

# Institute on Black Life

## Newsletter



### WELCOME NOTE:

Highlighting the accomplishments of this past semester, while looking ahead with excitement to the Spring 2025.

#### What's Inside:

- Director's Note
- Fall 2024 IBL Initiatives
- Dr. John Smith's Book Launch
- Private Screening of Journey Towards Justice
- Faculty and Student Spotlights
- 2025 IBL Annual Conference: Black Joy
- Donate \$2.50

**INSTITUTE on  
BLACK LIFE**



Bridging the University and the Community



UNIVERSITY of  
**SOUTH FLORIDA**

College of Arts & Sciences

## Director's note

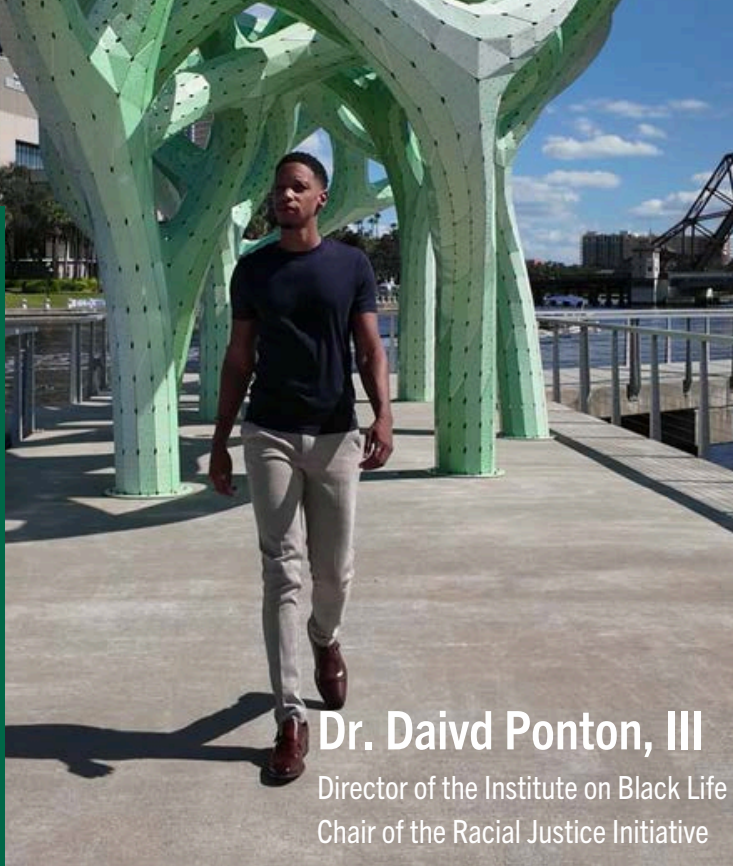
To the members of the Institute on Black Life Community:

This has been an inspiring semester. As we near IBL's 40th anniversary, I am brought to reflection by the Adinkra symbol of the Akan people of Ghana, Sankofa, which depicts a bird looking to the past while it flies forward. The Institute on Black Life was founded in 1986 and in its 38th year continues to serve as a bridge between the university and the community, thanks to the dedication of my predecessors and people like you.

Since its founding, IBL has emphasized both research and praxis. In fall 2023, Dr. Elizabeth Hordge-Freeman helped establish the Racial Justice Initiative (RJI). The late Carolyn Strange, who believed deeply in the mission of racial justice, gave a generous donation to establish RJI, which is housed within the Institute on Black Life. In addition to supporting research through sponsorship of book publication and launches, RJI has expanded the reach of IBL beyond the university campus. We have co-sponsored events such as Tampa Emancipation Day with the Tampa Housing Authority, funded the production of the award-winning Journey Towards Justice documentary, sponsored student travel to Alabama to learn about and experience the space and place of the civil rights movement, and more.

As we look forward to 2025, IBL has committed support to EnVision Resolution's Wellness Challenge, a nine-month study that will employ multiple interventions, including health education, community support, wellness coaching, and resources, to improve health outcomes. Additionally, IBL has been working with the League of Women Voters – Florida and the Pinellas County branch of the League to establish a project related to the Voting Restoration Amendment. And IBL is happy to support the Martin Luther King Jr. awards at the USF-St. Petersburg, January 23, 2025, which honors elementary, middle, and high school students who have committed themselves to the legacy of Dr. King through community work.

This work, other projects which are highlighted throughout this newsletter, and others that are



**Dr. Daivd Ponton, III**

Director of the Institute on Black Life  
Chair of the Racial Justice Initiative

ongoing behind the scenes, would not be possible without a hardworking, dedicated team. As a new director, I am grateful for the IBL staff and the IBL advisory board, who provide support and wisdom as we chart new paths in uncertain times. And even in uncertainty, we persevere and reimagine new ways of thriving.

Thus, we are excited to celebrate "Black Joy," the theme of the upcoming 2025 IBL Annual Conference on February 6. You will not want to miss the exciting panels on such themes as "Black Joy in the Arts" and "Health and Black Joy," as well as dynamic musical performances led by Allyssa Jones, Director of Vocal Ensembles at USF, and the Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe.

