested in history, museums, and archives met with the four community partners. We were full of questions: Who would we meet? What stories might be told? What documents might they want scanned? What images might be shared?

The students went on-site to scan images, and they later processed the digital files. They worked with the Lewis University library to create metadata for the content. These documents and images are now made available around the globe through the library’s digital collections.

The team worked on the pop-up exhibit and created public programs. Lizbeth Noyola, Graphics Design Intern, developed the preliminary designs in consultation with the team. Caitlin Wieckler, Graduate Assistant, crafted the final exhibit designs under the supervision of the Office of Marketing and Communications.

Laura Franklin, Dean of College of Humanities, Fine Arts, and Communications; Dennis H. Cremin, Professor and History Center Director; and Laura Wilmarth-Tyna, Director of Community Engaged Learning, coordinated meetings with the Community Partners and the Community Advisory Committee. Jacob Barrett and Morgan Jennings served as Student Project Coordinators and organized site visits.

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- Second Baptist Church
  - Lou Ann Johnson
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  - Janice Wood
- Mt. Zion Baptist Church
  - Community Engaged Learning
  - Dr. Geraldine Turner
  - Jeremy Redden
  - Kay Bolden
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- Greg Peerbolte, Joliet Area Historical Museum
- Josh Phillips, Joliet Public Library

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Bottom: Joliet bridge from Lewis University Collection