

Institute on Black Life

Newsletter



What's Inside:

- Associate Director's Note
- 2025 IBL Conference: Black Joy
- Festival of Films
- Spring Events
- RJI Sponsorship and Support
- Student Success
- Student Spotlight Series
- Faculty and Staff Series
- Race and Racism Research Group
- Congratulations to Dequasia Ellis
- Enlightenment Workshop Series
- Donate \$2.50

Associate Director's Note

About a year ago, I received an email from IBL Director David Ponton III with the mysterious subject line "Have time to chat?" He asked me if I had a little time to discuss IBL and run a collaboration idea by me. Being a curious person who was done with grades, I agreed to meet the next day. Dr. Ponton presented his vision as IBL Director that included adding an associate director and he asked me to consider the job. In my 21 years at USF, I had not been particularly active with IBL aside from attending occasional events. But Dr. Ponton and other folks in our community wanted to bring me in off the sidelines. My takeaway from that meeting was that IBL needed an associate director because there is more work that can be done. This is the approach I've taken as the first IBL Associate Director.

The 2025 IBL Annual Conference was a wonderful success, celebrating Black Joy through scholarship and fellowship. The conference aimed to further unite the USF and Tampa Bay community, showcasing the talent we have throughout our broader community. The annual conference is not only our signature event but our most prominent example of how IBL is a platform through which the USF community can grow and disseminate knowledge to a wider public.

In response to the incredible call for participants for the IBL Conference, we kicked off the inaugural IBL Festival of Films at the end of February, showcasing films and works from USF, Tampa Bay, and beyond. This festival highlighted the history and activism of Black communities in Tampa and St. Pete, providing an opportunity to learn and engage with the rich history of our region bookended by "The Tampa Technique" and "Razed." After 21 years living in Tampa, I realized I still don't know much about the history of my new home. This festival was a wonderful opportunity to learn and fill in these gaps in knowledge, showcasing the thoughtful wisdom we have throughout the region.

I also want to give a special shout-out to "A Splash of Color," which screened in April as part of our ongoing Festival of Films series. This film showcased a unique side of Black experiences, particularly in how we engage with water and the outdoors. Director Dr. Hillary Van Dyke highlighted the history of how space and place have been taken away from Black communities. The documentary shows how Black folks consciously and purposefully reclaiming these spaces to regain and maintain our joy and sense of belonging in a world that often does not feel like our own. There's a particular power in telling stories that may not be untold, but are often unheard, and ensuring we provide a broader audience for



Dr. Wil Tyson

Associate Director of the Institute on Black Life

those who want to hear these stories. USF is not only a community of students, teachers, and scholars; we are first and foremost curious people ready to engage with others to create more opportunities to share knowledge.

I am particularly proud of the HIV/AIDS in Africa and the African Diaspora Graduate Research Award, which shows the potential of what our broader community can do to cultivate scholarship. These awards stem from a donation. We often focus on six-, seven-, even eight-figure large federal grants, but it is important to seek opportunities for smaller awards to fund meaningful research. We welcome anyone interested in contributing towards other areas of scholarship of interest, particularly to support our undergraduate and graduate students. Sometimes, we take for granted that USF houses a broad and deep wealth of knowledge. We have thousands of experts on a wide range of topics, and any contribution can spark meaningful collaborations that spur transformative research.

Be on the lookout for upcoming events this summer and fall as we build upon the wonderful momentum from the 2024-25 calendar. We plan to create more opportunities for all facets of our community—students, staff, faculty, administration, alumni, and the broader community—to come together, learn, and grow. As we approach the 40th anniversary of IBL, we will continue to serve as a bridge between the university and the community, thanks to the dedication of our past leaders and active partners and people like you working together towards a brighter future.

Celebrating Black Joy: Highlights from the 2025 IBL Annual Conference



The Institute on Black Life (IBL) and the Racial Justice Initiative extend a warm thank you to everyone who attended our 2025 Annual Conference, themed Black Joy. Your presence helped create a vibrant, inspiring gathering embodying the spirit of community and celebration.

The day began with a welcome from Dr. David Ponton, setting the tone for an unforgettable event. We were honored to feature Dr. Denise Davis-Cotton, who delivered an engaging performance, “The Color of

Culture: Celebrating African American Excellence in the Arts!” Her insights illuminated the rich tapestry between culture and joy.

We were also thrilled to have Ms. Allyssa Jones and the Black Joy Ensemble, whose performance offered a moving, musical exploration showcasing the talents of USF students.

