



## LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

# A FRONT ROW SEAT

BY JENNIFER RILEY COLLINS

A sitting United States Senator recently reminded Mississippi and the country that “a front row seat to a public hanging” and voter suppression are very real. These comments not only invoke memories of a dark past but also remind us, especially when made by an elected governmental official, that these unfortunately remain very present threats to equality, equity, and liberation.

When Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith made these reprehensible comments, the ACLU of MS and the National ACLU together made the decision to not only condemn hateful speech – which is no joking matter – but to also seize the opportunity to address ignorance as a teaching moment. The ACLU saw this moment as our responsibility to hold ourselves – and all of our elected officials – accountable for our words and actions in order to learn from our past. Jeffery Robinson, ACLU Deputy Legal Director and the Director of the Trone Center for Justice, provided a rich and engaging lecture that took a factual look at the history of racial violence and discrimination in Mississippi and



in America and at the direct correlation of history to current policies that disparately impact communities of color.

We cordially invited and reserved a front row seat for sitting Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith as we believed this could be a moment for education and an opportunity for the duly appointed and now elected Senator to show sincere regret. That front row seat, however, remained empty.

The ACLU of MS, which was founded in 1969 in the shadows of the Civil Rights Movement, understands the implications of racialized policymaking that have led to structural and institutionalized racism. This racial justice lens informs what we work on and how we approach that work. Disparate treatment results in the fact that 65 percent of Mississippi’s male prison population are Black men, harsh discipline practices affect racial minority students at alarmingly disproportionate rates, and the wider wage gap for women of color all directly stem from racialized policymaking.

These are the reasons, as we approach our 50 Year Anniversary, we remain

committed to our efforts to protect and increase access to democratic participation through our “Let People Vote” campaign. We continue to advocate for smart criminal justice reforms with the intent of reducing Mississippi’s prison population by 50 percent by 2025 through our Campaign for Smart Justice. Our efforts ensure all Mississippians are treated with dignity regardless of wealth, gender identity or sexual orientation. Our other campaigns include our We Are All Mississippi Campaign, the Housing Not Handcuffs Campaign, and our Educational Opportunities Campaign.

As we continue our advocacy, we are grateful for members and supporters like you. We invite you to take a front row seat and to become an engaged participant in our determination to make Mississippi better!



**FIGHT FOR FREEDOM  
VISUAL ART COMPETITION  
1ST PLACE WINNER:  
TRAP SENSES P. 9**



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## INTERN SPOTLIGHT



**Angela Payne**, a native of Nashville, TN, is a University of Mississippi grad and a current student at Mississippi College

School of Law with just one more year to go. Angela worked as a legal intern during the summer, and now serves as the president of the MC Law ACLU Chapter. After graduation, she says she plans to return to Nashville and hopes to work with the ACLU of Tennessee or as a public defender.



**Amber Malone** is the Public Policy and Social Justice Intern. She obtained a bachelor's degree in International

Studies and French from the University of Mississippi and a diploma from the Centre Internationales des Etudes Francaises. After undergrad, she taught English as a Second Language (ESL) in France for two years. She joined the ACLU of Mississippi to have an active role in eliminating structural barriers that impede progress in Mississippi and to learn how to use tools for equity with intention and humility. Passionate about immigration and socio-cultural studies, she is interested in studying intergovernmental organizations. She plans to pursue a Master's of International Affairs and, ultimately, a career as a policy analyst.

## WELCOME NEW STAFF



**Cynthia Goodloe Palmer** joined the ACLU of Mississippi in July 2018 as the Operations & Administration Specialist.

Cynthia also serves as the Executive Director of the Veterans of the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement, Inc. and as the Secretary of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Legacy Project Board. Previously, she served as the Executive Director of the 50th Anniversary of the Freedom Summer Reunion and the 50th Anniversary of the Freedom Rider Reunion. She is the Founder of the Canton

Gospel Music Association, which has awarded 138 music scholarships to students in Madison County since 2004. Cynthia is a recording artist with four albums. She is a recent recipient of the 2018 Mississippi Gospel Music Awards "Women in Gospel Making Things Happen" award. She attended Tougaloo College and currently lives in Jackson, MS.



