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Seven community leaders honored during Black History Month

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Seven members of the Pitt community will be recognized for their volunteerism and commitment to equality and justice during the University's annual K. Leroy Irvis Black History Month celebration on Feb. 26.

Six of the honorees were selected from 50 people nominated by members of the Pitt community, said Chance M. Wideman, director of equity and inclusion programs for the University's Office for Equity, Diversity & Inclusion.

Also being honored is Larry Glasco, associate professor of history at Pitt and a chronicler of Black history, race and ethnicity in American life. The author or co-author of four books, Glasco has appeared in multiple documentaries about the history of Pittsburgh and jazz and has served as a board member for the Senator John Heinz History Center and Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation. He recently completed biographies of August Wilson and K. Leroy Irvis, a Pitt law graduate who was the first Black speaker of any state legislature in the United States when he elected to that position in the Pennsylvania House in 1977.

The awards will be presented at 6 p.m. Feb. 26 during a celebration in the Connolly Ballroom of Alumni Hall. Light refreshments will be served and the public is invited. Tickets are free and are available online, but an RSVP is requested.

"Last year during Black History Month, we welcomed family and friends of award winners to campus to celebrate with our honorees, and it was a very memorable evening," Wideman said. "We think this year's event will be a very special one as well."

Senior University leaders are scheduled to attend and Chancellor Joan Gabel will congratulate the winners via video.

The national theme for Black History Month 2024 is "African-Americans and the Arts." Wideman said each of this year's honorees are being recognized not just for their commitments to equity, diversity, inclusion and accessibility, but also have distinguished

themselves as artists, writers, performers, educators and champions of the arts.

Awards are being presented in the following categories:

Aspiring Ally: Jamie Upshaw, executive director and founder of Autism Urban Connections Inc., which meets each month at Pitt's Community Engagement Center in the Hill District. She first established a support group in 2015 after learning that resources for family members of people with autism were severely lacking in Black, majority-minority, and economically disadvantaged communities. In 2018, the support group became a nonprofit, tax-exempt corporation and is currently the only autism organization in Pennsylvania focused on supporting Black families.

Campus Leadership (Undergraduate): Ian Kehinde, a junior in the Swanson School of Engineering, exemplifies the best of the University of Pittsburgh, according to those who nominated him. He is the host of "Let's Talk Social Innovation," a weekly podcast that features the unsung social innovators and change-makers in the Pitt community. Kehinde created the podcast with the help of the Frederick Honors College and Center on Race & Social Problems to shine a light on diverse change-makers in the community.

Creative Changemaker: James T. Johnson Jr., — better known as "Dr. J" — has promoted Black music initiatives in Pittsburgh for more than 40 years. Classically trained as a violinist, Johnson was teaching at Grambling State University when he was recruited to the University of Pittsburgh in 1977 by Nathan Davis, founder of Pitt's Jazz Studies Program. In 1982, Johnson and his wife Pamela founded the African American Music Institute in the city's Homewood neighborhood. Since that time, the institute has provided workshops, lesson, and public performances for approximately 300 young people every year. He has maintained his connection to Pitt as well, teaching the Music Department's popular course in "African American Music," and mentoring graduate students.

Inspiring Leadership: Luana Reis, is pursuing a Ph.D. in Hispanic Languages & Literatures in the Dietrich School of Arts & Sciences, and is dedicated to empowering Pitt and the Pittsburgh community by bringing together diverse groups of people through poetry. In 2017, she created Addverse, a safe space where people of all ages, races, ethnicities and identities come together on Friday evenings to share the spoken and written word. Her own poetry, scholarship and translations have been published internationally and her work has been recognized locally as part of the Envisioning a Just Pittsburgh project.

Social Justice Advocate: Medina Jackson, (Social Work, '03G) is director of engagement for P.R.I.D.E. (Positive Racial Identity Development in Early Education) in Pitt's Office of Child Development. her peers say that Jackson has consistently advanced the efforts of teaching artists by engaging them in work with young children in the community — in particular, during P.R.I.D.E.'s Pop-Up Mini Art Festivals. Outside of those festivals, she brings artists to community programs in order for children and families to see Black artists, and to have art experiences that support positive development of young people. Jackson plays a leading role in similar work with the Black Transformative Arts Network, which links local teaching artists with nonprofit organizations and provides resources to both artists and programs.

Unsung Hero: Curtiss Porter, (Arts & Sciences, '69/Education, '84G) was instrumental in organizing students at the University of Pittsburgh in the late 1960s and early 1970s, including through the development of what later came to be known as the Black Action Society. Along with August Wilson and Rob Penny, Porter was part of the Black Horizon Theatre, and helped write one of its first productions, "Evolution to Revolution." During a long and successful career that included leadership roles at the University of Connecticut

and Penn State, Porter was an advocate for arts education and the preservation of Black history. In recent years, Porter has helped to perpetuate Wilson's legacy and contributed to a documentary about the playwright's life and work.

Departments, units and schools across Pitt's five campuses participate in the University's celebrations of Black History Month with a variety of events, seminars, performances and educational opportunities, many of which are open to the general public. For more information, visit pitt.ly/BHM2024.

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