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DISCOVERY

Meaningful Representation

Assigned an oral history project in 2007 for her master's degree in community arts at Maryland Institute College of Art, **Ashley Minner**—now professor of the practice and folklorist in the Department of American Studies at UMBC—knew exactly who she would ask to interview. She walked across the street from her parents' house and knocked on Uncle John's door.

"There will never be a person like Uncle John," says Minner, an enrolled member of the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina. "I don't know, he was just like that, always telling stories. He was a character. When he was younger, he had pork chop sideburns. He had a really thick Robeson County accent. He was a good man. I believe he was touched by God, he was—he is—a Lumbee Legend."

John Walker, if not a direct relative of Minner's, played that role along with his wife Jeanette Walker Jones, telling her about their shared heritage and regaling her with stories of their youth in North Carolina, where many Lumbees moved from in the 1950s and '60s to Baltimore in search of work.

Minner's project snowballed from there, leading her to interview more elders and gather stories and photographs that have become increasingly precious as the generation ages. The research has helped tell the wider story of Lumbee migration to Baltimore, specifically to the neighborhoods of Upper Fells Point and Washington Hill, affectionately called "The Reservation."

In fall 2019, Minner met with staff in UMBC Special Collections to discuss the creation of a home for her work and other Baltimore Lumbee-related research and ephemera. To be housed in the Maryland Folklife Archives, Minner's recordings will become part of "the Ashley Minner collection," along with other documents and photographs shared by tribal members.

"This collection really demonstrates how the university connects with the surrounding community in Baltimore," says **Beth Saunders**, curator and head of UMBC's Special Collections and Gallery. "Ashley really dug into local archives and did the legwork and other researchers will be able to benefit from that."

Minner sees the archive as a necessary repository for stories and photographs that

otherwise might be lost as the Lumbees who previously lived and worked close together spread out into the counties surrounding Baltimore. She hopes the creation of the archive will encourage more Lumbees to dig into their past while also finding pride in their present. Many don't know their own history, she says.

"I think being able to point and explain and show pictures and ground them in the fact that our people have been here for close to a 100 years now and have really made contributions, that does something. That helps with security, self-esteem, and feeling empowered—like you do belong, like nobody lied to you. You are who you are."

Minner bridges multiple spheres with her work—she's an artist, a scholar, and also a granddaughter, a friend, a fellow tribal member. The only hat she can take off, as she puts it, is her UMBC hat. Otherwise, "what I'm doing and what I'm about is bigger than a job," says Minner, "bigger than a job title or discipline."

Part of having her feet in two worlds is training students how to develop holistic approaches to public scholarship and community collaboration. In fall 2019, Minner was hired as the director of UMBC's new public humanities minor. "We're lifting up stories that get pushed to the margins," says Minner. "And we spend a lot of time on ethics. The last thing I want to do is turn a bunch of college students loose on communities that might be harmed through the interaction."

Minner is uniquely suited to the directorship, says **Nicole King**, associate professor and chair of the Department of American Studies. "Her broad range of experiences and skills speaks to the many positions we all hold in our everyday lives. These human aspects are often flattened in an institutional context. Yet, Ashley is more than all of these credentials and roles because her practice focuses on seeing the humanity and beauty of everyday people and places. What Ashley offers to our students at UMBC is lived experiences that are both ordinary and extraordinary and an understanding of the connections between the two."



From this perspective, Minner can see how outsiders often miss the mark when trying to tell the Baltimore Lumbee story. "They latch on to urban renewal and displacement," explains Minner, "but the elders don't see it that way. They're not victims, that's not the story they want to tell. It's important to teach folks to listen deeply and to check in and make sure people are being represented the way they want to be represented."

— Randianne Leysbon '09

Headshot by Jill Fannon, M.F.A. '11, for Bmore Art.

Opposite page, clockwise: Photo of Lumbee Tribe members commemorating the Baltimore American Indian Center winning the 2017 Maryland Heritage Award in the category of place, by Edwin Remsburg; Jeanette W. Jones holds the September 1957 issue of *Ebony* magazine, which featured an article on the Baltimore Lumbee, photo by Sean Scheidt '05, visual arts; The Inter-Tribal Restaurant was owned and operated by the Baltimore American Indian Center, photo courtesy of the Center, provided by Minner; Photo of Lumbee items by Edwin Remsburg; The Baltimore American Indian Center is the hub of cultural activities for area Indians, photo permission granted by the Hearst Corporation, provided by Minner.

