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Springfield's living black history

Arts organization empowers youth through education and culture

By [Rachel Otwell](#)



"In order to be a mentor, and an effective one, one must care. You must care. You don't have to know how many square miles are in Idaho, you don't need to know what is the chemical makeup of chemistry,

or of blood or water. Know what you know and care about the person, care about what you know and care about the person you're sharing with." – Maya Angelou

John Crisp Jr. – an artist and musician – is standing at the front of a community room at Lincoln Library in Springfield. A documentary about Maya Angelou, *And Still I Rise*, is about to begin. But first, Crisp welcomes folks and offers a simple introduction: "We celebrate black history *all year*," he said to applause.

In the room are a handful of viewers and as many or more members of the Marcus Garvey-Harriet Tubman Cultural Arts and Research Center. They sit behind fold-up tables and have a sign-in sheet and flyers for upcoming events. On the other side of the room are paper bags of popcorn, cookies and water for viewers. Volunteers actively welcome library attendees inside, so the viewing ends with many more people than when it begins.

Angelou, the late poet and activist, is on screen, detailing how she overcame a host of trauma rooted in oppression. Throughout her life she was closely associated with the likes of Nelson Mandela, Malcolm X and Oprah – who credits Angelou as a critical mentor and a force in her life.

The people in the room range in age from youth to elderly. And they represent dozens of local social service programs, activist causes and other affiliations. Under the umbrella of the Garvey-Tubman center, they come together as volunteers to empower under-served youth, with activities like summer camps, book drives and music jams. A number of supporters have lent a hand, including retired librarian and historian Kathryn Harris and Mayor Jim Langfelder.

And the organization is branching out with more events aimed at families, like these film screenings highlighting black culture. A plan is in place for it to grow and involve increasingly focused efforts, including ones aimed at restorative justice – such as reentry programming for people who were incarcerated. Crisp is the organization's founding president. The mission: "To provide African American children a viable support system that speaks to their educational, emotional and cultural needs." And now he, along with the center's founding CEO and director, Charles E. Scott, is passing the mission on to the next generation, to Shatriya Smith and Vanessa Knox who will serve as executive director and vice president of the Garvey-Tubman center, respectively. Together, they all share big dreams for an organization with a permanent facility in Springfield that can continue to supplement youth programming with arts and black history education, emotional support, community events and more.

Charles E. Scott (left) and John Crisp Jr. in their office at First Presbyterian Church.

Crisp is in his mid-70s. He gets told he looks like Redd Foxx from the sitcom "Sanford and Son." He's a hip dresser. A colorful beanie is often on his head, an ankh – the Egyptian symbol for life – dangles from his neck. In his younger days, he toured the country playing keys for the likes of Ike and Tina Turner and Albert King. He still plays shows and hosts jam sessions in Springfield regularly at Robbie's Restaurant on the Old State Capitol plaza. Often kids are invited to play, and Crisp has helped youth access musical equipment.



He is deeply rooted in Springfield, having grown up in the John Hay Homes on the city's east side. His dad was a "jack of all trades" who did maintenance for the public housing projects, completed in the early 1940s. "He took broken skates and made scooters for us to play on," said Crisp. And he was known for his singing. Crisp's mom was a maid "for a rich family." Crisp said he was never left wanting, before he left the house at age 18, he didn't know his family was poor. He was one of several children.

The Hay homes were originally considered beautiful. Residents planted flowers and showed care and pride for the hundreds of apartments they lived in. People watched out for one another. Later, the area became largely characterized by violence and drug abuse, before the buildings were razed in the mid '90s.

Crisp's childhood was full of adults who took an interest in his rearing. "Back then, we had communities and every adult had authority," he said. "We had to do whatever every adult says, and every adult's first name was Mr. or Mrs."

During his childhood, there was a regular slate of activities for the black community, like gatherings at Bridgeview Beach, a segregated area of Lake Springfield until 1952, which remained popular until it closed in the '70s, according to the Sangamon County Historical Society. Concerts were a key component of cultural offerings.

"Our money stayed in the neighborhood," said Crisp. White people "didn't want our money." There were black-owned hotels, the American Legion, the Elks Club and the black fire department, all places where adults made sure kids had a "safe place" to hang out and soak up cultural offerings.

Crisp is a talented artist who often depicts scenes and people from African countries. His love of the visual arts was inspired when a bout of rheumatic fever put him in the hospital from the ages of seven to nine. "All I could do is read and draw," he said. Art was a comfort and solace.