Throughout the conference, participants engaged with dynamic sessions exploring Black Joy in the arts, health, and activism. Engaging in thought-provoking conversations and creative exchanges brings students, scholars, artists, and community leaders together.

The evening concluded on a high note with a lively reception and an electrifying performance by the Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe, who presented “The Harlem Renaissance.” Their powerful celebration of Black history and culture uplifted and inspired the audience.

Thank you for celebrating Black joy with us!



INSTITUTE ON BLACK LIFE

— Festival of Films —

In celebration of Black History Month, the Institute on Black Life proudly hosted the inaugural IBL Festival of Films, featuring a full day dedicated to showcasing powerful independent films that explore Black life in the Tampa Bay region and beyond. Attendees experienced inspiring storytelling, met local filmmakers, and participated in live discussions.

Films Screened:

- The Tampa Technique — Director: Travis Bell
- T.J. (True Joy) Collections — Director: Dr. Chris Omni, MPH, MLS
- Dr. Marie Lily Cerat: Haitian American Educator, Scholar, & Activist — Directors: Barbara Cruz, Gary Granger, Deanna Michael, Jared Brown
- Blk Ops: Uncommon Stories from U.S. Special Operations Forces — Director: Chris McPhee
- Razed: A Film about the Gas Plant Neighborhood — Filmmakers: Andrew Lee, Gwendolyn Reese, Tara Segall



Special Thanks to Blk Ops: We sincerely thank Blk Ops for their generous sponsorship and unwavering support in making this event possible.

Splash of Color: Getting Black in the Water

Directed by Dr. Hilliary Van Dyke

As part of IBL's Festival of Films series, we hosted a powerful screening of *A Splash of Color: Getting Black in the Water*, directed by Dr. Hilliary Van Dyke. This thought-provoking documentary drew over 30 attendees, including USF students, faculty, and staff. The film explores the racial and historical barriers Black communities have faced in accessing swimming and aquatic spaces. Through personal stories and historical context, *A Splash of Color* offered a compelling look at the intersections of race, recreation, and resilience.

The screening was more than just a film—it was a meaningful space for reflection, learning, and dialogue. Events like this underscore IBL's mission to bridge the university and the community through education, storytelling, and engagement with Black life and history.



Unlocking the American Dream with Dr. Junia Howell

The Institute on Black Life welcomed Dr. Junia Howell, Visiting Professor of Sociology at the University of Illinois Chicago and Director of eruka, for a powerful and timely talk: *Unlocking the American Dream: Reframing the Housing Crisis and What Is Required to Solve It*. Dr. Howell challenged dominant narratives around housing and disaster relief policies, revealing how they often reinforce systems of White supremacy. Drawing from her nationally recognized research and community work, she offered insights into how we can move toward a more equitable housing economy. Her visit sparked rich dialogue among USF students, faculty, and staff to underscore the importance of research-driven advocacy in transforming current systems.



Student Success

HIV/AIDS in African and the African Diaspora Graduate Research Grantees

THE HIV/AIDS RESEARCH GRANT WAS ESTABLISHED BY THE AFRICAN STUDIES PROGRAM AND THE INSTITUTE ON BLACK LIFE, WITH SUPPORT FROM THE RACIAL JUSTICE INITIATIVE. THIS GRANT SUPPORTS STUDENT RESEARCH PROJECTS ON HIV/AIDS IN AFRICA AND THE AFRICAN DIASPORA, INCLUDING THE CARIBBEAN AND THE UNITED STATES.

THIS VIDEO FEATURES THREE DISTINGUISHED GRADUATE STUDENTS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA, EACH REPRESENTING A DIFFERENT ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE AND AWARDED SUPPORT THROUGH THE GRANT:

- **SAMUEL ILORI, A MASTER OF ARTS STUDENT IN THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY**
- **KARAH GREEN, A PH.D. STUDENT IN THE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK**
- **SANTIAGO HERNANDEZ BOJORE, A PH.D. CANDIDATE IN THE COLLEGE OF PUBLIC HEALTH**



Welcome to Unmask the Past with Joseph Ambrosino



Welcome to Unmask the Past, a series where Joseph Ambrosino will uncover the local history of the Black church, the Ku Klux Klan, and racial progress in central Florida. Over several reels, Joseph will provide a crash-course-style presentation of the difficult and inspiring story of how churches played dueling roles on both sides in the struggle over racism and desegregation. Joseph is a fourth-year political science and history major in the Honors College.

