THE 35th

NATIONAL CIVIL RIGHTS MUSEUM

FREEDOM AWARD

HONORING

FRED GRAY • SHAVON ARLINE-BRADLEY • BAKARI SELLERS • NNEKA OGWUMIKE

OCTOBER 1, 2026



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THE NATIONAL CIVIL RIGHTS MUSEUM: 35 YEARS OF LEGACY, EDUCATION, AND ACTION

The National Civil Rights Museum, located in Memphis, Tennessee, is one of the nation's foremost institutions committed to preserving the legacy of the American Civil Rights Movement and connecting it to today's ongoing struggles for equality and human rights. Housed in the former Lorraine Motel, the site of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination on April 4, 1968, the Museum serves as a place of remembrance, education, reflection, and action. Each year it invites visitors from across the globe to explore the historical fight for civil rights and to consider their own role in shaping a more just society.

In 2026, that invitation carries extra weight: the Museum marks 35 years since it first opened its doors.

Since its founding in 1991, the Museum has evolved from a commemorative site into a dynamic, living institution. Its exhibits blend powerful storytelling with archival materials, oral histories, and interactive technologies, guiding visitors through pivotal chapters of civil rights history, from slavery and Reconstruction to the Jim Crow era, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Freedom Rides, the March on Washington, and beyond. The Museum's mission has never been simply to chronicle the past; it exists to engage the public in an ongoing dialogue about justice, democracy, and human dignity, treating history as a living conversation rather than a closed chapter.

That mission is rooted in community activism and vision. After Dr. King's assassination, the Lorraine Motel, then owned by Walter and Loree Bailey, became a site of spontaneous memorial, with flowers, notes, and mourners gathering at a place that became sacred ground almost overnight. But as the years passed, the building fell into decline, and by 1982 it faced foreclosure. In response, a group of local leaders Judge D'Army Bailey, State Representative A.W. Willis Jr., and media executive Charles "Chuck" Scruggs, formed the Martin Luther King Memorial Foundation with a clear goal: save the Lorraine Motel and build a museum worthy of Dr. King's life and the movement he helped lead. Community fundraising, significant gifts from AFSCME and Lucky Heart Cosmetics, and a loan from Tri-State Bank gave the Foundation the resources and momentum to move forward. The City of Memphis, Shelby County, and the State of Tennessee joined the effort with essential funding, transforming a threatened building into a landmark institution.

Construction officially began in 1987, and on September 28, 1991, the Museum opened to the public, designed from its inception not simply as a place of memory, but as a center of learning and activism. Its influence has only grown since.

In 1999, the Museum acquired the Boarding House, officially known as the Young & Morrow Building, extending its narrative beyond commemoration into investigation, context, and reflection. Opened to the public in 2002 as part of the "Exploring the Legacy" expansion, the Boarding House offers visitors a detailed look at the events surrounding King's assassination, from the crime scene and the manhunt that followed to the broader, harder questions of conspiracy, accountability, and justice. In 2014, a $28 million renovation brought sweeping updates to the Lorraine Motel experience itself: new technologies, immersive storytelling, and refreshed content sharpened the Movement's relevance to civil and human rights issues still unfolding today.





The Museum's national standing continued to grow. In 2016, it was formally named a Smithsonian Institution Affiliate, opening the door to collaborative exhibitions, educational partner programming, and access to Smithsonian artifacts and resources. In 2018, it commemorated the 50th anniversary of Dr. King's assassination with "MLK50: Where Do We Go from Here?" – a symposium and civic observance that brought thousands together to reflect on his legacy and the future of social justice work.

In 2020, amid the COVID-19 pandemic and the international uprisings following the murder of George Floyd, the Museum met the moment with strength and purpose, turning to virtual programs, digital exhibitions, and community partnerships to remain a voice of leadership through deep uncertainty. It celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2021, and in 2022 launched the Corporate Equity Center, a bold initiative helping corporations confront and dismantle systemic racism through accountability, training, and structural reform, extending the Museum's influence directly into the workplace.

The Museum's collection deepened significantly with the acquisition of more than 500 artifacts from the estate of Bayard Rustin, the strategist and organizer whose behind-the-scenes brilliance shaped the 1963 March on Washington and whose story had long gone largely untold. That acquisition became the foundation for a major 2026 milestone: the launch of the Bayard Rustin Institute, a new permanent program supported by the Lilly Endowment in partnership with MICAH Memphis, BRIDGES Youth Action Center, and the Gamaliel Network. Built around four pillars scholarship, education, engagement, and exhibitions, the Institute extends Rustin's legacy of strategic, coalition-driven organizing into a new generation of civic leaders, ensuring his contributions take their rightful place alongside the Movement's most celebrated figures.

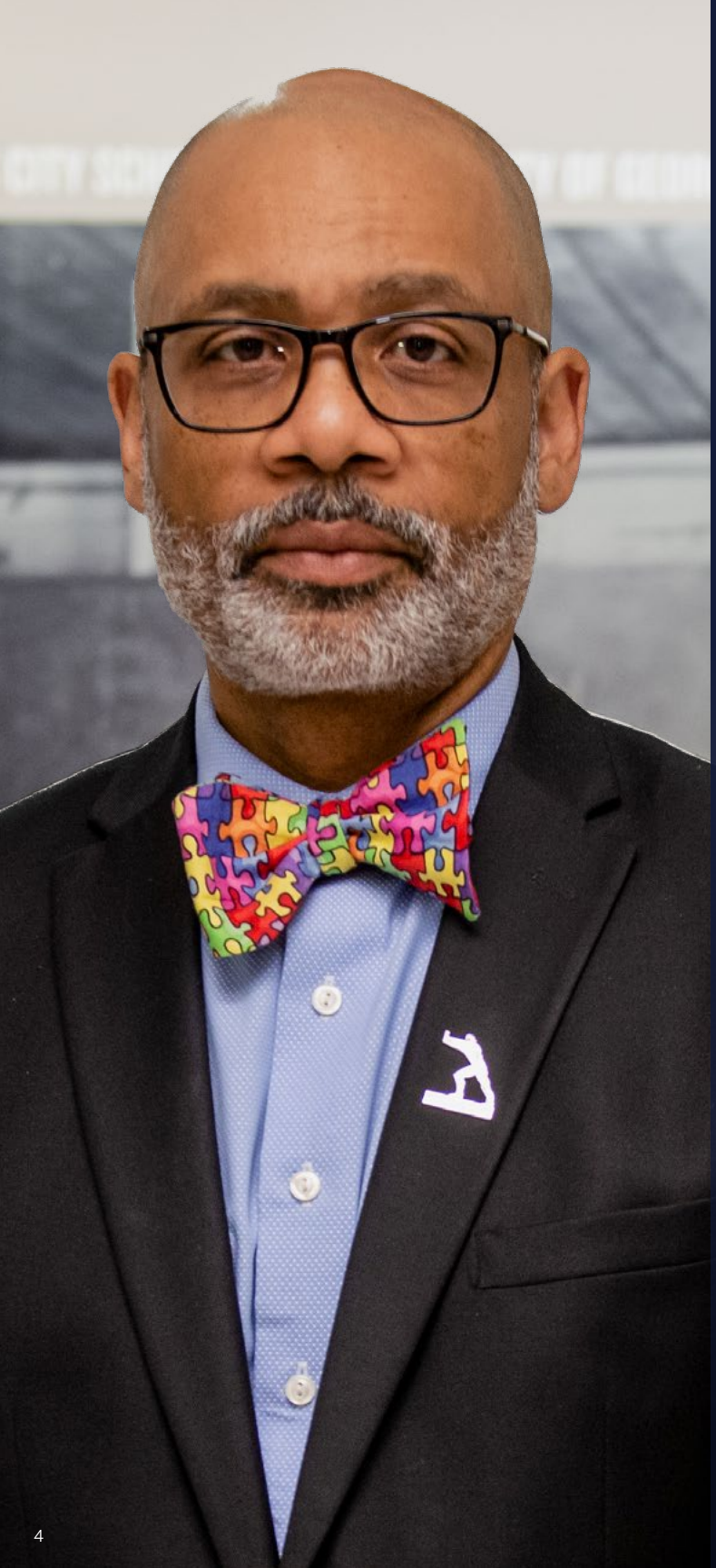
That same milestone year brings the Museum's most ambitious undertaking yet: the reopening of the newly reimagined Legacy Building on May 16, 2026, just 49 days ahead of the nation's Semiquincentennial. Anchored by the question "What will you do next?", the renovated space traces a constitutional through-line from 1619 to the civil rights legislation of the 1960s, positioning the Legacy Experience as the essential prologue to America's 250th. New exhibits center on the strategies, people, and global movements that fueled the civil rights era and continue to shape activism today, paired with digital learning tools and community-based installations built to inspire a new generation of students, families, activists, and tourists alike to see themselves as part of the ongoing pursuit of justice and freedom

