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THE REVIVALISTS

Black Wall Street isn't just history—it's now. Meet the entrepreneurs who make today's Greenwood a cultural touchstone for Tulsa.

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Photography by SHANE BEVEL

In March 2020, Ricco Wright's Black Wall Street Gallery hosted the exhibit *Blacklahoma* by Shannon Nicole. Many of the watercolors in the exhibit first appeared in the January/February 2019 issue of *Oklahoma Today*.

All the Wright Moves

RICCO WRIGHT HAS CREATED AN ALL-PURPOSE SPACE FOR CELEBRATING GREENWOOD.

As an educator, philosopher, activist, writer, and poet, Ricco Wright is the Andy Warhol of Black Wall Street. From hosting soirées of two hundred and fifty people or more in his home to launching the Black Wall Street Gallery in 2018, Wright creates an atmosphere that nurtures the spirit of community and conversation.

"Imagine yourself going to a really dope place, and they just so happen to have art on the wall—that's how I'm envisioning Black Wall Street Gallery," he says.

Growing up in Tulsa, Wright felt confined. He'd had enough of conforming to other people's opinions about his life. He left for New York in 2004 to attend Columbia University on a Bill Gates academic scholarship and, immersed in a city with many different cultures and backgrounds, he felt a desire to build a legacy for his own community. He returned to Oklahoma in 2014 and taught mathematics at Langston University for two years before relocating to Tulsa in 2017.

"I could have done all of this in New York, but I am not from New York," Wright says. "I am from Oklahoma—specifically Tulsa. And I wanted to give back for that purpose. I want to build a legacy for my own people; and I refer to Oklahomans as 'my own people.'"

Like those who established Greenwood in 1906, Wright exemplifies the spirit of entrepreneurship. Incorporating literature, music, poetry, film, and art, Black Wall Street Gallery is as eclectic as its creator. He provides more than just a place to look at art—this is an atmosphere where filmmakers, writers, musicians, comedians, artists, and poets gather in one creative space. Wright's exhibitions provide healing for the community—such as Shannon Nicole's *Blacklahoma*, which highlights prominent black Oklahoma pioneers of the twentieth century, and the Local Legends Comedy Show that injects truth into humor. This May, Black Wall Street Gallery will host an opening reception for a new exhibit by Eddy K Allen, who also will give an artist talk at the gallery May 19. On May 12, Oklahoma writer Rilla Askew will speak about her book *Fire in Beulah*.

Whether his gallery provides conciliatory conversation or healing laughter, Wright is at the forefront of helping mend the wounds of a community through dialogue and art while building new launching pads for the area's thriving entrepreneurial spirit.

BLACK WALL STREET GALLERY

- > 10 North Greenwood Avenue in Tulsa
- > (918) 986-2135
- > bwsgallery.com

Joyous Pride

THE TULSA RACE MASSACRE TOOK MUCH FROM TULSA'S BLACK COMMUNITY. BILLIE PARKER IS WORKING TO RESTORE THE HERITAGE OF GREENWOOD TO ITS PEOPLE.

The wall at the entrance of the shop is filled with all kinds of jewelry: wooden African beads with dangling, shiny ankhs; cowrie shells on braided strings of suede; and handmade bracelets and earrings in the colors of red, green, and black. At the checkout counter is Billie Parker, owner of the Black Wall Street Market and Community Pride Farmers Market that sit on three acres of land in north Tulsa.

Parker has always been entrepreneurial. In the fourth grade, she was known as the popcorn lady, because she sold popcorn balls and candy apples to her classmates. She opened what now is known as Black Wall Street Market in 2006. She helped inspire a new generation of nearby businesses like *The Black Wall Street Times* and The Greenwood Farmer and Artisan Market. Feeling underrepresented as a young girl growing up in the 1960s, Parker has made it her mission to ignite a sense of belonging in the African American community.

"When I was a girl, I would always wonder why the people in the posters or on the jars almost never looked like me," she says. "That's when I started painting ceramics and making beaded jewelry; I wanted to provide something that was representative to us."