Special thanks to Dr. Ponton III, Rebecca Sohl, the Lakeland Public Library, the Lakeland Ledger's Black in Polk series, and the Polk County History Center for their support and provision of resources for this series.

Racial Justice Initiative Sponsorships and Support

The USF Racial Justice Initiative (RJI) is a privately funded project within the Institute on Black Life. In the wake of the murder of George Floyd, the now-late Carolyn Strange intended for RJI to continue the work of racial justice in the Tampa Bay area through education and community investment. The pioneering efforts of the inaugural RJI Chair, Dr. Elizabeth Hordge-Freeman, established RJI's commitments to education, historical preservation, and health equity. As current RJI Chair, Dr. David Ponton has carried on this work.

EnVision Resolution Wellness Challenge

The USF Racial Justice Initiative is a major sponsor of the Wellness Challenge, a 9-month study designed as a challenge to improve health outcomes by combining health education, community support, accessible resources, and personalized accountability through wellness coaching. This challenge is about more than just personal health—it aims to create lasting change, reduce preventable diseases and risks of strokes, heart attacks, maternal mortality & morbidity, and obesity.



Black Women in Law

RJI supported a speaker series for USF's undergraduate student group, Black Women in Law. Black Women in Law Speaker Series 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. Working directly with BWL's president, graduating senior Toni Maxwell, RJI recruited five practicing attorneys who shared their expertise in areas ranging from criminal law to civil litigation to contracts and acquisitions. The speaker series helped illuminate the many paths possible for students interested in pursuing careers in the legal field.

Green Book of Tampa Bay

Green Book of Tampa Bay is a non-profit committed to increasing "Black economic vitality in Tampa Bay by connecting Black businesses and the broader community through a digital business directory, business development resources, and cultural experiences." Through IBL's developing relationships with Foundation for a Healthy St. Pete and USF alum Dr. Hillary van Dyke, the Racial Justice Initiative is a proud supporter of Green Book of Tampa Bay's mission.





2025 USF St. Pete Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr Awards

In partnership with the Office of Multicultural Affairs and Kyonna Henry at USFSP, IBL is a first-time supporter of the 2025 MLK Awards, which highlights the community contributions of local elementary, junior, and high school students who embody the ethos of Dr. Martin Luther King's life and work.

USF Special Collections Community Archiving Project

The Community Archiving Project, directed by USF Libraries Special Collections Director Tomaro Taylor, engages the Tampa Heights and Sulphur Springs communities in archiving their histories through their respective civic and museum associations. RJJ supports this project through investment in research kits that help local Tampanians trace their family histories and narrate the past of historically black communities that have always been central to the story of Tampa.



Tampa Emancipation Day 2025

Tampa Emancipation Day commemorates the May 6, 1864, arrival of news to Tampa that enslaved people in territories controlled by the Confederacy had been emancipated by the Emancipation Proclamation. Though both legal emancipation and full freedom would continue to elude Black Floridians, both through the Civil War and in the aftermath of Reconstruction, with the help of the Tampa Bay History Center, the Tampa Black History Museum, and the Tampa Housing Authority, the USF Racial Justice Initiative once again joins as a sponsor to remember this critical moment in Tampa's history.

Student Spotlight Series

The IBL continues to spotlight USF undergraduate students who are actively engaged both on and off campus, working and researching in areas that align with the IBL mission. *Click on each image to view the full student interview.*



Joseph (Joe) Ambrosino is a 4th-year student at the University of South Florida studying Political Science and History with a minor in Psychology. Joseph has a strong interest in the connections between African-American history, mental health, and antiquity. Joe founded USF's first Black Wellness Club, a student organization dedicated to bridging psychological concepts and research to the black experience in America. He was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to participate in the Black Humanities Institute at the University of Bristol.



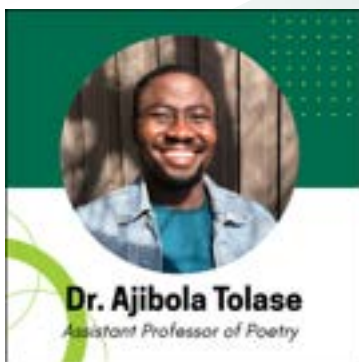
Laila Farhat, an undergraduate student at USF and the Co-Coordinator and Public Relations Chair for the New Voters Project. Laila is dedicated to empowering young people and communities by increasing voter participation and promoting civic engagement. Her work focuses on educating and mobilizing individuals to take part in shaping the future through voting.



Makayla Hays, an undergraduate student at USF and the President of the Black Student Union, an organization that supports the academic, emotional, social, and political well-being of students of the Black diaspora at USF.