**Michael Ann Galliano Oropeza** joined the ACLU of Mississippi as a Litigation Specialist in September 2018.

Michael Ann has an extensive history as an advocate for immigrants' rights and social justice. She previously served as the Director of Immigration Clinic with Catholic Charities, Inc. and as a Divisional Director with Catholic Charities, where she was also responsible for the Parish Social Ministry, Disaster Relief, Health Ministry and the Northeast Office. An entrepreneur, Michael Ann is a contract paralegal specializing in immigration and domestic work. She is a native of Clinton, Mississippi and graduated from the University of Southern Mississippi. While social justice is her passion, her most important role is raising her two strong daughters.



**Shalonda Spencer** is the Advocacy Coordinator for ACLU of Mississippi, where she focuses on the affiliate's criminal justice reform and

voter rights centers of work. Prior to ACLU, Shalonda served as the Policy Coordinator for Mississippi Black Women's Roundtable. Before returning to Mississippi, she served as a Legislative Assistant for the United States House of Representatives and as a Foreign Policy Analyst for Mennonite Central Committee while in Washington, D.C. Shalonda is graduate of Jackson State University, earning a Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice and a Master's degree in Public Policy Administration. She is a member of Mississippi Federation of Democratic Women, Hinds County Democratic Executive Committee, and Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc.



Our Vote Smart Justice campaign did not begin nor end with the U.S. Senate race. That's because justice remains at the forefront of Mississippi policy. Here are the facts:

- Per capita, Mississippi ranks third nationally for the number of people imprisoned.
- Our state's prison population has grown nearly fivefold since 1980.
- 1 in 30 Black men were imprisoned in Mississippi in 2016.
- More than 12,000 people are serving time in county jails, and the majority of them (56%) have not yet been convicted and are awaiting trial.
- Mississippi spent \$327 million on corrections in 2015.

There are too many people behind bars, and many of them should not be there in the first place. Mississippi's addiction to prison prioritizes harsh sentencing and wealth-based incarceration to hold people accountable. This obsession is too heavy a burden on communities, families, and taxpayer dollars. Although, reforms like HB 585 and last session's HB 387 have helped to reduce the prison population and make Mississippi safer, we still have a long way to go.

In September, we released a report with recommendations that could lead to a 50-percent reduction in Mississippi's prison population. [The Blueprint for Smart Justice](#) is a comprehensive analysis of factors that contribute to mass incarceration that includes reforms for ending our overreliance on incarceration.

Some of those key reforms include:

- Urgent efforts focused on bail reform, an evaluation of prosecutorial practices, sentencing reform for burglary offenses, and increasing access to alternatives for incarceration for drug-related offenses.
- Taking state prison time off the table for low-level drug and property offenses and reducing them to misdemeanors.

- A comprehensive approach to reform the state's extreme minimum and maximum sentencing laws as well as sentence enhancements for people with prior convictions.

The Blueprint has served as a tool to engage activists, advocates, and policymakers on the need for transformational change to the criminal justice system. This has led to the organization of the Smart Justice Coalition, which includes social justice advocates from across the state working toward reducing the jail and prison population and combating racial disparities in the criminal justice system.

## BECOME A VOTING RIGHTS ADVOCATE

Join our first ever activist-led voter engagement campaign. As an advocate you will:

- ☐ PROTECT THE RIGHT TO VOTE
- ☐ EXPAND ACCESS TO THE BALLOT
- ☐ EDUCATE PRO-CIVIL LIBERTIES VOTERS

I am an  
**ACLU Voter**

Mississippi has a long and troubled history with voting, and many - like those with a criminal record or those whose ID don't match their gender or gender expression - still experience significant barriers to voting today. With an army of Advocates on the ground in communities across the state, we can ensure thousands more Mississippians have access to voting.

**TO BECOME AN ADVOCATE**  
email office@aclu-ms.org

Likewise, we understand that in order to make these reforms a reality, we also must increase efforts around voter education and voter engagement in a way that holds players in the criminal justice system, like prosecutors and judges, accountable to support alternatives to prison and address systemic racial bias. Our Let People Vote coalition, made up of like-minded partners that advocate for voter rights and expanded access, are helping to lift up the need for ballot access for pretrial detainees, early voting, and online voter registration policy initiatives. One important partnership that came out of the coalition was an effort with Mississippi Votes, which included a massive radio and digital ad campaign that encouraged people to register to vote and provided assistance if they had

any questions.

