



Keepers of the Culture, Inc. (KOTC) Philadelphia's Afrocentric Storytelling Group

KOTC President's 2018 Report to

National Association of Black Storytellers (NABS)

KOTC Continuity & Sustainability

Keepers of the Culture, Inc. (KOTC) began year 2018 focusing on the "3Rs": Reviewing, Renewing, and Restructuring. Upon review, we renewed our commitment to make Black Storytelling the primary focus and restructured things that allow the *KOTC* organization to move progressively forward.

Thus first we felt need to scrutinize our *KOTC* constitution and by-laws to make sure we are on task and functioning at our optimal level. Keeping within the integrity of *KOTC* mission, goals, and objectives, we:

- restructured our dues and how we pay them
- clarified what it means to be a *KOTC* member "in good standing"
- defined *KOTC* obligations and membership benefits
- filled vacant *KOTC* Executive Committee positions
- increased membership
- created a *KOTC* Pledge

Second, *KOTC* acquired a new gathering place this year. We convene the 2nd Saturday of each month at Atiya Ola's Spirit First Foods, 310 S.48th St., Philadelphia, Pa. 19143. This is a very special place -spiritual, spacious, and friendly. It's owned and operated by *KOTC*'s Spiritual Care Taker, Atiya Ola. Her Spirit First Foods serves as the perfect venue for us to practice Kwanzaa Principles such as Umoja, Ujima, and Ujamaa, in addition to "breaking bread" together after our meetings. (One of our two Kwanzaa community celebrations will be held at this space on December 28th 2018 ~ *Ujamaa* = Cooperative Economics)

Lastly, *KOTC* has a wonderful new website (*KOTCInc.org*.) designed by our Corresponding Secretary and Web Guru, Sis.Oni Lasana. *KOTC*'s website is user friendly, interactive, and contains new features including a newsletter. Everything you need to know about *KOTC* can be found on our storytelling website. We invite you to visit.

Honoring NABS Co~ Founder Mother / Mama Mary Carter Smith,

March 2018

KOTC storytellers pay tribute to NABS cofounder Mother /Mama Mary Carter Smith by producing a *KOTC* Storytelling program entitled "Tell it, Tell it, Tell it", held at the Mount Airy United Fellowship Church, 701 Johnson St. Philadelphia, Pa.19144. This church is a *KOTC* Community Partner pastured by Rev. Joe Williams (formerly associated with the legendary Dixie Humming Birds). In "Tell it..." *KOTC* shared with Philadelphia and surrounding area, the love and respect we hold for Mother/ Mamma Mary Carter Smith. At this initial event highlighting Momma Mary's legacy and her significance to organized Black Storytelling, we:

- told Mother/ Mama Mary Carter Smith stories
- shared information about the founding of N.A.B.S.
- explained Mamma Mary's value to *KOTC*
- told stories with personal reflections of *KOTC's* relationship to Mother/ Mama Mary Carter Smith
- played video storytelling performance clips of Mother / Mamma Mary, in addition to audio segments of her landmark Baltimore Radio Storytelling Show

Dr.Sis. Caroliese Frink Reed prayed one of Mother Mary's favorite prayers in the style and language of Mother Mary. Mother Mary believed in feeding body and soul. After the event our celebratory community Karamu (Feast) included "homemade tea biscuits" made with a recipe straight from Mother Mary's Cook Book. Mother Mary loved music. *KOTC* presented live and recorded music with drumming and the singing of spirituals included as well.

Upon conclusion, *KOTC Storytellers* encouraged our community to "Tell it, Tell it, Tell it!" (a phrase Mother Mary would use in her storytelling workshops, urging us to tell our stories).

Acknowledging Ancestral Ascensions & Community Healing

2018 *KOTC* experiences a wide range *KOTC* Storytellers, family and friends making Ancestral Transitions:

- Sister Emily Rollins, Founder and Executive Director of Bridgeway Inc. (a long standing non -profit North Philadelphia community-based empowerment group). "Mrs." Rollins passing occurred on January 11, 2018, at the age of 90. In 2015 her Bridgeway Inc, organization formed an ongoing partnership with *KOTC*. In 2016 we co-sponsored a fundraiser for the "2016 In the Tradition Festival..." held in *KOTC's* hometown - Philadelphia, PA. Because of this partnership, Bridgeway afforded *KOTC* opportunities for increased community engagement including projects, performances, workshops, and celebrations. We will continue our partnership with Bridgeway Inc. In honor of Mrs. Rollins community work in Philadelphia *KOTC* activated the "Emily Rollins *KOTC* Guest Chair" for the

purpose of giving community leaders, artists and activists a venue to share their unsung stories. *KOTC* invites the public.