THE FREEDOM AWARD is the National Civil Rights Museum's highest and most radiant honor, a tribute reserved for those rare individuals whose courage has bent the arc of history toward justice. Since its founding in 1991, the Award has drawn an extraordinary constellation of honorees across disciplines, generations, and continents: global icons like Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama, Coretta Scott King, and Rosa Parks, standing alongside contemporary changemakers like Oprah Winfrey, Presidents Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, Diane Nash, Ava DuVernay, and Sherrilyn Ifill.

Each year, the ceremony transforms Memphis into a global stage, uniting dignitaries, artists, and everyday citizens for an unforgettable evening of celebration, reflection, and resolve. Held in one of the city's most storied venues and opened by a Red Carpet Pre-Show Gala, the Freedom Award is far more than a night of recognition; it is a living reminder that the fight for human dignity is carried forward by real people, and a rousing call for everyone in the room to ask what they, too, might be brave enough to do.

THE FREEDOM AWARD STUDENT FORUM is where that call reaches its most electric audience: the next generation. Held each year as part of the Freedom Award celebration, the Student Forum opens the door between young people and the honorees whose lives embody the values Dr. King spent his life fighting for, giving students a rare, direct opportunity to engage with the leaders shaping history in real time. Through candid conversation, a spirited Q&A, and moments designed to spark real dialogue, students leave not just informed but activated, seeing their own potential as agents of change more clearly.

At the heart of the Student Forum is the Keeper of the Dream Award, presented to Mid-South students in grades 9–12 who have shown extraordinary courage, compassion, leadership, and service in their own communities, proof that the dream doesn't belong only to history books, but to the young people writing its next chapter right now. Together, the Student Forum and the Keeper of the Dream Award turn the Freedom Award season into something bigger than a ceremony; it’s a launching pad for the leaders, organizers, and changemakers of tomorrow.



Welcome to the 35th Freedom Award!

For 35 years, the National Civil Rights Museum's Freedom Award has honored individuals whose courage, leadership, and commitment have advanced the cause of freedom and human dignity. Tonight, we continue that legacy by recognizing four extraordinary leaders whose work reminds us that the movement for justice is ongoing, and that each generation has a role to play.

This year, we are proud to honor Fred Gray, Shavon Arline-Bradley, Bakari Sellers, and Nneka Ogwumike. Through law, public service, advocacy, and athletics, each has used their voice and influence to confront inequity, expand opportunity, and strengthen communities. Their contributions reflect the many ways meaningful change can take shape when conviction is joined with action.

The Freedom Award is more than a celebration of remarkable achievement. It is also an invitation to consider what freedom requires of us today. The history preserved within the National Civil Rights Museum teaches us that progress has always depended upon people who were willing to stand, speak, serve, and persevere, even when the path forward was difficult.

As we celebrate this milestone year, may the stories and continued work of our honorees renew our commitment to justice and inspire us to carry the movement forward within our own communities and spheres of influence.

On behalf of the National Civil Rights Museum, welcome to the 35th Freedom Award.

DR. RUSS WIGGINTON

PRESIDENT, NATIONAL CIVIL RIGHTS MUSEUM

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THE HOST

Larenz Tate



MUSICAL MESSENGER

Tamela Mann



Garry Goin AND THE FREEDOM AWARD HOUSE BAND

Order of Programme

PRE-SHOW

Musical Director **GARRY GOIN** and the Freedom Award House Band

OPENING TRIBUTE

TAMELA MANN, Performance

LARENZ TATE, Host

DR. RUSS WIGGINTON, President, National Civil Rights Museum

Memorial Tribute
BERNARD LAFAYETTE, JESSE JACKSON, CLARA ESTER, GLORIA STEINEM, DOLLY PARTON

Musical Director **GARRY GOIN** and the Freedom Award House Band

THE FREEDOM AWARD HONOREES

FRED GRAY
Presented by Rachel Knox, Hyde Family Foundation

NNEKA OGWUMIKE
Presented by Terri Carmichael Jackson, WNBA

SHAVON ARLINE-BRADLEY
Presented by Karol Collymore, Nike

BAKARI SELLERS
Presented by Rita Cowan, FedEX

CLOSING TRIBUTE

Tamela Mann

Larenz Tate

Join us for dessert and coffee immediately after the Freedom Award Ceremony.

HYDE FAMILY FOUNDATION

Dear Friends,

On behalf of Hyde Family Foundation, welcome to the 2026 Freedom Award.
Thirty-five years ago, the National Civil Rights Museum opened at the Lorraine Motel and presented the first Freedom Awards to Coretta Scott King, Rosa Parks and James Farmer. We are proud to have supported both from the beginning. Each year this ceremony brings the world to Memphis to honor the people who carry the work of justice forward, and each year we are inspired by them.

John Lewis, a 2004 Freedom Award recipient, wrote that "freedom is not a state; it is an act." There can be no rest on the path to justice. Freedom is something every generation must choose. Tonight's honorees, whose work spans seven decades, make that clear.
Reverend Shavon Arline-Bradley leads the National Council of Negro Women and its three-million-member network, opening pathways of mentorship and opportunity for a new generation. Bakari Sellers, the youngest African American elected official in the country when he took office at 22, has spent the two decades since working at the intersection of law, media, and public service. Nneka Ogwumike, an MVP, champion and president of the WNBA Players Association, has used her platform to advance the rights of women and girls on the court and well beyond it.