As we look ahead to the 2019 Legislative Session as well as the 2019 election cycle for state and county offices, we must continue to change the politics surrounding mass incarceration, elevate these issues, and create a political environment where decarceration is a priority.



## Defending Your Right to Vote

The ACLU of MS protected voter rights during both the general and run-off elections this November as part of Election Protection, a statewide coalition that works to break down barriers to the ballot box and troubleshoot Election Day errors. The 1-866-OUR-VOTE hotline is a non-partisan effort that fields hundreds of calls to assist voters at the polling place.

# STILL FIGHTING FOR PROGRESS: A LOOK AHEAD AT THE 2019 LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

BY ZAKIYA SUMMERS, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS & ADVOCACY

## LEGISLATIVE SCORE CARD

## HOW'D YOUR LEGISLATOR VOTE IN 2018?

**HOLD THEM ACCOUNTABLE FOR EQUITY & INCLUSION IN 2019**

**VISIT [WWW.ACLU-MS.ORG](http://WWW.ACLU-MS.ORG) TO LEARN MORE**

The 2019 Mississippi Legislative Session is the finale to the legislators and governor four-year term before we head into state elections. We remain steadfast as your government's watchdog, and will advocate for smart justice reforms that rid the state of wealth-based incarceration, advocate for a statewide policy for law enforcement use of body-worn cameras, promote access to democracy for pretrial detainees and all Mississippians, and lobby for state civil rights protections for all. Here is a look ahead at the ACLU of Mississippi's 2019 Legislative Agenda.

### ENDING CASH BAIL

Money bail is one of the most corrupt and broken parts of the justice system. It lets the size of a person's wallet determine whether a person can return home or stay locked up in jail while awaiting their day in court. These are persons who have been accused, but not convicted of a crime. This unfair and unjust system

punishes those who are not wealthy even before they have had a chance to defend themselves in court. The consequences are tremendous. People lose their jobs, their housing, and even their families. More than half of the 12,000 people held inside Mississippi county jails have not been convicted of a crime.

The presumption should be no bail and release on personal recognizance. However, when bail is necessary, it should only be imposed when no other conditions will ensure public safety or appearance in court and an assessment of a defendant's ability to pay has been performed.

We are advocating for an amendment that will ensure pretrial liberties to non-violent misdemeanors, help save taxpayer dollars, and provide autonomy to judges to reasonably determine the most effective way to ensure public safety and for the accused to return to court.

### LET PEOPLE VOTE BY EXPANDING ACCESS

We are advocating for three separate bills this session that expand access to pretrial detainees, rural voters, college students, and all Mississippians.

Absentee voting in Mississippi is so complex, and quite frankly, is not reflective of the way most people live. During the 2018 election cycle, we also found out that absentee voting, while legal for those who have been detained and not convicted of a disenfranchising crime, is unavailable. In fact, Mississippi makes it nearly impossible to vote by absentee when behind bars.

Absentee voting requires an application with reasons allowing voters to swear by affidavit why they will be away from their polling precinct on Election Day, and it must be notarized. Without a category that specifically addresses registered and eligible voters who are detained in

**STILL FIGHTING CONTINUES, P. 5**



their own county and waives the notary requirement, thousands are de facto disenfranchised.

We are advocating for an amendment to the voting rules that both inserts a clause for those detained pretrial and removes the required notary.

The 2018 midterms exemplified the need for expanded voting opportunities. Many voters were unable to cast a ballot simply because they missed the voter registration deadline due to an outdated paper system that requires a stamp or hand delivery. Others, many who were college students, stood in line for up to four hours to cast an absentee ballot on the Saturday prior to Election Day. We are asking the state legislature to let people vote by implementing no-excuse early voting and online voter registration.

### **LAW ENFORCEMENT USE OF BODY CAMS REQUIRE COMPREHENSIVE POLICY**

Our report, [Striking the Right Balance](#), showed that local law enforcement policies around usage of body-worn cameras were inconsistent and filled with holes. For example, some policies allow officers to review footage before they write their report. Other policies do not include provisions for privacy on school grounds, in domestic violence incidents, or in individuals' own homes. There have been numerous incidents where body cams have failed due to gaps in policy.