The piano was one of the most treasured items in the Crisp family home. Crisp took to it naturally and could easily play by ear, much to his instructor's chagrin. She knew he was lying when he insisted he was reading what he played but never turned the pages of the sheet music. For him, it just flowed naturally.

Charles E. Scott, founding director of the Garvey-Tubman center, also grew up in the John Hay Homes, where he became passionate about police and community relations. In the '60s he edited an alternative newspaper called *The Spirit of the Black Community*. He decided to join the police force, and served for five years as a Springfield patrol officer.

Vanessa Knox (left) and Shatriya Smith



Later, he directed the Police Community Relations department within the now-defunct Illinois Commission on Human Relations. Scott then worked in Cincinnati with rehabilitation programs for the incarcerated, and as a mentor at an all-boys group home, before returning to Springfield in 1987.

When he came back, he was ready to continue to combat the effects of systemic racism. "I was on fire, I could see the need," Scott said.



Gabby Reeves (left) and Camya Burnes selling their art.

"Springfield may have launched the political careers of Lincoln and Barack Obama, but it is among the worst third of American cities in terms of black-white segregation." So said a 2019 report by *Governing* magazine which analyzed federal data and detailed the dividing lines and racial disparities of places in the Midwest, including central Illinois. In Springfield, segregation's effects are still felt, and railroad tracks along 10th Street are a clear indicator of that division.

Scott emphasizes the emotional well-being and confidence of the youth he works with. He implements circle time, which represents unity, and helps the kids "get in touch with their emotions."

Through working in a boys' group home and in after-school programming, he noticed a need many children had for a strong father figure, and he considered it his place to help mentor them. "There was some self-esteem and social and emotional issues that I had to begin to focus on, given my background and what I brought to the table," he said.

Scott leads by example, he'll share with the children that his father, who he describes as "Michael Jordan and Jackie Robinson wrapped up in one," was a great provider and husband. But Scott was the oldest of three kids, and his father's expectations were immense. "When he was disappointed in me because I didn't do something,

didn't achieve something, then I would get a tongue-lashing and I would be called names," said Scott. He said sharing honestly and openly with the kids creates trust and is a crucial part of programming.

Scott had an after-school program in the Springfield school district and worked for the Urban League, and later the Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Illinois, where he invited Crisp to join and work on arts programming.

When their program closed, the Garvey-Tubman center became a nonprofit in 2013. Its name was inspired by a previous organization Crisp had worked with, and Marcus Garvey was chosen for being an influencer of the early 1900s pan-Africanism movement, which emphasizes unity among black people throughout the world and acknowledgment of their common oppression. "He was a visionary," said Scott.

Garvey, born in Jamaica, was also a nationalist and separatist, who chartered an unsuccessful ship line meant to take black people from the U.S. to African countries. Scott said *that* is not an idea the Garvey-Tubman center subscribes to, however. "We're about the fact that African Americans built this country, and we're staying here," he said. "We're not advocating that we go anywhere."

Before his own return to Springfield in the mid-'80s, Crisp had been playing music in Chicago and across the country. In 1976, he published his first *Black History Coloring Book*. It was sold out of the DuSable Museum of African American History in Chicago, founded by Margaret T. Burroughs. She was an organizer, artist, poet and one of the people who helped light Crisp's path toward helping kids. Many more of the coloring books have since followed. Some feature local blues and jazz musicians of various races, like Mark Russillo, Alexis Rogers and Ada Lou, members of Crisp's band called Chahrm.

Crisp had been propelled by the Black Power movement and his desire to better black communities by empowering youth. "Religiously, as an elder, it is your job to teach the children," he said. Before joining forces with Scott, he worked with Faith Logan, a Jamaican immigrant who founded a center for women and children in Springfield that among its offerings provided music, books and activities.



Scott engages children in "circle time."

Crisp became president of the organization, the Harriet Tubman-Susan B. Anthony Women's Self Help Center, for a time. He would help pay the bills personally when funds ran short. In all these ventures aimed at social services and enrichment programming, funding and facility stability have been constant battles.

Over the past year, the Garvey-Tubman center has been operating out of First Presbyterian Church in downtown Springfield. The food bank there has fed kids during summer camp programming, and the collaboration is in line with the goals of Rev. Susan Phillips, who wants to see space in the church building used broadly as a community asset.