With an extensive collection of items from hair products to canned goods to posters and paintings of Maat—the Egyptian goddess of truth, justice, and the cosmic order—Black Wall Street Market is stocked with a little bit of everything, most of it made by Parker. Some days, she will have one of her hand-painted ceramic dolls available for purchase near shelves stocked with Billie's Homemade Hot Sauce, jars of strawberry Kool-Aid pickles, and jalapeño peppers and preserves. This also is the place many people came to buy their garb for the Dashiki Festival held here in October 2019—and she is planning Community Pride Dashiki Saturdays to run May through August this year.

Though there are many items to choose from, the selection grows next door at the Community Pride Farmers Market, a greenhouse filled with produce cultivated by north Tulsa residents. Collard greens, carrots, turnip greens, beets, cauliflower, strawberries, and pear trees line the borders of miniature plots. Families interested in learning how to produce their own food are welcome to stop by the garden, choose a plot of land, and start planting. Parker says she hopes the garden and the market will show African Americans something of the connections that were lost during the Tulsa Race Massacre.

"I'm not doing this for me," she says. "This is for the community to have a place to come together and learn about the things we've lost—our culture, rituals, food, ways of living, and even how we interact with each other."

BLACK WALL STREET MARKET AND COMMUNITY PRIDE FARMERS MARKET

- 5616 North Osage Drive in Tulsa
- (918) 770-6020
- blackwallstreetmarket.us

Billie Parker, in the Community Pride Farmers Market, is a lifelong Tulsa entrepreneur and community organizer.



Time Machine

TREY THAXTON LOOKS TO THE PAST TO CREATE CONTENT AND MERCH THAT IS 100 PERCENT HERE AND NOW.

Though his work celebrates the past, Trey Thaxton, creator of the *Greenwood Ave* online web series and gift shops gwdave.com and 19and21.com, is looking to carry the Black Wall Street message beyond Greenwood.

“My goal is to make *Greenwood Ave* synonymous with black entrepreneurship,” Thaxton says.

Thaxton’s personal history gave rise to this goal. His family moved to Tulsa in 1999, when he was still in middle school, and he knew nothing of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. It wasn’t until his early twenties that he would learn of Greenwood’s history.

“Someone from out of town asked me where they could see Black Wall Street, and I had no clue what they were talking about,” Thaxton says.

Thaxton began reading books like *Black Wall Street* and *Up From the Ashes*, both written by Tulsa attorney-turned-author Hannibal B. Johnson, and researching the Tulsa Historical Society’s collection of photos and artifacts.

“That’s where we came up with the idea to honor entrepreneurs of the past by recreating their logos and putting them on tees,” Thaxton says. “Those tees help tell the stories. I want to celebrate the triumphs that happened back then and champion that same spirit to move forward.”

Greenwood Avenue was the hub for African Americans escaping the harsh realities of the post-Reconstruction South. For those hoping for a chance to improve their lives by migrating to Tulsa, the area seemed like a dream. Today, Thaxton is creating walking billboards for the remembrance of those historic businesses. With logos of classic Greenwood businesses like the Grier Shoe Shop, Williams Dreamland Theater, Rainbow Cab, and Mr. Saulter’s Ice Cream and Record Shop screen printed in plastisol ink on T-shirts and sweatshirts, Thaxton has created a way to incorporate yesterday’s victories into today’s ambitions.

In addition to providing hip fashion via historic tees in the virtual gift shop, Thaxton has assembled a library of resources about the history of Black Wall Street. This includes an online video series, titled *19&21*, showcasing other up-and-coming local black entrepreneurs.

Between producing creative designs and highlighting Greenwood businesses in his web series, Thaxton is charting new territory beyond Greenwood and is carrying with him the mindset and spirit of the pioneering black culture of Oklahoma.

GREENWOOD AVE AND 19&21

➤ See Thaxton’s videos and online store at gwdave.com and 19and21.com. Some items are offered at Silhouette Sneakers & Art, 10 North Greenwood Avenue, (918) 732-9166 or silhouettetulsa.com.



Trey Thaxton sells clothing from his 19and21.com gift shop at Silhouette Sneakers & Art in Greenwood.



Sweet Dreams

WHAT'S AGE GOT TO DO WITH IT? FOR TWELVE-YEAR-OLD ONIFADE AMUSAN AND HIS THRIVING COOKIE BUSINESS, THE ANSWER IS NOTHING.