Additionally, we invite you to hold February 27 on your calendars for the first Institute on Black Life Film Festival. We invite filmmakers, documentarians, and social media creators to submit their projects here: <https://www.usf.edu/arts-sciences/institutes/black-life/events/annual-conference/call-for-films.aspx>.

The doors of IBL are open. We are excited to see our community grow its mission through the support and the ideas of people like you. We welcome you to join us online, on social media, and on campus in FAO 270 and FAO 296. In the meantime, we wish you a happy holiday.



# Institute on Black Life 2025 Annual Conference

## Black Joy

The USF Institute on Black Life (IBL) is happy to announce a call for participation in the 2025 IBL Annual Conference on the theme of “Black Joy”. We encourage participation from undergraduate and graduate students, alumni, staff, faculty, and members of the broader Tampa Bay community and beyond.

Black Joy is a powerful lens through which we can understand the full breadth of Black life, identity, and resilience, offering a nuanced view that encompasses both individual and communal experiences of joy. This conference seeks to explore and celebrate the dynamic ways Black individuals and communities cultivate joy in the face of personal and systemic challenges. We invite scholars, artists, activists, and practitioners to engage in thoughtful discussions on how joy functions as an act of resistance, a cultural practice, and a source of personal and collective healing. We seek to highlight how expressions of Black joy sustain and nourish our communities, breathing life into Black futures and inspiring strength, creativity, and connection both within and beyond our communities.

The USF Institute on Black Life (IBL) is happy to announce a call for participation in the 2025 IBL Annual Conference on the theme of “Black Joy”. We encourage participation from undergraduate and graduate students, alumni, staff, faculty, and members of the broader Tampa Bay community and beyond.

Click on the video below to view community thoughts about Black Joy



 **February 6 - 7, 2025**

 **USF - Tampa campus,  
Marshall Student Center**

Scan for more  
information





## RACE & RACISM RESEARCH GROUP

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The R3 Group commenced this year to serve as a space where USF community members who research issues of race and racism can read, write, and workshop papers together. This semester, the group discussed Allen Brown's

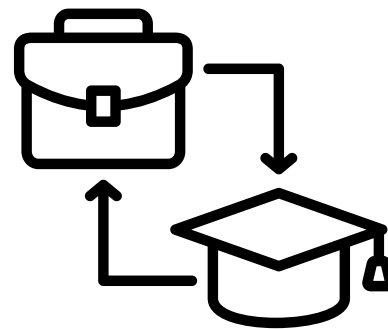
(Ph.D. student in political science) paper about representations of Asian masculinities on television sitcoms Parks and Recreation and The Big Bang Theory. And Kayla Nembhard (Ph.D. student in public health) led a discussion on "Social Work in the Shadow of Death" (*Advances in Social Work, 2021*). The group consists of graduate students from the College of Arts and Sciences and the College of Public Health and remains open to everyone. To join and receive updates on the happenings of R3, e-mail [instituteonblacklife@usf.edu](mailto:instituteonblacklife@usf.edu).

## UNDERGRADUATE INTERNSHIP PLACEMENT PROGRAM

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The Institute on Black Life placed and supervised nine interns with EnVision Resolution, a non-profit that works to "raise the health consciousness of communities of color and elevate the focus of equity" in the Tampa

Bay Area; Black Voters Matter Fund, which is committed to increasing democratic participation with marginalized, predominantly black communities; and the USF Racial Justice Initiative, which is spearheading a research documentary about the past and present of black life and activism at the University of South Florida. Students earn academic credit and learn practical skills through their internships as they build their resumes and networks and work to put good in the world. Help us connect students with more opportunities by e-mailing [instituteonblacklife@usf.edu](mailto:instituteonblacklife@usf.edu) and forwarding this newsletter to employers and community organizations looking for dynamic and motivated students.





## SPEAKER SERIES IN COLLABORATION WITH BLACK WOMEN IN LAW UNDERGRADUATE GROUP

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Black Women in Law is an undergraduate student group committed to that works to provide opportunities for Black undergraduates to learn more about the journey to law school, the application process, and law school itself. BWL strives to close the gap in access to pre-law resources by providing practice LSAT preparation, mentorships, various workshops, and opportunities to speak with law school admissions and hear testimonials from Black women who went through the law experience. Additionally, they are comprised of students passionate about social change. As these inspiring students developed a speaker series, IBL served as a bridge between the university and community, making connections between students and practicing attorneys. We look forward to inviting more speakers to share with USF students in spring 2025. Learn more about BWIL here: <https://www.instagram.com/usfbwl/>.

## 2024 US ELECTION DEBRIEF

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IBL held an election debrief on Wednesday, November 6. Scheduled speakers included IBL Director Dr. David Ponton and Dr. Vanessa Perez, who gave her thoughts on Latino voters. Other faculty, staff, and graduate students in person and online shared their thoughts. Overall, 60 people attended, about 30 in person and 30 online. Attendees discussed the prospects of holding similar events around different topics of interest in the Spring.