Body cams have proven to be beneficial and can be a win-win for both community and police, but only when properly used alongside strong policies. That is why we are advocating for uniformed, statewide guidelines so that all agencies

using body cams are operating with transparency, accountability, and privacy rights at the forefront.

Women make up 52 percent of the state's population, yet they have no state civil rights. No one does. The

## LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY DAY

JANUARY 24, 2019 / 8 A.M. – 3 P.M. / STATE CAPITOL  
PRESS CONFERENCE @ 10:30 A.M.



**ADVOCATING TO:**

- END CASH BAIL
- ESTABLISH A STATEWIDE UNIFORMED BODY CAMERA POLICY
- LET PEOPLE VOTE WITH VOTING FOR PRETRIAL DETAINEES, EARLY VOTING & ONLINE VOTER REGISTRATION
- PROTECT ALL MISSISSIPPIANS WITH THE MISSISSIPPI CIVIL RIGHTS ACT

**SAVE THE DATE!**

**STAND WITH US!**

AGENDA INCLUDES BREAKFAST, LEGISLATIVE BRIEFING & LOBBY TRAINING, NEWS CONFERENCE, AND VISITS WITH LEGISLATORS.

RSVP TO [OFFICE@ACLU-MS.ORG](mailto:OFFICE@ACLU-MS.ORG) OR 601.354.3408

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Mississippi

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### **WOMEN AND YOU NEED STATE CIVIL RIGHTS**

We celebrated Equal Pay Day back in April alongside the Mississippi Women's Economic Security Initiative, by lifting up the need for gender pay equity. During that convening, we were reminded of the startling disparities. Women are paid 76 cents for every dollar paid to men, and for black women the pay is even less at 56 cents. Women in the room asked about the legal recourse women can take when they're faced with discrimination but are afraid to speak out because they're trying to hold on to the little income or because they cannot afford an attorney. The answer, unfortunately, was that there is no legal recourse at the state level because Mississippi state law does not protect women.

Mississippi Civil Rights Act would provide those necessary rights to all who live here. It is time we stop putting prejudice over progress.

### **LIBERTY LOBBYISTS**

The ACLU of Mississippi staff, while strong and mighty, cannot push this legislative agenda alone. We depend on citizen advocates to help us lift up the need for these policies as we work together to make Mississippi a more just and free state for all.

We offer the Liberty Lobbyist program, which provides the education you need in order to talk with your legislator and help lobby them for support of this agenda. If you are interested in being a part of this program, please send us an email to [office@aclu-ms.org](mailto:office@aclu-ms.org).

## HOUSING NOT HANDCUFFS CAMPAIGN

In partnership with the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty and as part of a national campaign, the ACLU of MS sent letters to 16 of the largest cities in Mississippi demanding that they repeal unconstitutional panhandling ordinances. Housing Not Handcuffs comes on the heels of the 2015 Supreme Court decision, *Reed v. Town of Gilbert*, which afforded greater protections to the First Amendment right of free speech. Being homeless and asking for help are not crimes, but anti-panhandling ordinances essentially punish both. By working actively with cities, three have repealed in whole or in part their unconstitutional anti-panhandling ordinances, while



several others are in the process of repeal. We will continue fighting for the rights of the homeless. We need to address the sources of the problem, rather than the symptoms, by providing services such as shelter and job training rather than moving people along, citing and arresting them.

Anyone affected by these unconstitutional laws should contact the ACLU of Mississippi. Learn more and see the letter sent to Jackson's mayor at [www.aclu-ms.org/panhandling](http://www.aclu-ms.org/panhandling).

## PATRICK BEADLE HIGHLIGHTS MISSISSIPPI'S CONTINUING WAR ON DRUGS AND PRACTICE OF MASS INCARCERATION

Medical marijuana is legal in 33 states. Recreational marijuana is legal in ten. A Pew Research poll from September found that 62% of Americans support marijuana legalization. Canada recently legalized recreational marijuana nationwide. Meanwhile, in Mississippi, a court sentenced Patrick Beadle, a 46-year-old father, son and musician, to 8 years in prison without the possibility of parole for possessing 2.8 pounds of marijuana while driving through Madison County. In Oregon, where he is from, Mr. Beadle would have likely received a fine. Mr. Beadle unfortunately exemplifies the starkly disparate ways states are approaching marijuana policy.

