

In Honor of Black History Month, Slotkin Recognizes Lives, Work, Legacies of 8th District Black Leaders and Organizations

Congresswoman Enters Remarks into the permanent Congressional Record

WASHINGTON, D.C. – This week, U.S. Rep. Elissa Slotkin (MI-08) honored the lives and legacies of Black leaders and prominent organizations in Michigan’s 8th district in commemoration of Black History Month. The remarks — delivered in Statuary Hall at the U.S. Capitol — will be entered into the Congressional Record to ensure the memory and legacy of these leaders and groups live on.

Slotkin’s full remarks, as prepared for each honoree, are below [\(full video of Slotkin’s remarks can be viewed here\)](#):

Trinity AME Church, Lansing [\(Video of Slotkin’s remarks can be viewed here\)](#)

I rise today to honor a pillar of Lansing’s African-American faith community: Trinity AME Church. For over 150 years, the area’s oldest black church has knit itself into the fabric of its community, serving folks in ways that are too many to count.

Trinity was founded in 1866 with only 21 members, and today it boasts a congregation more than 400 strong. Its roots in the Lansing community run deep, having been cultivated by generations of devoted congregants. Take a look around the pews on a Sunday and you’ll see folks who have been coming to Trinity for decades. They come to say a prayer or chat with an old friend – to enjoy those little moments of community and humanity.

Some have been members of Trinity AME for decades, like former MSU Athletic Director, and 2017 inductee into the MSU Hall of Fame, Clarence Underwood. He first joined in 1958 while studying at MSU, and never looked back.

Trinity’s impact reaches far beyond the walls of the church building off West Holmes Road. From youth programs, scholarships, clothing drives and more, Trinity and its congregation are devoted to supporting the people of Lansing. The congregation has also reached out beyond their immediate community, like helping the residents of Flint during its water crisis.

With such a spirited and steadfast congregation, it is no surprise that Trinity is headed up by such a vibrant pastor. Pastor Lila Martin is the first woman to take the pulpit, and she has risen to the occasion.

From getting kids involved in the services, to returning the church to its role as a vital part of the community, she is shepherding her congregation into a new era in its long history.

Pastor Martin ends her sermons with, "Maybe you're without a church home, then I invite you to allow Trinity to be your church home, we will accept you." Her steadfast effort to open Trinity's doors to all who may need it is felt each and every week.

With in-person services returning and the congregation stronger than ever, the future looks bright for Trinity. Its history, members, and presence in the community is an essential part of Lansing, and I am proud to add this church into the record of the People's House, so that its impact may be forever known.

Black Students' Alliance at Michigan State University, East Lansing ([Video of Slotkin's remarks can be viewed here](#))

I rise today to recognize a student organization that gives the Black community at Michigan State University a platform to let their voices be heard: The Black Students' Alliance.

Founded in 1967 in the basement of MSU's, then associate professor, Dr. Robert L. Green's home, the Black Students' Alliance was created as a way to voice support for those protesting racial injustice and increase representation of black students on campus. Green's mentee and co-founder, Barry D. Amis, was frustrated that he could only see what seemed to be about 400 black students in a campus population of over 40,000, not at all reflective of Michigan's 10% African-American population.

When Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated on April 4th, 1968, Amis and other members of the Black Students' Association organized a protest on MSU's campus. Student groups came together and demanded that they do more to integrate the history and culture of the Black community onto campus. Not only did the students request courses on African American studies, they challenged the university's lack of Black residence hall staff, counselors, and professors. They wanted to be represented. They wanted to be seen. They wanted to be heard.

Today, more than 50 years after its founding, the Black Students' Alliance continues to be the main voice for Black students on MSU's campus. With enrollment for Black students now close to 8% of the student population, the BSA's main focus is on supporting academic growth and increasing graduation rates for black students.

I am so proud of the way BSA President Kenneth Franklin, and his board of directors, advocate for and support the black student population by connecting them with the local black community in all aspects of campus life: socially, academically, and through mentorship programs. By focusing their efforts on results-driven actions to create a diverse support system, the Black Students' Association is working to redefine the Black experience at Michigan State University.

For its steadfast support for generations of Black students at MSU, and for its lasting contributions to the entire MSU community, I submit the story of the Black Students' Association into the permanent record of the People's House, so that it may be remembered forever.

Barbara Roberts Mason, Lansing ([Video of Slotkin's remarks can be viewed here](#))

I rise today to honor Barbara Roberts Mason of Lansing as an internationally recognized voice for education, equality, and justice.

This exceptional public servant made Michigan history by becoming the first African American woman to be elected to statewide office. Serving 24 years on Michigan's State Board of Education, Barbara worked tirelessly as a child advocate to push for equal educational opportunities and high academic standards for all.

