



# Pennsylvania Black Conference on Higher Education, Inc.

www.pbcohe.com

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Dear Friends,

One of my favorite quotes comes from the hit musical, *Hamilton*. In the scene, Aaron Burr (played by Leslie Odom, Jr.) sings us through his version of the duel in which he killed Alexander Hamilton. Off-screen, Hamilton (played by Lin-Manuel Miranda) raps back with the thoughts in his head while preparing for this battle. Burr fires first, and when Hamilton hears the shot, he wonders if he has accomplished enough in his lifetime and is ready to die. He muses, “Legacy...what is a legacy? It’s planting seeds in a garden you never get to see.” That statement has a profound impact on me every time I hear it, and I play the soundtrack a lot.

When I hear it, I think of my great-great grandparents – the first of my maternal ancestors born into freedom and the earliest generation that exists in family folklore and Census records. I think of their children, my great-grandparents, who quit school in the third and eighth grades, respectively, to work in the sharecropper fields with their parents and siblings. After marrying in Georgia, they moved to Pennsylvania during the Great Migration, in search of better jobs. I think of their daughter, my Nana, who did not receive the same education as her brothers because of her gender, but who still became a force for union organizing in the region. I think of her daughter, my mom, who took 35 years to complete her associate’s degree at community college because life is not linear. She is now, at age 72, only 11 credits away from earning her bachelor’s degree at Penn State. I think of myself, grown from seeds they planted, living a life they could only have imagined.

For as long as I can remember, my family’s biggest legacy has been in land. In the 1930s, my great-grandfather purchased 13 acres (the size of 10 football fields) of land from a White developer for \$100; Grandpop only wanted one acre, but the developer said he could take all of it or none, so he took it all. He parceled out the land facing the road, reserving space for each of his children to build a home, and sold the rest to other Black families at a time when White banks would not loan us money. On the remaining land, they built a house, raised six children, and kept a small farm. My mother raised me on that land, within walking distance of three generations of relatives and, during the summers when I was small, my great grandmother would watch me; we would pick peaches from the tree in the side yard and sit on the covered front porch while she hand-churned ice cream in a squat wooden barrel. That land sustained us and enabled us to build generational wealth, and it has always been sacred to us because it is the physical manifestation of their legacy grown from actual seeds. For me, it has always been *home* – not ‘the place where I live,’ but ‘the place to which I can always return and be welcomed,’ and I was positive that I would raise my children there, too, rooted deep in the history of their ancestors.

Then the pandemic hit and laid bare our lives in unexpected ways. As we watched the world halt, we saw and felt the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 health and economic crises on our families, communities, and campuses. In the wake of so much uncertainty, I clung to any semblance of my routine that I could. However, how could I continue with ‘business as usual’ when not a single thing about this situation was normal? How could I show up with my camera on in Zoom meetings with White folks after the murder of George Floyd when I was constantly worried that my partner – a Black man – would be killed by the police on his way home from playing soccer at a nearby park? How could I talk about attending college when my students were facing basic food and housing insecurities? How could I manage the constant exhaustion and anger of being Black in America when America was the last place I wanted to be? Suddenly, I was forced to reconcile my imagined future in the context of racial reckoning, the far-right political agenda, and living in a city where – despite being “the most livable city” three times – Black women are more likely to die during pregnancy and childbirth than in 97% of other U.S.

cities. I started to wonder if perhaps the greatest part of my great-grandparents' legacy was not the land itself, but what it made possible for me. Maybe the freedom to choose where to live and the ability to change my mind; to consciously work to heal my trauma and break generational curses in the family I create; to show up authentically and take up my full space when I sit at the tables where decisions are being made in spaces that were closed to them; to represent, and work with, you across the Commonwealth to carry out the legacy of the late Honorable K. Leroy Irvis; maybe *that* is the very best part of their legacy. Thus, it is ironic but also, I think, a good omen that my two-year term as president of PBCOHE begins the day we close on the sale of that land.

The Pennsylvania Black Conference on Higher Education is the brainchild of the late Honorable K. Leroy Irvis, but it is also part of his legacy. Our work is the result of seeds he planted but did not live to see the full impact of, but *our work* is also to plant seeds for future generations. Our actions now will determine whether, and to what extent, PBCOHE will exist in five, ten, and even twenty years. We get to choose what we want future PBCOHE to look like, and then plant those seeds. (I mean, the U.S. Treasury was part of Hamilton's legacy and is still with us today). To be fair, we must also water, weed, harvest, and prepare the soil after each crop; but the work we will do now will shape the future and sustainability for years to come, and so I ask you, "What seeds will you plant? What will your part of this legacy be?"

We – each of us – truly are our ancestors' wildest dreams and greatest legacies and we, as an organization, know that our greatest asset is our members who do the work. Look at what is happening today: just today, in 2022, Ketanji Brown Jackson, whose name makes the tongue work just as our ancestral names did, was confirmed to the United States Supreme Court as the first Black woman justice in the court's 233-year history. Today, in 2022, we recognize that PBCOHE celebrates 52 years of activism and advocacy for students and higher education professionals in Pennsylvania. Our ancestors could not have imagined a time when either of these things would be possible, but they planted seeds in their garden anyway. Past President Brown's theme of *sikhona*, "I see you," and *sawubona*, "I am here," guided us through unprecedented times in virtual space during a pandemic. She envisioned a community where Black and Brown higher education professionals would be affirmed and valued, able to take up their full space in a safe space, and work together towards shared goals, and she accomplished this feat in a virtual environment. I want to thank her for her vision, leadership, and service, and we will continue to incorporate these qualities into our identity as we return to physical space.

Over the next two years, we will plant seeds to improve sustainability. We will invest in using technology to modernize our data and records, streamline business processes, and create an intuitive, user-friendly online experience. My priorities include revising the constitution and bylaws to include and support virtual programs, developing opportunities for connection beyond the annual conference and leaning into regional events, and using the three-pronged membership approach, "Grow, engage, reconnect." To that end, I invite you to stay with us, or become active, to help us do this work of legacy building so that the Pennsylvania Black Conference on Higher Education exists for future generations. Join us at the annual retreat on June 17-18, 2022 at Lock Haven University where we will return to in-person engagement, and I will introduce a plan and budget to accomplish these goals.

I am excited to work with you and learn together as we continue the legacy of the late Honorable K. Leroy Irvis and create a more sustainable organization for us all. If there is any way that I can be of service to you, please let me know.

Take good care,

Rachael

Rachael Banks, MPS  
President, Pennsylvania Black Conference on Higher Education