Pitt and I are honored to present the 35th Freedom Award to Fred Gray. He has practiced law for more than 70 years. He represented Claudette Colvin and then Rosa Parks, became Dr. King's first civil rights attorney, and argued the cases that ended bus segregation in Montgomery and won federal protection for the marchers bound for Selma. There can be no better example of a life given to the act of freedom.

Congratulations to Shavon, Bakari, Nneka and Fred on this powerful recognition. Thank you for your leadership in championing civil and human rights in America and around the world.

May your example inspire all of us in Memphis to work together to build a unified, thriving city for all.

Sincerely,

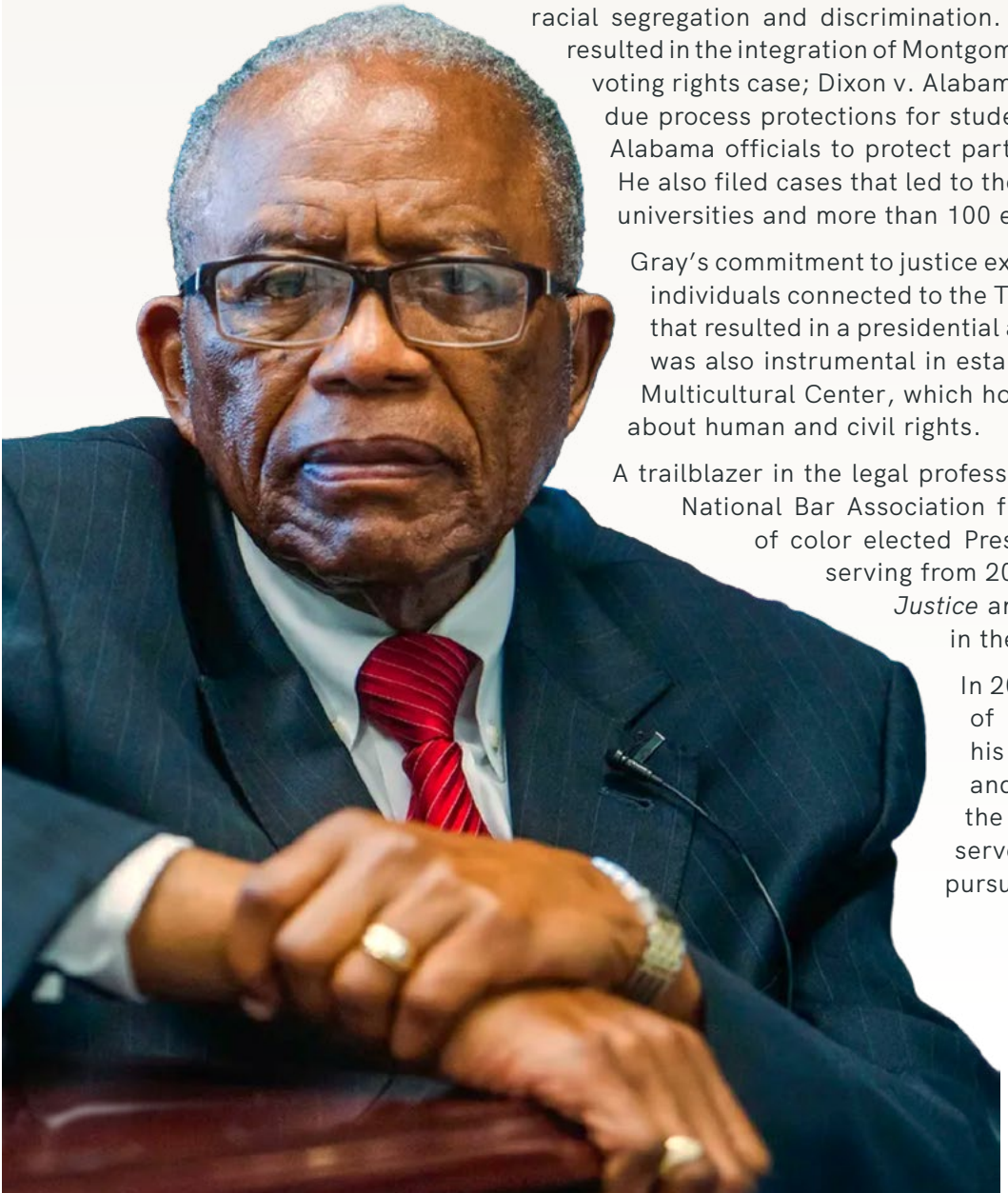
Barbara Hyde

Barbara R. Hyde



FRED GRAY, is a distinguished civil rights attorney, author, minister, and lifelong advocate for justice whose legal career has spanned more than six decades. A native of Montgomery, Alabama, Gray was educated at Nashville Christian Institute, Alabama State College for Negroes (now Alabama State University), and Case Western Reserve University. He was admitted to the Alabama Bar in 1954 and began his civil rights legal career that same year.

Gray quickly became one of the leading attorneys of the Civil Rights Movement. Among his earliest clients was Claudette Colvin, a 15-year-old student who refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus. In December 1955, he represented Rosa Parks following her arrest for refusing to surrender her seat, a case connected to the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Gray also served as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s first civil rights attorney.



Throughout his career, Gray successfully argued numerous landmark cases that challenged racial segregation and discrimination. His work included Browder v. Gayle, which resulted in the integration of Montgomery's buses; Gomillion v. Lightfoot, a landmark voting rights case; Dixon v. Alabama State Board of Education, which established due process protections for students; and Williams v. Wallace, which required Alabama officials to protect participants in the Selma-to-Montgomery march. He also filed cases that led to the integration of Alabama's public colleges and universities and more than 100 elementary and secondary school systems.

Gray's commitment to justice extended beyond the courtroom. He represented individuals connected to the Tuskegee Syphilis Study and helped lead efforts that resulted in a presidential apology to the study's participants in 1997. He was also instrumental in establishing the Tuskegee Human and Civil Rights Multicultural Center, which honors the participants and educates the public about human and civil rights.

A trailblazer in the legal profession, Gray served as the 43rd President of the National Bar Association from 1985–1986 and became the first person of color elected President of the Alabama State Bar Association, serving from 2002–2003. He is also the author of *Bus Ride to Justice* and other works documenting pivotal moments in the Civil Rights Movement.

In 2022, Gray was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom at the White House, recognizing his extraordinary contributions to civil rights and justice. His enduring legacy is reflected in the laws he helped change, the communities he served, and the generations inspired by his lifelong pursuit of justice.

FRED GRAY

Dear Gala attendees and Museum supporters,

We are honored to present this year's National Civil Rights Museum Freedom Award to Rev. Shavon Arline-Bradley, President and CEO of the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW). On behalf of Nike Mid-South, we honor Rev. Arline-Bradley's community and civic and advancing NCNW's mission of leading, advocating and empowering women of African descent, their families and communities.