In 1986, she founded the Black Child and Family Institute in Lansing, which she considers one of her proudest accomplishments. She met with President Jimmy Carter on Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, and was a trailblazer for the Equal Rights Amendment campaign alongside legends like Gloria Steinem, Dorothy Height, and Mildred Jeffrey.

Barbara's advocacy and dedication to the service of others has taken her all over the globe. She has lectured abroad and led humanitarian, business, and education exchanges to Japan, Germany, Korea, Ghana, Cameroon, and South Africa. During her time as the President of Lansing's Regional Sister City Commission, she established an HIV-AIDS project in Ghana, as well as the construction and renovation of health clinics, schools, libraries, and worked towards clean water, sanitation, and hygiene.

Clearly, Barbara's humanitarian heart knows no bounds. For her outstanding merit and life accomplishments in service of her community, and the international community, Barbara received the honor of being inducted into the Michigan Women's Hall of Fame in 2014. When asked to give remarks, Barbara stated that she "strongly believes that if everyone would reach out and give help to someone

in need, we'd all be better off." I agree, and I am so thankful for her commendable actions that made Michigan a better place.

For her tireless service to all those in need, it is my privilege to add her story into the permanent record of the People's House so that many more will answer her call to service.

Rev. Dr. Melvin T. Jones, Lansing ([Video of Slotkin's remarks can be viewed here](#))

I rise today to honor Reverend Doctor Melvin T. Jones as the dedicated Senior Pastor of the Union Missionary Baptist Church in Lansing, Michigan. He has stood at the forefront of fighting for justice since he was a child, and continues to do so throughout the Greater Lansing community today. He is a living testimony of using one's life to serve others.

At 78 years old, Pastor Jones is a model and inspiration for generations of citizens and faith leaders in our community. He has served at Union Missionary Baptist Church for 37 years, and is often referred to as "The Patriarch," because nothing happens in the Lansing community without seeking his wisdom, guidance and support.

Every community has a guiding light, that someone who serves as the force to bring others together to drive change, and in the Lansing faith community, that someone is Pastor Melvin T. Jones. More than a decade ago, he became founder and Chairman of GLADE, currently known as ACTION of Greater Lansing, an interdenominational justice ministry of churches. Pastor Jones has served as President of The Greater Lansing Clergy Forum, Co-President of ACTION of Greater Lansing, and most recently helped shape the Assembly of Lansing Pastors to address gun violence.

He has received numerous awards and honors, both civic and national including an Honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from Dallas Baptist Christian College, and he is currently completing a Doctor of Ministry degree program at Ashland Theological Seminary.

Pastor Jones has accomplished all of this while still devoting himself to his family: his wife Sallie of more than 50 years, and their five grown children.

As Pastor Jones prepares for retirement, he will be remembered for his faithful leadership that positively changed the direction of the city and impacted individuals and families for the better. He will be known for the inspiration and love he brought to Lansing, but also for the many pastoral leaders he mentored over many decades.

I have no doubt that even after retirement he will continue to be a voice for Lansing, and a strong supporter for those in need. While we will miss his voice in the house of worship, it is my great honor to record his many good works in the official record of the People's House so that they may live forever.

Willard Walker, Civil Rights Leader/Public Servant/Coach, Lansing ([Video of Slotkin's remarks can be viewed here](#))

*I rise today to honor Mr. Willard Walker, a civil rights era leader, devoted public servant, youth football coach, MSU alumni, and friend to the Greater Lansing community. For more than *50 years* Mr. Walker has fought tirelessly for social justice, and the community is so much better for his efforts.*

Raised in Columbus, Georgia, by his grandmother, he joined the military after graduating from Albany State University.

His first job out of the military was as a math teacher in Chicago. There, he fought to unite historically segregated schools. Willard met and married his first wife in Chicago, with whom he had two children. They eventually moved to Alabama, where Mr. Walker began work for the Birmingham Urban League, before arriving at Michigan State University in 1969, where he was the first Black student in the industrial relations department. He lived in Case Hall, a place he described as the epicenter for black student life.

Mr. Walker has been influential in both local and state government, serving under four City of Lansing Mayors in various roles, including director of the Human Resources and Community Services Department, and on the Lansing Police Commission. At the state level he served as director of Michigan's School-to-Work Office, director of the Michigan Department of Commerce, and deputy director of the Neighborhood Builders Alliance – just to name a few.

But beyond his many impressive titles, his work to ensure the Greater Lansing area is a more equitable and welcoming place is legendary. As a founding member of the Greater Lansing Area, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday Commission, he was the first recipient of the Commission's MLK Legacy Award in 2010.

In 2018, the City of Lansing Parks and Recreation Department dedicated the former youth sports facility, Ridsdale Park, in his honor, and it is now known as the Willard Walker stadium at Ridsdale Park. It gives me great happiness to know that through these awards and honors, his legacy of service will continue to provide a positive impact in the Greater Lansing community for generations to come.