Office space for the center is covered in art by Crisp and kids who attend the camp, including a cardboard painted mask and decoupage vases with pictures of Martin Luther King Jr. The kids sell their wares, which Crisp said provides a valuable lesson in seeing projects through and being compensated for work.

With Phillips in the room, Crisp and Scott discuss the ongoing racism their organization works to counter. "We've always had allies and we always had relationships and partnerships with people who help us hold on against terrorism," said Scott. "The Klan were terrorists." Phillips interjects, the Ku Klux Klan *are* still to this day terrorists, she said. He agreed.

Phillips acknowledged that the partnership in terms of space is temporary, as the church is due for a large renovation project and the center wants a permanent facility. But for the time being, "We just loved the energy and the vision," she said.

"Anytime a society has moved forward, it always happens because creatives have cast vision," Phillips said. "The creatives lead, and so hosting space where children in particular are given support and resources to create is nurturing those visions."

The history of black people in the U.S. and their contributions to society is not what Crisp and Scott were taught in school, and that history is what their programming promotes. The same can largely be said for Shatriya Smith and Vanessa Knox, who are in their 40s and have young families, and who also were raised on Springfield's east side.

"We have to know and learn more about our past. I grew up here and never knew anything about the race riots until I was at UIS," said Knox. The 1908 Race Riot, which some prefer to call a massacre, as it was started by a white mob that lynched innocent black men and decimated black homes, led to the founding of the NAACP.

Knox has worked on investigations with the county public defender's office and is a permanent substitute teacher. She's enrolled in one of the few law school programs in the nation with a degree for restorative justice – which focuses on rehabilitation and reconciliation.



Crisp drumming with children.

Along with Smith, she was a volunteer for the Faith Coalition for the Common Good, a nonprofit based on the east side that has advocated around issues like plans for high-speed rail along 10th Street. The plan has been criticized for potentially exacerbating segregation.

Knox and Smith were recently named as co-leaders of the Garvey-Tubman center. Still, Crisp and Scott don't appear to be going anywhere soon. "They have the energy of five-year-olds. They will keep going and keep going and be the first one (at events)," said Knox.

Knox's long-term goals for the organization include a reentry program for the formerly incarcerated, and she reiterates a need for a permanent facility. Both she and Smith utilize an intersectional framework, considering the connections between various forms of discrimination.

For Smith, art and activism is very much a "Family Affair" – as was the name of one of her grandmother Teena's businesses, a bar and club. Teena also helped organize outreach programming for those addicted to drugs. Crisp is a family friend.

Smith has participated in local women's marches and her own list of affiliations is unfathomably long. When she's not acting in official functions, including a support role at the Early Learning Center, she bakes banana bread that she shares widely, including with those who are without a home, as a "ministry" – and gathers young adult black creatives for regular brunches.

"I don't want to hang out with somebody that's just sitting on their couch complaining. I don't want to go to a church that doesn't do things for the community," said Smith. "I want to see your efforts." As to why her activism largely focuses on youth, said Smith, "If you just lead the way they're willing to learn, they're willing to try it. And I like the willingness the kids have."

As an adolescent, she participated in Urban League programming that was directed by Doris Chambers, a local educator. "She and her team of activists helped me to understand that it takes a tribe," said Smith. "And I need to recreate that for a kid who needs a tribe, because it was done for me."

Smith is a published poet who now lives near Southeast High School, in the house that was her grandmother's. She said it was built by a white family who moved within a few years, after the school and surrounding area became integrated. The home is covered in family photos and artwork, including art done by her child, Boris.

Boris is a freshman in high school and has also volunteered at the Marcus-Garvey summer camp. Boris is gender non-conforming and said art is a way they cope with their emotions. Smith is a fiercely protective mother, which lends Boris strength, "I just want to be able to stand up for myself. Maybe even stand up for others and make the world a better place."

Asked if Boris has any parting words on the topics of art and activism, two things their young life has been steeped in, they have two – "love yourself" – which seems to sum up the message of the Garvey-Tubman center as simply as possible.

Upcoming events

An "Open Jam" session and fundraiser for the center, featuring Frank Parker's Jambalaya Jazz Group, will take place 5:30-7:30 p.m., Monday, Feb. 24, at

Robbie's Restaurant, 4 S. Old State Capitol Plaza, Springfield.

"Cultural movie nights" will happen on the second Monday of every month at Springfield's Lincoln Library (326 S. Seventh St.) from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. and feature films about "the black experience."

You can contact the center's director, Charles Scott, at cescott1943@gmail.com.