Under her NCNW leadership, the organization is advancing the Freedom to Learn mobilization launched by the African American Policy Forum. The campaign protects Black history and educational equity. Rev. Arline-Bradley also created the Bethune Height Changemakers Pathways program for Black collegiate women with more than 100 active college campus sections.

Before NCNW, she held senior leadership positions at the NAACP, including Executive Vice President of Strategic Planning & Partnerships and Chief of Staff. She subsequently served in the Obama Administration as senior advisor and Director of External Engagement for U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, working with congressional and global leaders on public health policy and public-private partnerships.

Please join us in celebrating Rev. Arline-Bradley's commitment to carrying the work of freedom forward.

Sincerely,



Willie H. Gregory
Senior Director, Community/Business Investment
NIKE Inc.

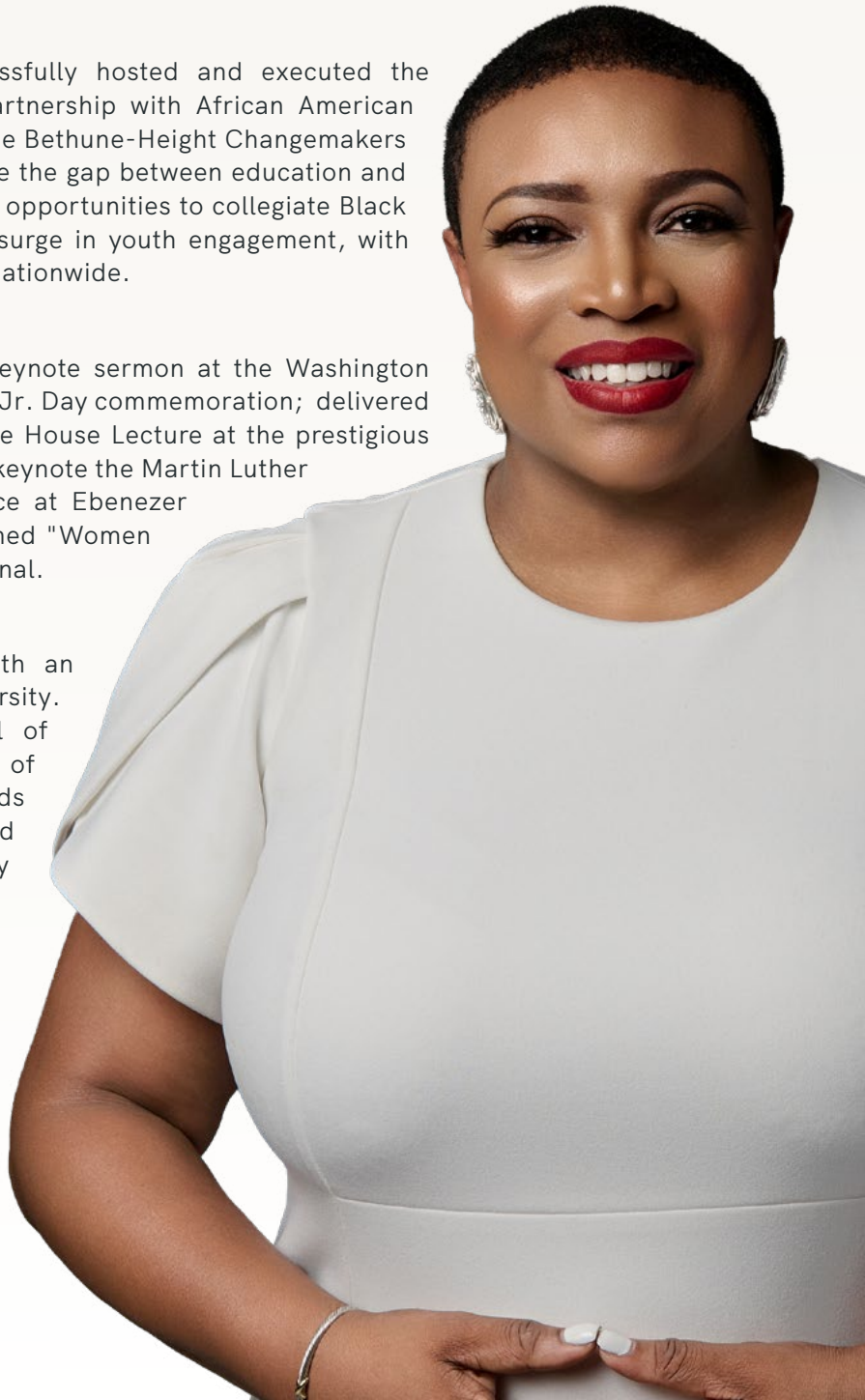


REV. SHAVON ARLINE-BRADLEY, serves as the President and CEO of the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), marking a historic milestone as the first person to hold this title in the organization's history. Since taking the helm in March 2023, she has led a three-million-member network into a new era.

Under her visionary leadership, the Council successfully hosted and executed the Washington, D.C. Freedom to Learn activation in partnership with African American Policy Forum. Central to her legacy is the creation of the Bethune-Height Changemakers Pathways, NCNW signature program designed to bridge the gap between education and industry by providing mentorship and high-level career opportunities to collegiate Black women. Her presidency has also overseen a historic surge in youth engagement, with over one hundred active campus sections established nationwide.

Since taking the helm some of her milestones are: keynote sermon at the Washington National Cathedral for their annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Day commemoration; delivered a lecture at the Week Seven African American Heritage House Lecture at the prestigious Chautauqua Institute in New York; youngest person to keynote the Martin Luther King, Jr. Beloved Community Commemorative Service at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, one of 25 women to be named "Women Who Mean Business" by the Washington Business Journal.

A native of southern New Jersey, she earned both an undergraduate and master's degrees from Tulane University. graduated from the Samuel Dewitt Proctor School of Theology at Virginia Union University with a Master of Divinity and was subsequently ordained. She holds executive certificates from Howard University and Cornell University, in addition to holding two honorary doctorates.



SHAVON
ARLINE-BRADLEY

National Civil Rights Museum Freedom Award

September 14, 2026

To the friends and supporters of the National Civil Rights Museum,
Memphis is the shared home of FedEx and the National Civil Rights Museum. The museum's work has helped shape our commitment to the city and its founding ideals. In 2023, the museum honored our late founder, Frederick W. Smith, with a Freedom Award for his belief that dignity and opportunity belong to everyone. We proudly celebrate this year's honorees that are carrying that essential work forward.

FedEx is committed to standing with communities and creating opportunities. We are honored to join in celebrating the 2026 Freedom Award recipients, whose work widens the circle of opportunity for all.

On behalf of FedEx team members around the world, congratulations to the 2026 Freedom Award honorees: Bakari Sellers, Fred D. Gray, Rev. Shavon Arline-Bradley, and Nneka Ogwumike on this well-deserved recognition. Thank you for the conviction and generosity you bring to the pursuit of justice.