A Madison County Sheriff's Deputy pulled over Mr. Beadle, who is black, for allegedly crossing a lane line. The ACLU of MS, along with its co-counsel Simpson Thacher & Bartlett and the ACLU, sued the Madison County Sheriff in 2017 for racially discriminatory policing, including for making traffic stops on the basis of race. Mr. Beadle's arrest is sadly consistent with the claims in that lawsuit.

### THE TARGETED CITIES INCLUDE:

Jackson

Gulfport

Southaven

Meridian *Repealed*

Greenville

Olive Branch

Horn Lake

Clinton

Ridgeland *Repealed*

Starkville *Amended*

Vicksburg

Pascagoula

Brandon

Clarksdale

Natchez

Greenwood

**ACLU**  
Mississippi



While many states have acknowledged the devastating effects of the “war on drugs” and mass incarceration on communities and individuals, and adjusted their laws accordingly, Mississippi continues to embrace these failed policies. Instead of continuing to use our state’s scarce resources to incarcerate people for years for possessing marijuana, Mississippi would be better served re-routing resources to any of the other areas in dire need of funding in our state.

Our lawsuit against the Madison County Sheriff’s Department is ongoing, and Mr. Beadle is appealing his conviction.

## MISSISSIPPI’S 15-WEEK ABORTION BAN FOUND “UNEQUIVOCALLY” UNCONSTITUTIONAL

Since 2010, states have passed more than 400 restrictions on access to abortion. Politicians are competing to see which state can be the first that is abortion free.

As a part of this effort, Mississippi passed a law last legislative session that banned abortions after 15 weeks. On November 20, 2018, Federal District Court Judge Carlton Reeves ruled that this law “unequivocally” violated the U.S. Constitution and permanently enjoined it from being enforced.

The Mississippi legislature knew when it passed this law, Governor Phil Bryant knew when he signed it, and Judge Reeves knew when

he found it unconstitutional, that banning abortions after 15 weeks was in clear violation of decades-old U.S. Supreme Court precedent. Mississippi passed a law that it knew was clearly unconstitutional, and asked Judge Reeves to disregard binding Supreme Court precedent, in its ongoing effort to overturn *Roe v. Wade* and ban abortions in Mississippi. These “disingenuous calculations,” as Judge Reeves called them in his November 20 Order, cost Mississippians a tremendous amount of their scarce taxpayer dollars.

Mississippians should tell their elected officials to stop passing unconstitutional laws and wasting our tax dollars defending them in court.

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## 2019 Equity Agenda



## THE 2019 EQUITY AGENDA

This agenda provides Mississippi leadership clarity regarding goals that will create a more equitable state, and guidance to help this state avoid policymaking that perpetuates structural racism. This agenda seeks to help us come together around clear solutions that build a different narrative.

The ACLU of MS will publish a Legislative Score Card at the end of the 2019 Legislative Session. The Score Card will highlight “Champions” of Equity and Inclusion. It will also educate the public regarding the record of legislators who fail to ensure racial, cultural, and economic justice for all Mississippians.

Learn more at [www.aclu-ms.org](http://www.aclu-ms.org).

# TEAP-MS CONTINUES TO CHALLENGE THE NARRATIVE

BY JENSEN MATAR, TEAP-MS ADVOCACY COORDINATOR



In November, we paused to remember those lives lost due to violence simply because they choose to live in their authentic identity. The ACLU of MS's Transgender Education and Advocacy Project (TEAP-MS) chose Transgender Month of Remembrance as a time to lift up those lives in a way that raises awareness and sends out a call to action to fight hatred, discrimination, and indifference. So, we say the names of Diamond Stephens, a black transgender woman who was shot to death on June 18 in Meridian, and the 22 other trans lives lost so far in 2018.

We also continue our efforts to educate and advocate on behalf of the transgender and gender non-conforming (GNC) community in Mississippi. The advocacy-driven program focuses on strategies that reduce discrimination faced by the transgender community through coalition building, leadership development, public education and strategic communications, and direct lobbying. TEAP-MS is an integral part of the We Are All Mississippi (WAAM) Campaign, which pursues inclusion and works to create a state where we are all treated equally under the law.