Faculty & Staff Spotlight Series

The Faculty and Staff Spotlight Project features interviews highlighting the diverse ways faculty and staff contribute to Black life and Black Studies, broadly defined. From research to community engagement, the series showcases the people working to make USF an inclusive and vibrant space for all. *Click on each image to view the full student interview.*



Meet Dr. Ajibola Tolase, Assistant Professor of Poetry at the University of South Florida. Dr. Tolase is the author of the recently published poetry collection, *2,000 Blacks*. This video features the poem "Transatlantic" from the collection.



Meet Dr. David Ponton III, Associate Professor in the School of Interdisciplinary Global Studies, (SIGS), Director of the Institute on Black Life (IBL), and Chair of the Racial Justice Initiative (RJI) at the University of South Florida. Dr. David Ponton III is the author of the recently published book *Houston and the Permanence of Segregation: An Afropessimist Approach to Urban History* (University of Texas Press, 2024).

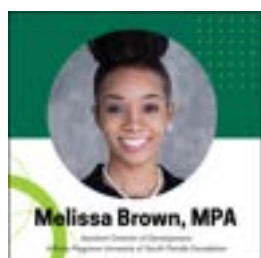


Meet Dr. Christian Wells, Professor and Director of the Center for Brownfields Research & Redevelopment at the University of South Florida. Dr. Wells discusses his work, the importance of 'Dream Work' in communities, and the recent reception of two grants (\$1.5 million grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and a \$1.5 million grant from the National Science Foundation).



Meet Dr. Tangela Serls, Special Advisor to the College of Arts and Sciences Dean, Associate Professor in the Department of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and Faculty-in-Residence for the Department of Housing and Residential Education. Dr. Serls discusses her guiding pedagogy, the [#IBELONGATUSF](#) Week, and the rewarding nature of being the advisor for the University of South Florida Chapter of NCNW.

Coming Soon



Race and Racism Research Group

Over the course of the spring semester, the Race and Racism Research (R3) group engaged in vibrant discussions around members' individual research projects and the broader influence of racial justice on their academic journeys. The group explored the practical challenges of theoretical nuance through Kieran Healy's piece "F*ck Nuance," reflecting on its relevance to their work. Discussions also drew on Herbert Blumer's "Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position." Members benefited from hosting a luncheon, focused on her work, "A Homegirl Goes Home." There, Dr. Rodriguez shared her anthropological perspective on today's racial environment as a member of the Tampa and USF communities. Additionally, in another luncheon, Dr. Howell previewed the first chapter of her forthcoming book, leading a discussion on how race continues to shape housing access and experiences. Together, these conversations fostered safety in the critical reflections on race, research, and community engagement.



Dequasia Ellis

WeRise Graduate Assistant



Dequasia Ellis, the RJI/WeRise Graduate Assistant, supported key initiatives under the leadership of Dr. Hordge-Freeman and Dr. Ponton throughout her academic tenure. She contributed to the planning and execution of RJI events such as the Community Partner Meeting and the Gullah Geechee Commemoration in St. Augustine, assisted with the Journey to Justice trip selection process, and provided general operational support. Under Dr. Ponton, she directed and produced the Faculty and Staff Highlight project, showcasing contributions to Black life and scholarship at USF. She also supported IBL events with marketing and on-site coordination, including the Festival of Films, the Annual IBL Conference, and a private screening of Journey to Justice.

Congratulations, Dequasia, on graduation this May 2025 with a Master of Arts in Communications. We wish you all the best with your future endeavors.

Enlightenment Workshop Series

The Enlightenment Workshop Series presents courageous conversations designed to foster a culture of inclusive excellence at the University of South Florida. Organized by the Black Employee Steering Committee with support from the Institute on Black Life and Black Faculty & Staff Association, these sessions began in 2020, and since the launch, over 1200 members of the USF community have registered to attend.

Under the coordination of Dr. Ruthmae Sears the workshops focus on intersectional perspectives on current trends, with an awareness of how it impacts Black communities across the African Diaspora.



January 2025

A vision for growth: Developing the workforce via mentorship, leadership, and development opportunities



February 2025

From Black Codes to discovery freedom in poetry and visual arts: A historical context and lived experience



March 2025

Food: Conceptualizing policies and systems that impact food production, distribution, and consumption within the community



April 2025

Be an agent of change: Act locally, think globally



May 2025

Take a break and rejuvenate: The importance of allocating time for wellness and well-being

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



Give Today!

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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.

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