With respect and gratitude,

Raj

Raj Subramaniam
President and CEO
FedEx Corporation



BAKARI SELLERS, is an attorney, author, political commentator, and speaker whose work spans law, media, public service, and storytelling. He is the author of the New York Times bestselling memoir *My Vanishing Country: A Memoir*, which combines personal history with cultural analysis to explore the lives and experiences of America's often-overlooked Black working-class communities.



Sellers recently expanded his work as an author with *Who Are Your People?*, a children's picture book inspired by his twins, Sadie and Stokely. The book introduces young readers to Black history, identity, and the importance of understanding where they come from. He also hosts The Bakari Sellers Podcast, a twice-weekly podcast on The Ringer Podcast Network. Through the podcast, Sellers explores a wide range of topics, including politics, race, sports, media, and culture.

Born into a family deeply rooted in the civil rights movement, Sellers was influenced from an early age by his father, civil rights leader and educator Cleveland Sellers. His family's legacy of activism and public service helped shape his own commitment to civic engagement and community.

Sellers earned a bachelor's degree in African-American Studies from Morehouse College in 2005 before receiving his Juris Doctor from the University of South Carolina School of Law in 2008. He practices law with Strom Law Firm, LLC, in Columbia, South Carolina, where his work includes strategic communication, public affairs, and legal advocacy.

In 2006, at age 22, Sellers made history when he was elected to the South Carolina House of Representatives, becoming the youngest African American elected official in the nation at the time. He served in the legislature until 2014, when he became the Democratic nominee for lieutenant governor of South Carolina. Throughout his career, Sellers has also worked with U.S. Congressman James Clyburn and former Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin. Sellers has also remained active in national political and civic life. In 2008, he served on then-Senator Barack Obama's South Carolina steering committee. His career has earned him recognition including TIME Magazine's 40 Under 40 and appearances on The Root 100 list of influential African Americans, as well as HBCU Top 30 Under 30 recognition.

BAKARI SELLERS

The National Civil Rights Museum transformed a place of tragedy into a place of reconciliation.

The Freedom Award honors those who carry the fight forward.

Joining forces for a thriving Memphis for all.

CONGRATULATIONS TO THE 2026 HONOREES

Fred D. Gray

Bakari Sellers

Rev. Shavon Arline-Bradley

Nneka Ogwumike

HYDE FAMILY FOUNDATION

hydefoundation.org

NNEKA OGWUMIKE, has built one of the most accomplished careers in WNBA history, distinguished by excellence on the court and influential leadership off it. A graduate of Stanford University, Ogwumike was selected No. 1 overall in the 2012 WNBA Draft by the Los Angeles Sparks and earned WNBA Rookie of the Year honors in her first season.

In 2016, Ogwumike reached a defining moment in her career, earning WNBA Most Valuable Player, First Team All-WNBA, and First Team All-Defensive honors while leading the Los Angeles Sparks to a WNBA Championship. In the deciding Game 5 of the Finals, she secured the championship with a game-winning jumper with 3.1 seconds remaining.

Over her career, Ogwumike has been named an 11-time WNBA All-Star, earned eight All-WNBA selections, and was named to The W25, recognizing the 25 greatest players in WNBA history. She is also the Los Angeles Sparks' all-time leader in scoring, field goals made, steals, double-doubles, Win Shares, and Value Over Replacement Player.

Beyond her accomplishments as a player, Ogwumike has been a leading advocate for women's basketball. She has served as President of the Women's National Basketball Players Association (WNBPA) since 2016, helping advance player advocacy and shape the future of the professional game.

Across 15 seasons, Ogwumike's legacy reflects not only championship-level performance, but also her commitment to leadership, service, and strengthening the game for generations to come.

NNEKA OGWUMIKE



Memorial Tributes

REV. JESSE JACKSON, SR | *Champion of Justice, Voice of Conscience — 2018 Freedom Award Honoree*



Rev. Jesse L. Jackson, Sr. was a towering figure in the American civil rights movement and a global advocate for justice, peace, and equality. Beginning in the 1960s alongside Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Jackson served as a young leader in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and director of Operation Breadbasket. He later founded Operation PUSH and the Rainbow Coalition, advancing political and economic empowerment for Black communities.

A frequent presence at the Museum's April 4th commemorations at the Lorraine Motel, Jackson was a witness to history and steward of King's unfinished work. In 2018, the Museum honored him with its Freedom Award for a lifetime of mobilizing communities and inspiring hope. His advocacy extended from apartheid-era South Africa to American communities, championing labor, education, healthcare, housing justice, voting rights, and global human rights. Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr. leaves an enduring legacy of service, advocacy, and lifting others as he climbed.

REV. DR. BERNARD LAFAYETTE, JR. | *Key Civil Rights Strategist and Organizer — 2012 Freedom Award Honoree*



Rev. Dr. Bernard LaFayette, Jr. was an influential strategist of the Civil Rights Movement and lifelong advocate for nonviolence, justice, and democratic participation.

As a student leader in Nashville, he helped lead the 1960 sit-ins and form the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. He later played key roles in the Freedom Rides, Alabama voter registration campaigns, and the 1965 Selma movement. He went on to serve as National Program Administrator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and National Coordinator of the 1968 Poor People's Campaign, teaching nonviolence as a method for social change.

The Museum honored Rev. LaFayette with its Freedom Award in 2012. As an Emory University professor, he brought students to Memphis to experience the movement's history at the Lorraine Motel and returned in 2018 for MLK50. His legacy continues through those carrying forward his principles of nonviolence, community organizing, and equality.

CLARA ESTER | *Deaconess, Organizer, and Witness to History*



Clara Jean Ester, a 1965 graduate of Memphis's Booker T. Washington High School, is a United Methodist deaconess, civil rights advocate, and servant leader whose life has been dedicated to faith, activism, and community service. She also served as international vice president of United Women in Faith.

While attending LeMoyne-Owen College, Clara became active in the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike and later served as a youth organizer for the Second Poor People's Campaign in Marks, Mississippi. Her commitment to justice was shaped by her relationship with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and mentorship from Dr. James Lawson.

On April 4, 1968, Clara was on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel when Dr. King was fatally shot and attempted to staunch the blood flow. The experience deepened her commitment to love and nonviolence. In 2026, she returned to the Museum to speak at its April 4 observance and visited the balcony for the first time since the assassination.

In 1970, Clara moved to Mobile, Alabama, where she served at Dumas Wesley Community Center, eventually becoming Executive Director. A longtime church and United Women in Faith leader, she helped found Habitat for Humanity of Mobile and People United to Advance the Dream. Clara's life reflects a legacy of faith, service, and persistent commitment to justice and community.

GLORIA STEINEM | *Writer, Organizer, and Lifelong Champion for Women's Equality - 2019 Freedom Award Honoree*



Gloria Steinem was a pioneering writer, activist, organizer, and 2019 Freedom Award honoree whose decades of advocacy helped transform the women's rights movement and advance equality and justice.

