



Championing The Arts:

Kathleen McKinney-Franks leads the way at local Alpha Kappa Alpha chapter

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PHOTO COURTESY OF KATHLEEN MCKINNEY-FRANKS

To be involved with the arts, one does not necessarily have to be an artist themselves. They don't have to sing, dance, play an instrument, paint or be adept in some other art form. Instead they can be an arts supporter or, to use a more descriptive term, an "arts aficionado."

“That would be excellent terminology to describe me,” said New Orleans native and arts activist Kathleen McKinney-Franks.

As a member of the 114-year-old, predominantly African American, Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA) Sorority, Inc. and past president/charter member of the local Omicron Lambda Omega (OLQ) chapter, Kathleen chairs the New Orleans-based Target 4 the Arts Committee. The chapter has about 250 members.

OLQ, as well as the sorority as a whole, is enthusiastically supporting and promoting the arts and the artists. These endeavors can range from theatrical, dance, vocal and musical performances to exhibitions of fine art and they also organize groups to patronize local productions.

“Currently, I fancy myself an amateur photographer,” Kathleen said. “I embrace my saying that the arts make life eminently worth living. In all of their varied forms they improve the quality of life and living

for all – in excellence.”

At present, Kathleen is focused on promoting an arts-related event at the church she and her family attend, Cornerstone United Methodist Church in New Orleans East, pastored by Rev. Dr. Jonathan C. Richardson. The event, going into its second year, is titled Cornerstone Arts Freedom Fest: Focus on Family. It will open on Friday, August 5 at 6:00 p.m. with a reception for a group of fine artists whose works will be displayed in the church’s exhibition area through October.

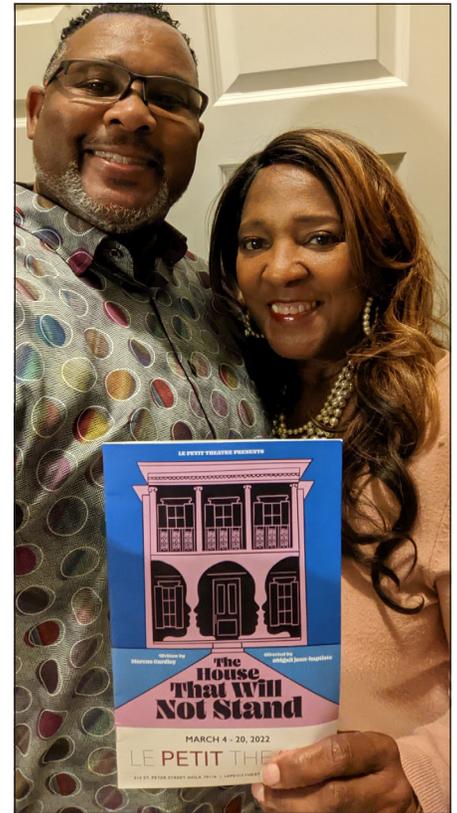
As the coordinator of the Cornerstone Arts Freedom Fest, Kathleen stated that the goal of this family community event “will display the beauty of God’s creative spirit while showcasing local artists.”

This two-day festival is under the auspices of the young adult and family ministries with major community sponsorships by Gizelda Toomer of Zelda’s African Imports, the National Conference of Artists (NCA) New Orleans Chapter and T.I. Contractors, LLC. The events of both days will be hosted by Danyel Nicole Black, educator, author and founder/CEO of the Crown Me Foundation. Displaying artists will include NCA of New Orleans president Sheleen Jones, plus Patrick Henry Arts, Debra Austin, Jourdan Barnes and Kathleen’s daughter, Barriane Franks.

The following day, Saturday, August 6, will showcase musical artists and a deejay. Among those scheduled to perform are DJ Kool Breez, Red Dog, J9 The Diva, Don Jackson, Clinton Smith, Veronica Downs Dorsey and the St. Peter Claver Choir, the Cornerstone Harmonizers and as-yet-to-be-named special guests. Several authors will be on hand to discuss and sell their books and various vendors will be offering artworks and handicrafts for sale.