Mr. Walker is married to his current wife Victoria where they have been residents of Lansing's historic Westside for over five decades. Two years ago, he returned to local government to serve the City of Lansing as a consultant in Human Relations and Community Service, a department he ran for over a decade.

It's an honor to represent a community leader like Mr. Willard Walker in Washington, and I am grateful for his personal and professional sacrifices to advance civil rights at the local, state, and national levels. May his efforts be forever celebrated, uplifted, and immortalized in the permanent record of the House of Representatives.

Page Fence Giants Baseball Team, Lansing ([Video of Slotkin's remarks can be viewed here](#))

I rise today to recognize the Page Fence Giants, an all-black baseball team that was founded in 1894 in Adrian, Michigan. At a time when Jim Crow laws swept the nation and racial segregation largely divided sports, the all-black Page Fence Giants persevered, ultimately claiming their place in history in the Michigan Baseball Hall of Fame.

The team was founded by Bud Fowler and Grant "Home Run" Johnson, both of whom went on to play for the Giants. The team was a knockout, winning over 100 games in each of their four seasons. And in 1897, went on a winning streak, claiming 82 consecutive victories. The team's four-year run was an early success towards integration – but was phased out of the league decades before Jackie Robinson's 1947 debut.

The Page Fence Giants traveled around the Midwest and Canada on a 60-foot railcar. While the team was celebrated and welcomed in some communities, they were discriminated against and disparaged in others, often barred from eating at the local restaurants or sleeping in the hotels. This railcar provided the basic necessities for the ball players when they were unwelcome to stay or dine in the whites-only establishments.

One of the full-time cooks on the train was William Wendell Gaskin, who is believed to be Lansing-born. Gaskin traveled with the team, cooking meals and even joining the team in a couple of games as the Giant's pitcher.

Last year, on June 19, our very own Lansing Lugnuts paid tribute to the Page Fence Giants by wearing historically accurate black and burgundy Giants jerseys.

While the Giants dissolved after four solid seasons in 1898, their contributions to sports and to Michigan's history will be forever remembered here, in the permanent record of the People's House.

George Jewett, Howell ([Video of Slotkin's remarks can be viewed here](#))

I rise today to honor George Jewett, a legend of the gridiron, a physician, and an entrepreneur who blazed a trail through the history of both football and race relations, breaking barriers and records at every turn, including a forward pass through Howell, Michigan.

Intelligent, driven, and athletically blessed, George was a classic all-American, and he was also an African-American at a time when Jim Crow was tightening its grip on the country.

Valedictorian of the class of 1889 at Ann Arbor High School, Jewett captained the football and baseball teams—as well as the debate club. He was the fastest sprinter in the Midwest, and was fluent in German, Italian, and French. He went on to attend the University of Michigan, becoming the first African American in the school's history to letter in football, and ultimately one of its greatest stars.

Though he excelled on the field and in the classroom, Jewett endured racial taunts and physical abuse on and off the field. A newspaper during Jewett's time aptly described him as "a brilliant player who stands punishment with indifference."

Jewett transferred to Northwestern University in 1893 where he suited up for the Wildcats, becoming the first Black player for that school's football team as well. Upon graduating from medical school in 1895, he returned to Michigan where Howell Public Schools Superintendent Robert Briggs hired the doctor as coach of the first official Howell High School football team.

Now, high school sports had different rules and norms in the late 1800s, with teams composed of both student athletes and local residents who would join them. And that is how Dr. George Jewett became not just the first Black coach of a Michigan high school football team, but also a teammate.

To fundraise for the new team, Mr. Jewett hosted a gala at the Howell Opera House, a lavish event featuring food, music, and demonstrations of football plays.

By all accounts it was a smashing success, and if it hadn't been for that event, we might never have known about the remarkable role George Jewett played in Howell's history.

A program from his fundraiser was recently found under the floorboards of the Howell Opera House during its renovation, connecting this trailblazing legend to the community, and forever cementing his role in Howell history.

Last fall, the George Jewett Trophy — the first rivalry trophy in major college

football named for an African American player — debuted in Ann Arbor when the University of Michigan played Northwestern University. And from now on, the George Jewett Trophy will be played for, each and every time the two programs meet on the field.

I'm so proud to see George Jewett's cultural, academic, and athletic accomplishments solidified, immortalized and set in stone.

It is my honor to record his name and his story into the permanent record of People's House so that all who read it may catch inspiration from his groundbreaking achievements— So that we too may tackle our current challenges with the same dedication and perseverance he brought to every aspect of his life— And so that each of us may lace up our shoes, march onto the field, and pass on his legacy of triumph over adversity, and indifference to punishment.

Lulu V. Childers, Howell ([Video of Slotkin's remarks can be viewed here](#))

I rise today to recognize the incredible contributions to musical history and to the history of Howell, Michigan made by one of the city's Black pioneers, Lulu Childers.