# Faculty & Student Spotlights

IBL Faculty and Staff Highlights is a short-form video documentary project that seeks to preserve the contributions of any staff or faculty member, making USF a more inclusive place vis-a-vis the mission of IBL and/or who research and teach in areas related to Black Studies. The project also shines a light on students, documenting their efforts inside and outside USF, capturing their initiatives and achievements that align with and advance the IBL mission.

This project is led by IBL team members who bring the initiative to life. **Dequasia Ellis**, the WeRise Graduate Assistant, oversees the faculty and staff highlight project, while **Nate Perez**, IBL's Branding and Outreach Coordinator, spearheads the student highlight efforts.

## Student Spotlight



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## Faculty Spotlight

*Coming  
Soon*



# Dr. John Smith, Jr. Book Launch

They Taught Me How to Be the Man I Am



On Oct. 5, 2024, IBL celebrated the launch of Dr. John L. Smith, Jr.'s newest book, *They Taught Me How to Be the Man I Am*. Dr. John L. Smith, Jr. served as the first Black dean at the University of South Florida before resigning for another pinnacle position: president of Fisk University. His 30-plus years at USF included teaching, working as an administrator and serving 12 years as the Dean of the College of Fine Arts. After leading Fisk, he retired to Tampa and has authored a new book: *They Taught Me How To Be The Man I Am*.

*They Taught Me How To Be The Man I Am* is a memoir about mentors and mentees in which he pays tribute to those men who guided and nurtured him on his storied journey from the Deep South to the upper echelons of academia. It includes a chapter on his principal USF mentor, Dr. Donald Saff, the professional artist, GraphicStudio founder, and former arts dean who appointed Dr. Smith to his first administrative position and nurtured his subsequent development.

In addition to being USF's first tuba professor, Dr. Smith founded the Committee on Black Affairs (COBA) and was instrumental in establishing IBL and building the Martin Luther King Jr. Plaza on campus. As Dean of Fine Arts, he acquired gifts for three endowed chairs, including in African art. He also established annual alumni awards and increased international programs. He actively pursued campus and community outreach efforts, embracing all students and constituents.

Dr. Smith served as a professional tubist with several orchestras, including the Aspen Music Festival Orchestra, the Oklahoma City Symphony and the Florida Orchestra. His service includes a stint as a musician in the Navy.

Dr. Smith contributed to the Tampa Bay community by serving on numerous boards, including the Hillsborough Arts Council, the Tampa Museum of Art, and Tampa Prep Academy. He and his wife, Dr. Juel Smith, continue to give generously through the Juel Hickman Shannon Smith Endowed Scholarship for students majoring in Africana Studies or Elementary Education and The John L. Smith Endowed COTA Scholarship, awarded annually for a student recipient in the College of the Arts.

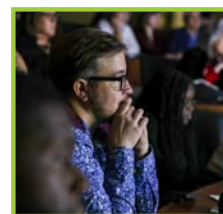
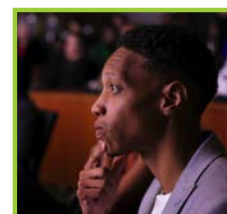


# JOURNEY TOWARDS JUSTICE

Private screening for cast and crew

The Racial Justice Initiative (RJI) is a privately funded initiative, founded under the leadership of Dr. Elizabeth Hordge-Freeman and formally launched in December 2023. The charge of RJI is to motivate and support action that will promote racial and social justice in the Tampa Bay community.

To date one of the Initiative's most significant accomplishments was the establishment of the Journey Towards Justice Maymester course for USF students, developed and taught by Dr. Elizabeth Hordge-Freeman, Dr. Kathleen Heide and Nicky Luckett, doctoral student.



Proposed at a time when Black history and racial justice education were under increasing attack, the course offered students the opportunity to learn about and experience the lasting impact of the Civil Rights Movement through a transformative five-day trip to Birmingham, Selma, and Montgomery, Alabama.

The film The Journey Towards Justice by USF alum Ta'Bria Snowden captures the experience of a four-week undergraduate course, culminating in an immersive one-week trip to Alabama in May 2024. Made possible through the generous support of RJI donor Carolyn Strange, the film beautifully highlights the students' inspiring journey.





# DONATE \$2.50

In two simple steps, we invite faculty and staff to make a meaningful impact by contributing just \$2.50 from each paycheck—only \$5 a month—to the IBL Fund.

**Let's reach 100 donors and make an impact!**

Step 1: Complete the [Faculty & Staff Payroll Deduction Form](#)

Step 2: Email the form to the Office of Annual Giving at [fscampaign@usf.edu](mailto:fscampaign@usf.edu)



Give Today!

# Newsletter Contributors



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The University of South Florida Institute on Black Life newsletter brings together stories, events, and news. Each volume contains two issues published in the Fall and Spring. The Fall 2024 **issue is Vol. 1, No. 1**, the inaugural publication.

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