This past summer, TEAP-MS initiated an oral history project entitled, [I](#)

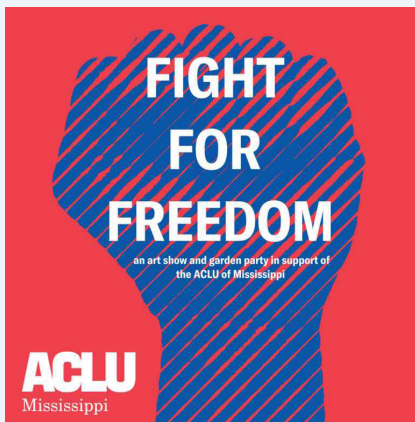
[Too Am Mississippi](#) (ITAM) in an effort to challenge the narratives about who belongs and who gets to fully participate. ITAM brings to life the real stories of five transgender Mississippians. In addition to sharing my story, we also meet Shaun, Alicia, Fiona, and Stephenie. Our personal stories enable others to explore commonalities we all share and better understand the human toll of discrimination. In October, the video stories, pop-up displays, and catalogs of ITAM premiered in Tupelo, MS at the Elvis Presley Birthplace during the city's first-ever Pride celebration. Following the showing, community members engaged by asking questions and sharing tools the Tupelo community can use to do their part in ensuring a more inclusive Mississippi. ITAM made its way through the state at various events and locations such as the pre-pride events in both Hattiesburg and Gulfport, and later at the University of Southern Mississippi for a gender studies class. TEAP-MS looks forward to collaborating with many more institutions, organizations, and community members to elevate the lives of the transgender community and educate the state of Mississippi through ITAM showings in next year.

## ID ME

While Mississippians were gearing up to participate in the mid-term elections, thousands of transgender voters likely stayed at home because they do not possess photo ID that accurately reflects their gender. The Williams Institute reports that the state's strict voter ID law impacts at least 5,300 transgender people in Mississippi. TEAP-MS's ID ME Project provides a solution. By helping members of the trans and GNC community gain identification that matches their identity, we reduce barriers around voting. TEAP-MS is available to help trans and GNC Mississippians overcome this barrier as we are committed to ensuring that that every voice is heard and every vote is counted.

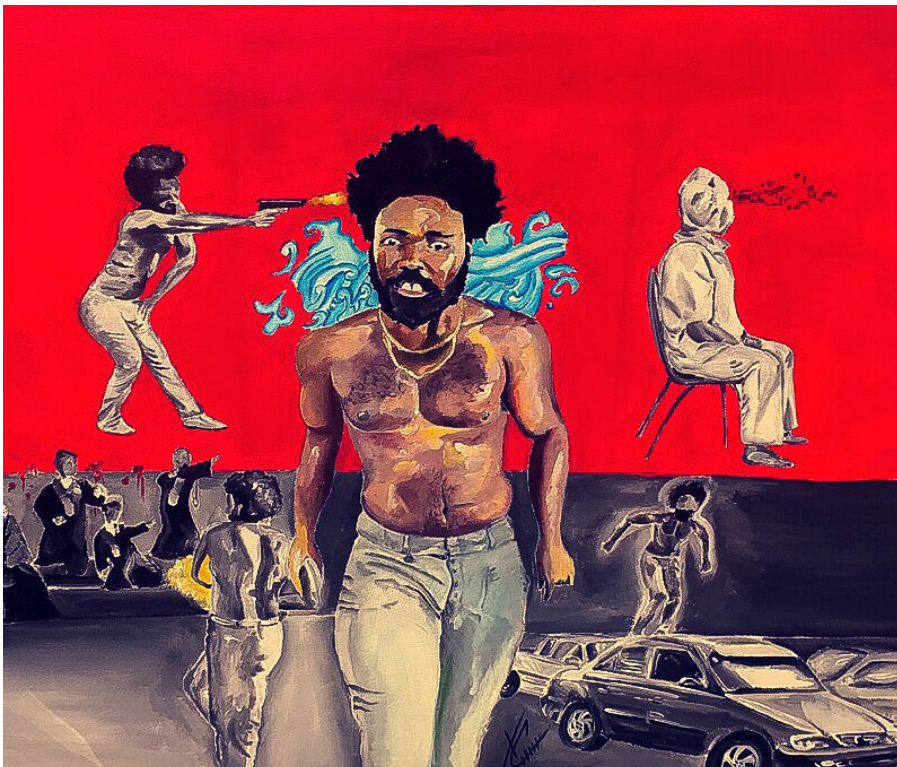
TEAP-MS continues to advocate for policy protections in the form of local non-discrimination ordinances, protections in housing and for state employees as well as the Mississippi Civil Rights Act through the legislature. Our growing coalition of trans members and allies is helping TEAP-MS to achieve its goals and take the program to the next level in 2019.