For more than half a century, Steinem challenged systems that limited women's and girls' opportunities while recognizing the interconnected struggles of sexism, racism, and other forms of injustice. She co-founded the Women's Action Alliance and National Women's Political Caucus and served as founding president of the Ms. Foundation for Women, supporting grassroots efforts to empower women and girls nationwide.

The Museum honored Steinem with its Freedom Award in 2019 for her lifetime commitment to equality and human dignity. She also emphasized mentorship and preparing future generations to continue the work, encouraging women to open doors for others.

We remember Steinem not only for the barriers she challenged and movements she strengthened, but also for her curiosity, humor, and genuine love of people. Her legacy continues through the generations she inspired and the ongoing pursuit of equality.



DOLLY PARTON | *Global Icon And Humanitarian*

Dolly Parton was a global icon and humanitarian, known worldwide as a beloved singer, songwriter, philanthropist, actress, and author, who died peacefully on August 25 in Nashville, Tennessee, at age 80.

Born January 19, 1946, in East Tennessee, Parton rose from humble beginnings to become one of America's most influential musical figures. Over a six-decade career, she created enduring songs including "Jolene," "I Will Always Love You," "9 to 5," and "Coat of Many Colors," with her work selling more than 100 million records worldwide.

Parton's success extended beyond music, including acclaimed films such as "9 to 5" and "Steel Magnolias" and the creation of Dollywood, a lasting source of pride for Tennessee.

Her most enduring impact came through her philanthropy. Through the Imagination Library, Parton helped place millions of free books into children's hands worldwide while supporting education, medical research, and disaster relief.

Preceded in death by her husband of fifty-nine years, Carl Thomas Dean, Parton leaves an enduring legacy through her music, entrepreneurship, and generosity.

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COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY

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COOPERATION IN EUROPE
(U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION)



Dear Friend,

I want to welcome you to the prestigious National Civil Rights Museum's 35th Freedom Awards. Each of this year's honorees has made invaluable and indelible contributions to human rights and civil rights.

Fred Gray is a pioneering civil rights attorney from Montgomery, Alabama, whose legal work helped dismantle segregation and expand constitutional protections nationwide. Beginning his career in 1954, he represented Claudette Colvin and later Rosa Parks, becoming one of the key legal architects of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and counsel to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Gray argued landmark cases including *Browder v. Gayle*, *Gomillion v. Lightfoot*, and *Williams v. Wallace*, advancing voting rights, desegregation, and equal protection. Over his nearly seven-decade career, he integrated Alabama's public schools and universities, secured justice for victims of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, and served in the Alabama Legislature. His contributions have been recognized with numerous honors, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Bakari Sellers is an attorney, author, and political commentator who made history in 2006 as the youngest African American elected official in the nation. He is the author of the bestselling memoir *My Vanishing Country* and the children's book *Who Are Your People?* He hosts *The Bakari Sellers Podcast*, covering politics, culture, and current events. A Morehouse and University of South Carolina Law graduate, he was elected in 2006 to the South Carolina legislature and became the youngest African American elected official in the nation, was the 2014 Democratic Nominee for Lt. Governor, and served on President Obama's South Carolina steering committee. He currently practices law in Columbia, South Carolina, and is married to Dr. Ellen Rucker-Sellers, with whom he shares three children.

Rev. Shavon Arline-Bradley is the president and CEO of the National Council of Negro Women, where she has led a three-million-member network since 2023. Under her leadership, the organization has expanded youth engagement nationwide and launched new initiatives including the Bethune Height Changemakers Pathways, focused on mentorship and career opportunities for collegiate Black women. She has delivered keynote addresses at major national institutions and has been recognized as one of the Washington Business Journal's "Women Who Mean Business." A New Jersey native and ordained minister, she holds degrees from Tulane University and Virginia Union University, executive certificates from Howard and Cornell Universities, and two honorary doctorates. She remains guided by faith, family, and her commitment to community.

Nneka Ogwumike is a WNBA champion, MVP, and longtime leader in women's professional basketball whose impact has extended well beyond the court. Drafted first overall in 2012, she quickly became one of the league's defining players, earning Rookie of the Year honors and later leading the Los Angeles Sparks to the 2016 WNBA title during her MVP season. An 11-time All-Star and one of the most decorated players in Sparks history, she is also the longtime president of the WNBPA, helping guide players through a transformative era for the league. A Stanford graduate and one of the program's most accomplished athletes, she has paired elite performance with influential leadership, shaping the future of women's basketball for the next generation.

I also would like to thank Dr. Russ Wigginton and everyone at the National Civil Rights Museum who played a role in making this event a resounding success. This will be my last dinner as Congressman of Tennessee's Ninth district, and it has been an honor to serve for so many years. Thank you again to this year's honorees who have greatly contributed to the advancement of civil and human rights. This work is unfortunately never finished and remains as important as ever.

As always, I remain

Most sincerely,

Steve Cohen

Steve Cohen
Member of Congress

Shelby County Government

MICKELL M. LOWERY
MAYOR

Dear Freedom Award Ceremony Attendees:

As Mayor of Shelby County, it is my honor to welcome you to the National Civil Rights Museum's 35th Freedom Award Ceremony. For 35 years, this distinguished celebration has recognized individuals whose courage, leadership, and commitment to justice have helped move our communities forward.

Here in Shelby County, we understand the significance of carrying forward the legacy of those who fought for freedom, equality, and opportunity. Our history reminds us that meaningful progress is possible when people come together with a shared commitment to creating a better future. As we celebrate this milestone year, may we also recommit ourselves to continuing that important work.

To this year's Freedom Award honorees, I extend my sincere congratulations and gratitude. Your leadership and service embody the spirit of the Freedom Award and demonstrate the impact that can be made when we use our voices and influence in service to others. Shelby County is proud to join the National Civil Rights Museum in recognizing your extraordinary contributions.

On behalf of our residents, welcome to Memphis and Shelby County. As we celebrate 35 years of the Freedom Awards, may we leave inspired to continue building communities rooted in opportunity, dignity, and respect for all. That is the spirit of One Shelby, recognizing that our greatest progress comes when we work together as one.



Sincerely,

Mickell M. Lowery
Mayor

MML/kr

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City of MEMPHIS TENNESSEE

Paul A. Young
MEMPHIS MAYOR



October 1, 2026

Dear Friends,

It is a true honor to support the National Civil Rights Museum as it hosts the 35th Freedom Awards, one of Memphis' most meaningful traditions. The Freedom Award reminds us that courage, conviction, and perseverance are not only history lessons, but living calls to action.

This year, we celebrate four extraordinary leaders whose work reflects a steadfast commitment to justice, leadership, service, and progress: Fred Gray, whose historic legal career helped transform the fight for civil rights and equality in America; Bakari Sellers, an attorney, author, and public servant whose voice continues to elevate issues of justice and opportunity; Rev. Shavon Arline-Bradley, a faith and civil rights leader whose advocacy has strengthened communities and advanced equity; and Nneka Ogwumike, a champion both on and off the court whose leadership and advocacy continue to empower others and inspire change.

To each of our honorees, congratulations. Your impact reaches far beyond your respective fields and reminds us of what is possible when leadership is rooted in courage, purpose, and service.