The festival is free and open to the public, “rain or shine,” barring a serious weather event. COVID-19 protocols will be in effect and enforced.

A certified school psychologist with more than 35 years of experience and an active member of the Mystic Krewe



of Femme Fatale, Kathleen grew up in the Gentilly neighborhood. Her interest in the arts was sparked as a young girl, taking piano lessons, attending dance class at Deirdre’s School of Dance and participating in her youth choir at Calvary Tabernacle CME Church. As a teen, she participated in the Miss Black Teenage America pageant and she took acting lessons at Southern University New Orleans.

Following graduation from Walter L. Cohen High School, Kathleen went on to Dillard University, receiving her B.A. in psychology and her Master’s from Iowa State University. She is currently a doctoral candidate at Western Michigan University, completing all of her Ph.D. requirements except for the dissertation, which she confidently expects to do when Barriane finishes her Master’s program in art history at Columbia University.

“My daughter encouraged me to complete my doctoral studies so that we could graduate together,” Kathleen explained.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF KATHLEEN MCKINNEY-FRANKS

“I see myself as the MOTA, Mother of the Artist,” she continued, proudly noting that Barriane is a visual artist, having worked in painting, photography, sculpture and other media. She graduated from the New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts (NOCCA) and Xavier University of Louisiana with a B.A. in visual arts, before going on to Columbia for her graduate work.

One of Barriane’s recent sculptures is a 10-foot-long model of a slave ship which is on display in the library on the Xavier campus. “She has a lot of interest in social justice issues,” Kathleen said, adding that Barriane is also a member of the same AKA chapter as her.

Prior to the pandemic, the local chapter was hosting in-person classes for young people that were focused on careers in the arts, as well as history presentations of the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement; periods during which Black culture in America flourished. Sophie B. Wright High School on Napoleon Avenue served as the site for one of the first in-person student collaborations.

The chapter also gets its message out via a Facebook channel, YouTube and Instagram. Available for viewing is a YouTube interview that was recorded with sorority member and former New Orleans First Lady, Sybil Haydel Morial, who discusses her book, “Witness the Change,” as well as her personal journey to becoming an author.

“We took a three-pronged approach to

how we did the work,” Kathleen explained, summarizing the methods used. These included sponsoring educational interaction through the Arts on a Sunday Afternoon series, which included a virtual theater and jazz performances and a reading of Trombone Shorty’s book, “The Five O’Clock Band,” by Malik Mingo, local host of “Great Day Louisiana.”

Lesson plans were also used, emphasizing the arts and bringing in artists to share their experiences and insights for their Career Focus Up Close and Personal program. In addition, students were shown actual live performances and discussions over the Zoom platform.

“The sessions were broken down into different age groups and school grade levels,” Kathleen explained. “We received a lot of positive feedback and interaction with the children, who were most particularly shocked by the parallels between these historic arts periods and the modern era,” she added.

As a part of the 2021 and 2022 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. celebrations and this year’s Coretta Scott King celebration, participants as young as 13 were invited to submit a work of art to be displayed during the festivities, exemplifying their personal experiences with social justice.

Participation in the Career Focus Up Close and Personal program is free and open to the public, Kathleen emphasized.

And so the beat goes on for Kathleen and her sorors in the Omicron Lambda Omega chapter of AKA, supporting the



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arts and raising awareness of what the performing and visual arts offer to the New Orleans community, as well as to her personally.

Happily married to her husband Barron for 30 years and with a talented daughter showing great promise in her artistic aspirations, Kathleen McKinney-Franks has been and will continue to be a shining star in the city she proudly calls home!

Entries for artists wishing to participate and display their works at the Cornerstone Arts Freedom Fest have until Saturday, July 30 to submit their applications. Apply online at the following link: [Artist's Call](#). For general questions and/or vendor inquiries contact: kmcfranks@gmail.com or (504) 407-5406. Cornerstone United Methodist Church is located at 5276 Bullard Avenue in New Orleans East.