This remarkable woman was ultimately responsible for developing the small music program at Howard University in Washington, D.C., first into a Conservatory of Music, and then into a School of Music.

But before all that, she was a child in Howell, Michigan, the daughter of slaves, her parents brought her from Dry Ridge, Kentucky in 1875 at the age of five.

It was in Howell that the public was first treated to the gift of Lulu's voice. In the early 1880s, she performed regularly at the Howell Opera House and its neighboring Methodist Church on Walnut Street. By 17 she was singing at numerous fundraisers and events across the area and was billed as "Howell's Lulu Childers."

And in 1890, she walked across the stage as valedictorian of the Howell High School Class, and enrolled at Oberlin Conservatory in Ohio to study voice.

After graduation, Childers performed around the country but felt a tug to the classroom. She taught music in Ohio public schools for several years, and then in 1905, she joined the faculty of Howard University.

At the time, Lulu was one of only two music teachers at Howard. She taught voice, and another instructor taught piano. In 1906, Lulu was appointed Director of Music and steadily the program blossomed.

Lulu established a college-level curriculum, hired experienced instructors, and created the University Choral Society. When she led the chorus in song, the people turned out. At the 1929 Christmas service, Lulu drew a crowd so large that there was standing room only and 400 people had to be turned away.

Lulu also created an annual concert series that brought renown musicians to the Washington community. In 1938 she invited the famed contralto, Marian Anderson, to perform. The performance gained national attention because both the Board of Education of Washington, D.C. and the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to let Anderson perform in their facilities because of her race.

Lulu used her voice, not just to sing, but to enlist the help of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt in the fight for equity and justice. She also took her advocacy to Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, who in turn invited Anderson to perform at the Lincoln Memorial, a free concert which drew 75,000 people on Easter Sunday of 1939.

One year later, Lulu retired from Howard University and returned to her family home in Howell, where she died in 1946.

It's so entirely fitting that ten years after her passing, the classroom portion of Howard University's fine arts complex was renamed Lulu V. Childers Hall.

And it's fitting that I now speak her name into the permanent record of the People's House.

Lulu Childers was born with the gift of voice, a gift she never took for granted. She used that voice to entertain, to instruct, and to advocate. She sang the anthem of freedom, justice, and equality with perfect pitch and tone. Let us all endeavor to use our own lives and our own voices to carry her tune, to continue singing her song, and to ensure that the music never ends.

Thelma Lett, Brighton ([Video of Slotkin's remarks can be viewed here](#))

I rise today to share the story of a courageous Black woman from Brighton who would not sit down when faced with racism, hatred, and bigotry.

Thelma Lett did not grow up in Livingston County, but moved there from Detroit in 1976 with her husband. She was an avid churchgoer and involved in many community organizations, as she and her husband raised their two children, Paul and Keith.

But it was her involvement with the Livingston Diversity Council, then known as Livingston 2001, that drew headlines and propelled this quiet woman into the local spotlight.

Eager to champion the cause of diversity in the mostly white county, she joined the organization in 1988, its founding year -- the same year a cross was burned on the property of a Black family in the county. She's credited with helping to grow the group and support for the cause with her dynamic, can-do style.

Here's what some former friends and colleagues had to say about Thelma: "A tremendous go-getter."

"You just had a smile on your face after talking to her," and,

"I would put a great deal of the success of the membership on her leadership."

But it's what SHE had to say to a group who showed up to protest a community forum that will go down in history. In 1994, members of the National Association for the Advancement of White People showed up at a forum in Howell and openly declared that they didn't want Black people living in their community.

Lett stood up, looked directly at the crowd, and calmly, but passionately informed them she would not be run out of her home.

"When I walk down the street, I'd like not to have cat calls or the N-word shouted at me," she said, staring into the eyes of men and women wearing hats emblazoned with "NAAWP" and "Anglo-Saxon."

She told the crowd how some of her family members served in the US military, and were wounded in combat fighting for the American ideal that all people are created equal.

And when she called for some simple respect, saying "I give dignity and I want dignity," the crowd rocketed to its feet.

Lett never backed down from her devotion to diversity, continuing her activism and community involvement until her death at age 79. In fact, if you visit the Detroit Impact Youth Center on the city's west side, you'll find the Thelma Lett Library inside, a tribute to the many young people she taught to read and write.

And if you visit Howell, you'll find the Livingston Diversity Council continuing her work, inspired by the courage of her convictions, and still standing up to intolerance and hate.

Thelma Lett lived and died in Brighton, Michigan and made it abundantly clear her love for this country and all it stands for was far greater than the hatred she was shown. Brighton was her home, and today it is my honor in sharing her story, to give a permanent home to that truth in the public record of the United States

House of Representatives.

###