On behalf of our city, I thank the National Civil Rights Museum for preserving history while shaping the future. By honoring those who lead with vision and courage, you keep Memphis at the center of the fight for dignity, equality, and human rights.

As we celebrate the 35th Freedom Awards and this year's distinguished honorees, let us also recommit ourselves to building a city and a nation where freedom is not a promise deferred, but a reality lived by every person, every day.

Sincerely,

Paul A. Young
Mayor, City of Memphis

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As of September 11, 2026


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A voice for today's world
Bakari Sellers, an accomplished attorney, author, and political commentator, has spent two decades at the intersection of law, media, and public service. He uses his voice and influence to advance meaningful conversations around justice, equity, leadership, and the future of our communities.
We celebrate Mr. Sellers, 2026 National Civil Rights Museum Freedom Award honoree.
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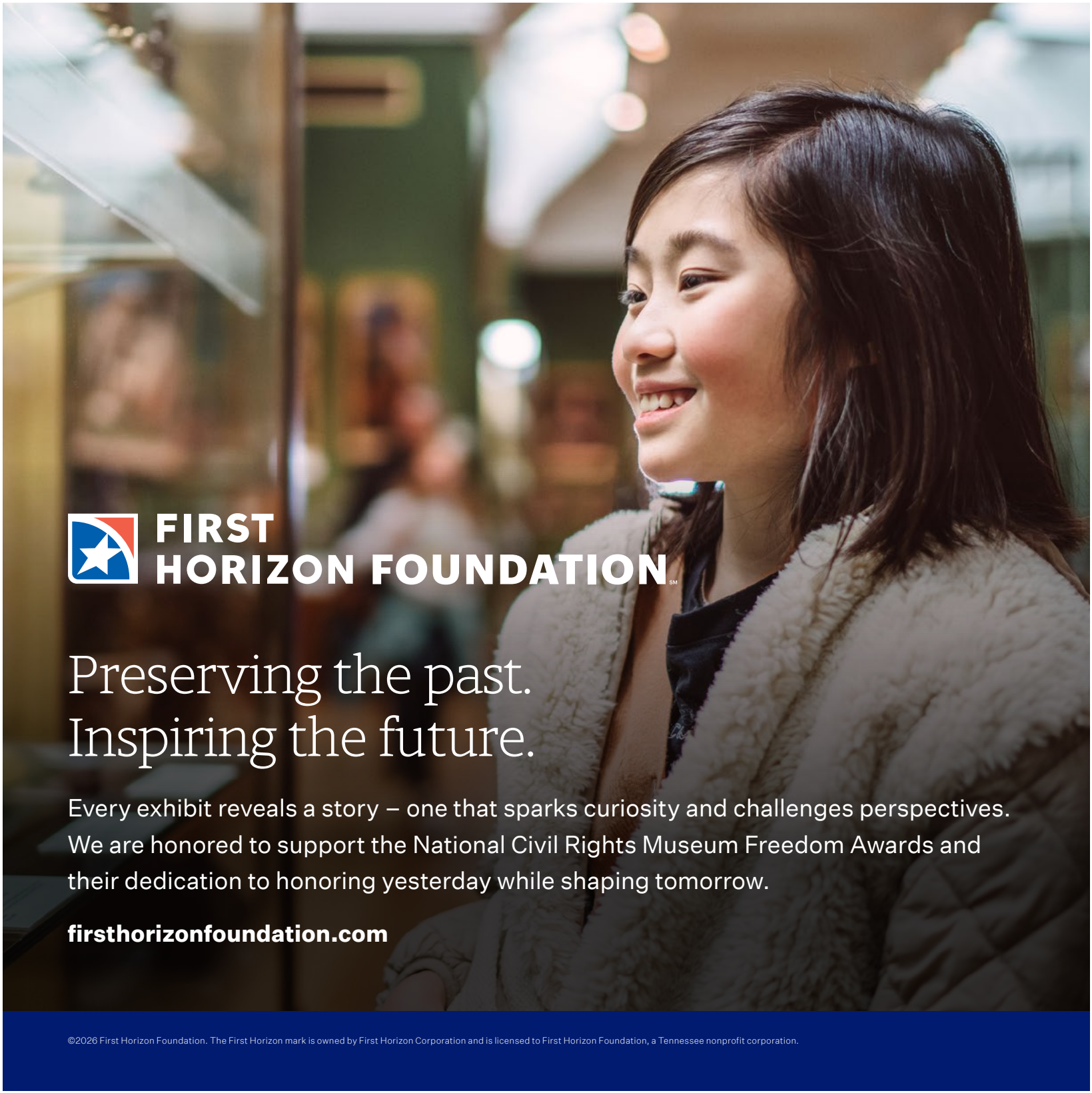
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35th
NATIONAL CIVIL RIGHTS MUSEUM
FREEDOM AWARD

GUTHRIE'S CHICKEN FINGERS
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To uplift each other is our greatest freedom.

Baptist is proud to support the National Civil Rights Museum and other advocates who share our commitment to building healthy communities.

Tonight, we salute the 35th Freedom Award honorees:

Fred D. Gray
Rev. Shavon Arline-Bradley
Bakari Sellers
Nneka Ogwumike

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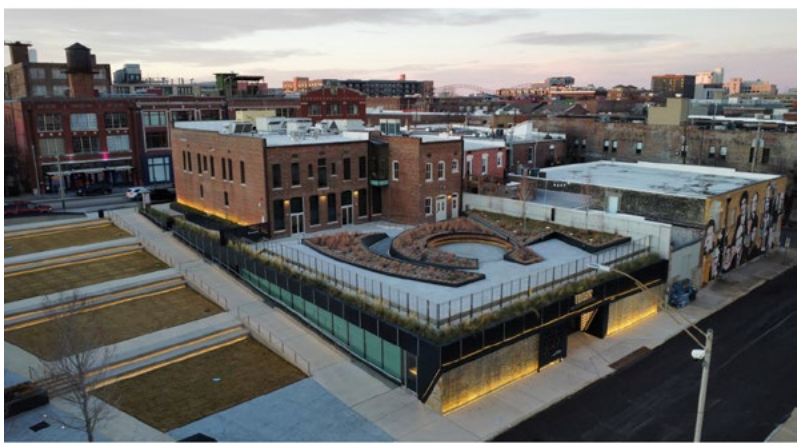