- *KOTC*'S Beloved Vice President, Sister Theresa M. Harris Randall, (Storytelling Name, "Feather on the Wind") made Ancestral Transition, April 16, 2018. Feather on the Wind was Musician, Poet, Psychologist, Community Activist, Mother, Nana, and Storyteller. For Sister Theresa's Home Going Celebration *KOTC* created a heartfelt *KOTC* Final Rites of Passage Ceremony, leaving the family and community with the following comforting message, "As long as we speak her name, her spirit lives". (Additional note, "Feather" served as *KOTC* Creative Director in 2017's Annual Family Day / Sundays on Stage at Philadelphia Free Library Central Branch entitled, "Momma Don't Allow Daddy Don't Allow ... Do I Do It Anyhow?") This outstanding day of family storytelling helped *KOTC* collect a list of more than 125 "Friends of *KOTC*" signees, many of whom pledged to support *KOTC* storytelling with us thru 2018 and beyond.)
- Young Brother Clifton Webb, aspiring potential *KOTC* storyteller tragically ended his life in April 2018. In February 2018 grandson of *KOTC* consistent supporter Tyrone Reid, Brother Clifton's grandfather introduced him to us at our *KOTC* community tribute to NABS Founder Mother / Mama Mary Carter Smith in February 2018. This impressive young man expressed interest in joining *KOTC*'s youth component ("*KOTC* Watoto of Joy"). Little did we realize then that this young man, with promising potential, knew he was carrying heavy emotional burdens that eventually would lead him to prematurely ending his life. In support of Bro. Tyrone Reid and his family, *KOTC* Storytellers attended the services. *KOTC* were united dressed in white. Bro. Tyrone's plea to elders and adults at this service made an impact on us, especially as *KOTC* Storytellers. He said, "Please talk to our youth, especially if they are not looking like they are okay. It could make the difference between death and life."

Other milestones include:

- September 2018 Sister Anna Marie "Cookie" Armstrong, sister of, *KOTC* Treasurer Baba Nashid Ali made transition. A double amputee, Anna was a community activist, who loved her community more than they even loved her. We met her through the stories of Baba Nashid but learned more about her love for community at her combined "Home Going – Birthday Celebration". Just before Sister Anna's transition, the neighborhood was suffering in the aftermath of two drive by gun violence deaths, of one of a young man and the other of a young mother standing close by. Compounding their pain was the loss of their beloved "Aunt" Anna. Representing at Sister Anna's memorial was 5 *KOTC* Storytellers who focused on healing utilizing music, ceremony, poetry, drumming, and stories. We received heartfelt positive feedback regarding our presence and participation. *KOTC* helped Baba Nashid, his family, and neighbors in the North Philadelphia community where Sister Anna lived in put cultural closure on a well lived life, despite all odds. Sister Anna's story is an inspirational one.

- September 2018 Legendary Philadelphia Musician Brother Don Gardner a celebrated rhythm, blues & jazz artist (drummer and vocalist), in addition to serving as Philadelphia Clef Club Executive Director, ascended to ancestry. Brother Don Gardner is *KOTC* President Sister Irma Gardner-Hammond's 1st cousin. Brother Don Gardner is fondly remembered by *KOTC* for his support of *KOTC's* Annual Love Night during its early years. "*KOTC* Annual Love Night" performances convened at the Philadelphia Clef Club. Additionally Yesseh Furaha ~ Ali, a *KOTC* Watoto of Joy, and past recipient of the NABS Youth Award studied jazz saxophone at the Clef Club, becoming an outstanding musician through Brother Don Gardner's Direction. Another new *KOTC* Storyteller Toure Clark says he also owes much to Brother Gardener' as Brother Don's mission was to share the gift of music, artistry and cultural legacy with the community enough for generations to come. Brother Gardner's two - day memorial and legacy celebration (Oct.1th and 12th 2018) was held at the Clef Club with hundreds of family, friends, musicians and artist, attending The celebration of life included a live jazz memorial concert and jam session with video clips of Brother Don talking to the attendees about his life journey ("In His Own Words..."). Brother Don Gardner's Home Going Celebration, along with others we attended this year, serves as a perfect example of how communities still come together in times of tribulation, and how community rituals and ceremony have changed to become more relevant. For me it validates that we as storytellers are required to be connected to our communities in order to preserve stories and the legacy of our people and villages. We must be about this for those who arrive after we have gone on.

Storyteller Development

April 2018

KOTC held its first storytelling workshop of the year at the Cecil B. Moore Free Library in North Philadelphia. Facilitated by Wanda Gigetts *KOTC's* Co-founder, life member, professional educator, and current *KOTC* Interim Vice President, *KOTC's* informative workshops are designed to:

- hone our member's storytelling skill
- make stories purposeful and relative to current issues
- educate participants in the art of storytelling
- continue to elevate storytelling to a higher level

This hands on *KOTC* Storytelling practical workshop was well received.

Community Outreach Interaction and Engagement

June 2019

For the past 5 years, *KOTC* participated in the Westpark Community Festival. Volunteering talent and time, we share this stage with other area musicians, dancers, storytellers, bands, and artists. This Westpark Community Festival allows us to network and heightened in West Philadelphia. It is a fun festival geared mainly to youth.

August 2018

KOTC participated in the 3rd Annual Philadelphia Citywide Arts and Education Fair, held at the City's Kimmel Performing Arts Center, 300 S. Broad St., Philadelphia, Pa. 19102. Hundreds of arts, education, and health care organizations were on hand to receive information and distributing promotional materials. *KOTC*'s storytelling information table was heavily visited. We collected contact information while networking with the other providers.