Onifade Amusan was only six years old when he came up with the idea to have a bake sale to help his family realize a dream.

"We told him we wanted to plan a family trip to Nigeria, and he insisted on helping us pay for it," says Onifade's mother, Ifaseyi. "He asked me if I would help him have a bake sale. I thought it was funny, because I knew it would take more than just one bake sale to raise \$10,000 for the trip, but it was cute that he wanted to help."

Soon, what started as a bake sale became a thriving business—Onifade's Cookie Company. Onifade began formulating recipes and made dozens of batches of dough. He would bake and test out his cookies with family and friends. At ten, he acquired a sales tax permit and began selling his goods at bake sales and farmers markets in and around Tulsa. Oftentimes, at events like the annual Black Wall Street pop-up shop for the Greenwood Cultural Center, he was the first to sign up and the youngest to attend.

One bake sale begot another as Onifade improved his creations. With his mother's help, he created a healthier line of products. Baked with whole natural ingredients and coconut oil instead of eggs and butter, the snickerdoodle, key lime, and butter cookies have become popular vegan alternatives. The pecan pie has its perks too, as it is made with maple syrup instead of high-fructose corn syrup. Now, with a growing online business, this twelve-year-old and his family have bigger dreams and hope to one day bring Onifade's Cookie Company to a storefront on the streets of Greenwood.

"Despite the challenges we face as African American business owners, it feels good to know the dream of building Black Wall Street into that thriving town it used to be—and that has not died," Ifaseyi says. "We can do anything as long as we work together."

ONIFADE'S COOKIE COMPANY

> (918) 707-5827

> onifadescookieco.com

Onifade's Cookie Company is part of the spring 2020 launch class at Kitchen 66 in Mother Road Market in Tulsa.



Venita Cooper opened Silhouette Sneakers & Art in November 2019.

Outlined in Art

WITH A LOCATION PERFECTLY SUITED TO HER MISSION, VENITA COOPER BRINGS SNEAKER CULTURE TO BLACK WALL STREET.

With the words *100% Human* printed on an Everlane sweatshirt, dark denim jeans, and a pair of Air Jordan 4 sneakers, Venita “Coop” Cooper, owner of Silhouette Sneakers & Art, watches from the entrance of her store as contractors install finishing touches just weeks before her grand opening. She says she created this place to elevate sneaker culture and as a way to experience black history and social-justice-inspired art.

“I will serve anyone who comes through those doors,” she says. “I want to create a space where people want to be and feel comfortable being themselves.”

Silhouette Sneakers & Art is as fly as the shoes Cooper wears. The sneaker boutique—located in the same spot as historic Black Wall Street’s Grier Shoe Shop—is part of the framework that makes up the southern border of the Greenwood Historic Business District. There is a metal truss over the doors painted in Tulsa’s flag colors of blue, red, yellow, and beige. The walls are lined with fifteen feet of custom-made shelving, cherry-stained benches, and a brick accent wall built to pay homage to Black Wall Street. The whole place reflects Tulsa’s warmth and collaborative spirit.

“There is an energy in Tulsa; Oklahoma City has it too,” Cooper says. “They are emerging cities with aspirations to be bigger and do bigger things. I have access to so many people here, and I feel like what I am trying to do would be much harder to accomplish in places like Los Angeles or Chicago.”

With all the new artists and businesses in the area, Silhouette provides a perfect place for creative collaborations. Black Moon, a collective of black artists with an array of different styles ranging from printmaking to digital media art to sculpting, and Rose Gold, an art punk band from Tulsa, have worked on projects here. Local fashion and streetwear designers like Trey Thaxton’s *Greenwood Ave* collection—as well as other Black Wall Street-inspired apparel—are available. And by using a retail consignment model, Cooper can provide sneakers not found anywhere else.

“We have largely limited-edition sneakers—like Jordans and Yeezys—that you will not be able to find at Foot Locker and Finish Line,” she says.

But no matter what visitors come in to find or create, Cooper, like other business owners in the area, has made a space where Tulsans—especially African Americans—can be proud to be who they are. ■

SILHOUETTE SNEAKERS & ART

- ▶ 10 North Greenwood Avenue
- ▶ (918) 732-9166
- ▶ silhouettetulsa.com