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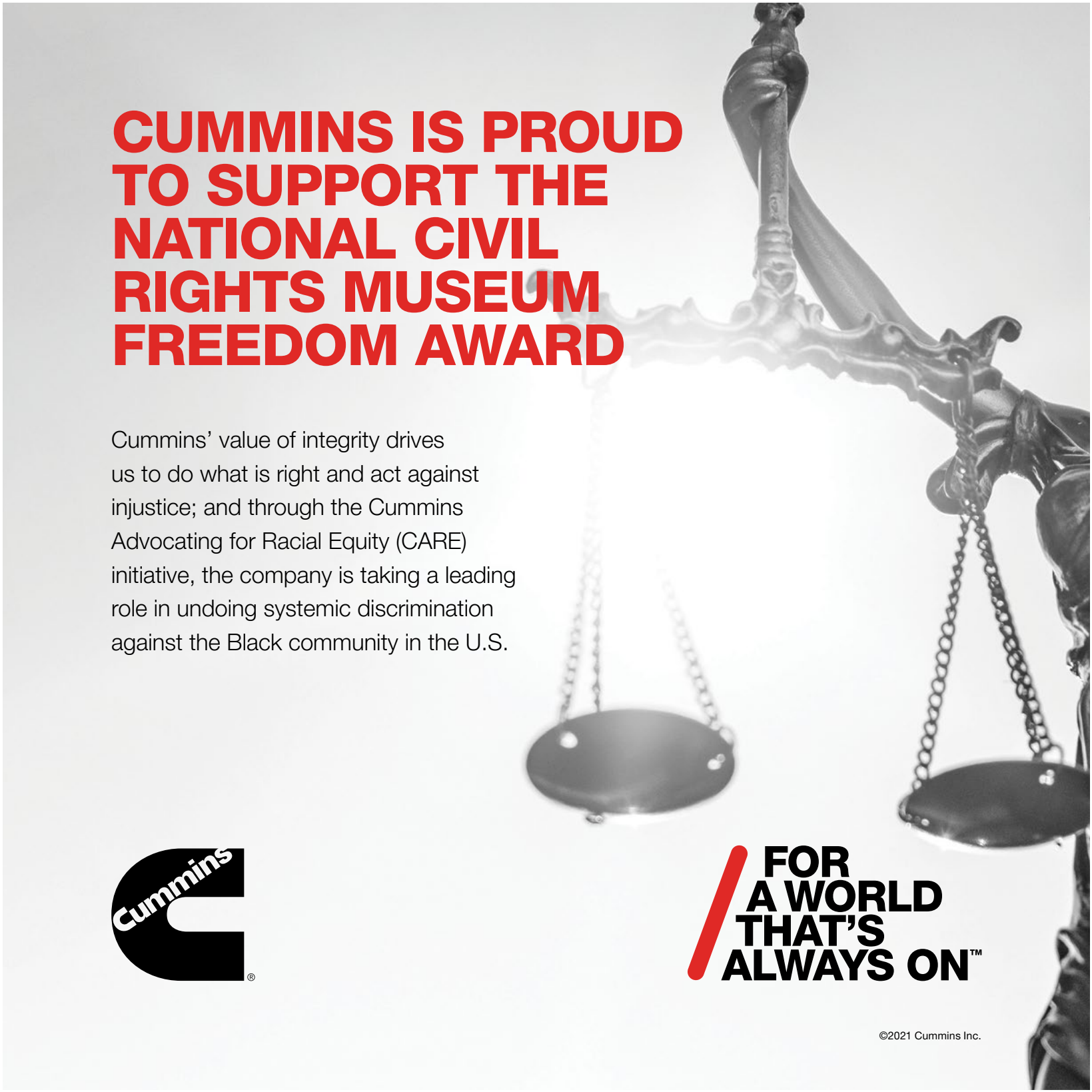

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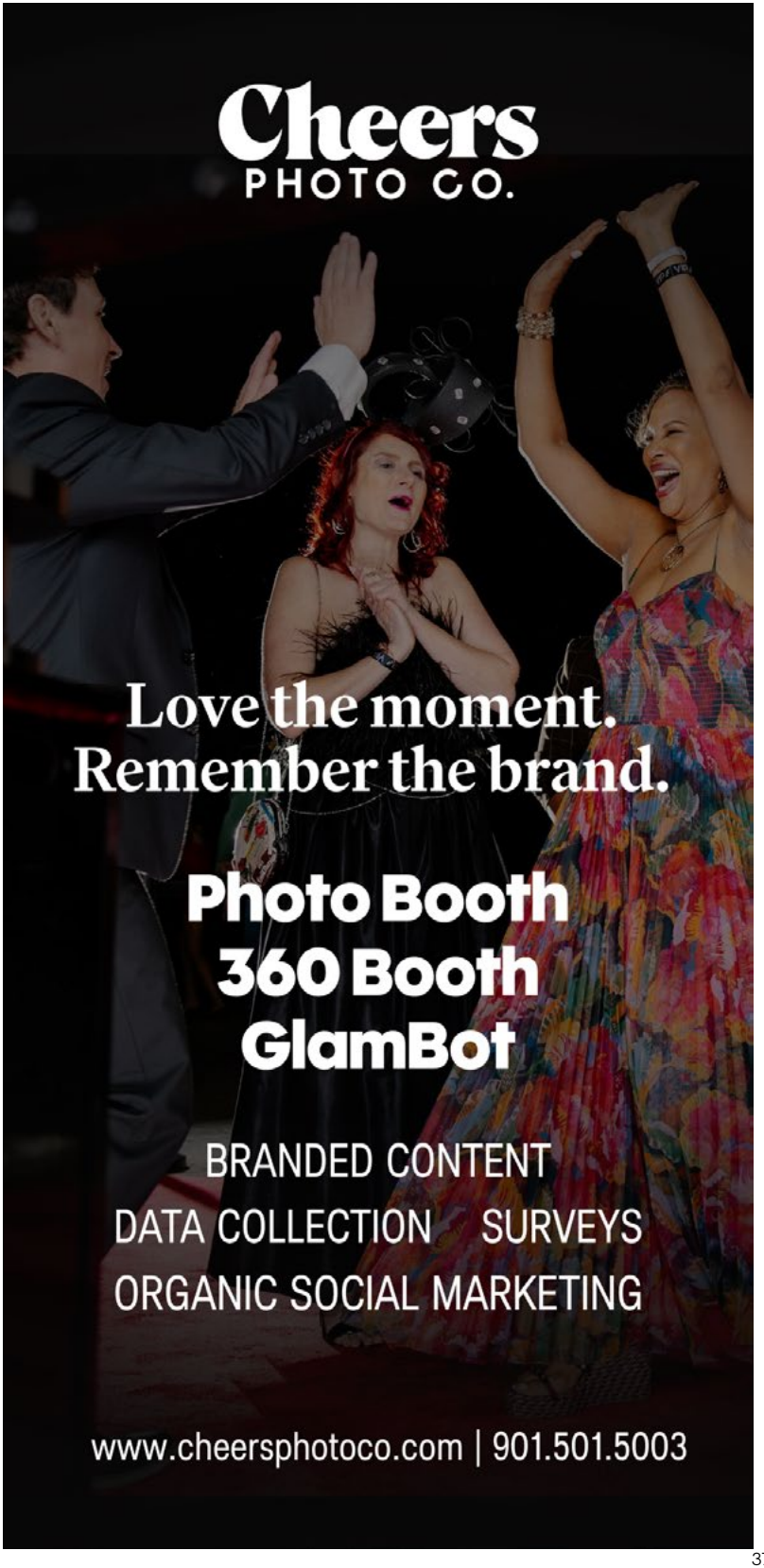

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