KOTC Fundraisers and Special Events

July 2018

KOTC represented at a "Valley of the Dolls" fundraiser held in Baltimore, Md. by NABS (and *KOTC*) Co ~ founder Momma Linda Goss. *KOTC* Storytellers – "Storytelling" Irma Gardner - Hammond and Jawara Janice Bishop told stories. *KOTC* Storyteller Nzinga the Poet with *KOTC* Friend Antoinette Jackson also experienced this gala affair. The dolls are gorgeous. Afterwards we had a delicious Karamu Feast.

August 2018

Marking *KOTC*'s 27th Annual Love Night, our *KOTC* 2018 Love Night program entitled, "Let's Talk about Love, A Tribute to the Everlasting Love of Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee" raised the bar for other Love Nights to follow. *KOTC* Love Night 2018 Event Planner, Wanda Gigetts, and *KOTC* Love Night 2018 Creative Director, Jawara Janice Bishop worked together to co-produce this unique program. *KOTC*'s 2018 Evening of Love Stories, Poems, and Music included a scrumptious dinner, vendors, an Ossie and Ruby exhibit room full of their pictures, posters, movie video clips, obituaries, and information on their Black Artist activism on display. *KOTC*'s Love Night 2018 was created around the book entitled the autobiography book entitled, In This Life Together with Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis served as an inspiration for *KOTC*'s Love Night 2108. *KOTC* discovered that above being writers, poets, actors and "family first" artists, they both were Black Storytellers extraordinaire. We played to a full house with attendees from as far away as Chicago and Indiana. Keepers of the Culture, Inc. were honored to host such distinguished guest as NABS and Baltimore's Griot Circle Storytellers Baba Jamal Karam; Bunjo Butler; and Deborah Fukunle. Also, in the *KOTC* Love Night 2018 audience was NABS Festival Director and *KOTC* Cofounder Dr. Sis. Caroliese Frink

Reed along with *KOTC* Life Member and NABS Board Past President Queen Nur, who both took active roles volunteering where needed (Thank you right on) It was a beautiful summer storytelling event. We had an overflow of diners enjoying *KOTC* Storyteller Atiya Ola's Spirit First menu on the outside patios surrounded by earth's greenery. The 2018 Love Night event was held at The Center of Peace for Spiritual Living in Elkins Park, Pa.

KOTC Family & Friends Soul Gathering

August 2018

They say, "...A family that plays together stays together." *KOTC* family and friends gathered at the home of gracious host *KOTC* President Storytelling Irma for a great time her in fellowship, reflection, and feasting. A combined pool party and cookout, *KOTC* family and friends played games, took pictures, swam, and even practiced spitting "real" watermelon seeds.

Next Up

October 28, *KOTC* 23rd Annual Family Day ~ Sundays on Stage in Partnership with Philadelphia Free Library 2p.m., Philadelphia Free Library Central Branch. This is our 23rd year of performing Family Day, *KOTC* was the 1st organization we were the first to do this program with Philadelphia Library. The theme for *KOTC* Family Day 2018 is "Ain't It Funny". *KOTC* Storytelling Family Day 2018 is the brainchild of our Momma Nzinga The Poet. Oni Lasana is the *KOTC* Creative Director of this fun filled program featuring Aesop, Anansi, and Bro. Rabbit stories as only a *KOTC* Storyteller can. Stories involving these 3 characters have traveled from Africa to the Caribbean to America. They continue to:

- sustain us
- teach valuable moral lesson
- help us transmit our culture;
- bring us comfort in times of sorrow

This will be the first time in the history of *KOTC* that all three characters will be appearing on one stage at the same time. This year's *KOTC* Family Day 2018 will be held in memory of *KOTC* Ancestor Sister Theresa Randall who in her work via *KOTC* exemplified her love for Black storytelling. She served *KOTC* Vice President before her passing. Rest in Power and Rest in Peace.

December 2108
Kwanzaa Celebrations

Planning *KOTC's* Future

Electing *KOTC* new officers for 2019 – 2020. *KOTC* Executive Leadership vacant positions include:

- President
- Vice President
- Recording Secretary
- Historian
- Spiritual Caretaker

To continue our forward momentum and to get the job done, the organization needs committed officers with energy, stamina, and a vision. *KOTC* elders are recruiting youth who show a love listening and telling the stories of our people.

Concluding Words from *KOTC* President

As *KOTC* president, I have worked hard over the past two years. I have enjoyed serving my term. The experience will always be a valuable one for me. I planning to support and advise the new *KOTC* president and officers.

This 2018 *KOTC* Report to NABS is Prepared and Submitted by: “Storytelling” Irma Gardner-Hammond, President of Keepers of the Culture 10/22/18

Vice President: Sis. Wanda Gigetts

Treasurer Bro. Nashid Ali

Interim Recording Secretary: Sis. Barbara Cox

Corresponding Secretary: Sis. Oni Lasana

Spiritual Caretaker: Sis. Atiya Ola