We took an artistic approach to our annual fundraiser this year. We called for visual art and creative writing submissions as part of the Fight for Freedom Art Competition. We received 11 visual art pieces, which included paintings, graphic design, a sculpture and mixed media. We received eight creative writing pieces including poetry, spoken word, and essay. The competition culminated with our art showcase and garden party at the Mississippi Museum of Art, featuring Southern Komfort Brass Band and a robust silent art auction.

## FIGHT FOR FREEDOM VISUAL ART COMPETITION 1ST PLACE WINNER: *TRAP SENSES*



### ABOUT THE WORK

Trap Senses derived from the controversial imagery shown in Donald Glover's music video, This Is America. There is a course of bold bright colors that guide the movement of the piece. Childish Gambino (top left) fires a gun in which causes the man's head, top right, to expel blood across the remainder of the painting. A choir is fired upon which is a visual illustration of the 2015 mass murder at a church in Charleston, SC (bottom left). The painting concludes with Gambino gracefully dancing on top of vehicles (bottom right). This serves as a depiction of the reoccurring, mind-

tarnishing violence experienced by African Americans in America today. The black community is plagued most because people of color are still heavily scorned in America. Despite the portrayed maelstrom, the narrative suggests that in the midst of it all, those not immediately affected opt to remain absent-minded in response to the calamity surrounding them.

### ABOUT THE ARTIST

Born in Jackson, MS, Xavier Carroll, a young, emerging African American artist ventured into the arena of art at a young age and continues to sharpen his skills in present day. He has been recognized locally and nationally for his lifelike, tranquil paintings, along with his captivating pen and color pencil work. Inspired by Leonardo Da Vinci and Chuck Close, Carroll's work focuses primarily on the human figure, and is galvanized by the perfections and imperfections of women.

Currently, Carroll attends Tougaloo College, where he majors in Art Education. Additionally, he continues to invest in his craft by composing works inspired by day-to-day interactions, as well as commissioned works. Carroll has been awarded numerous scholastic awards, including the Martin Luther King Jr. Art Poster Contest and the recipient of the Golden and Silver Key awards sponsored by the Eudora Welty Foundation. Carroll strives to become a world-renowned artist and art educator with ambition to shape the next generation of artists.

FIGHT FOR FREEDOM CONTINUES, P. 10

# FIGHT FOR FREEDOM CREATIVE WRITING 1ST PLACE WINNER: *FREE?*



## ABOUT THE WORK

“Free?” is a spoken word piece meant to not define what freedom is, but more so what it is not. Today’s social and economic climate is ripping away veils of faux freedom and really showing the blatant divide of America, minority and non-minority.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

A graduate of Mississippi College, Sham Williams is a writer, blogger, philanthropist, activist, and lover of all things culturally fulfilling. Sham runs two local non-profit organizations (The Maresa Williams Foundation and Modern Social), has been a feature in Boom Jackson’s Young Influential’s profile and nominated for Leadership Greater Jackson. She is a published poet, having two works published in the Black Magnolias Literary Journal. She also has numerous articles on the global website prsuit.com, a feature expose on latoyahart.com, and two contributing commentaries on the Huffington Post Blog. Recently, Sham finished her first young adult novel. Her digital resume can be found on her blog at [www.shamwilliams.com](http://www.shamwilliams.com).

## FREE?

Allow me to introduce myself

Rather, allow me to define myself

To target myself

To label myself

To assert myself into your commonwealth.

Although, I do not come from your kind of wealth.

I am a product of your common fare, your welfare and your unfair practices.

Your justifications of a better life

Met with strife and despair and ramifications to the lesser heir.

Hi, I am the minority.

I am the black.

I am the gay.

I am the woman.

I am the lesser paid.

I am the underserved.

I am the one not worthy of god’s love.

I am free.

But what does that even mean?

What is the legacy of those before me?

Why does the earth grown miserably underneath me?

And the trees sway in the winds of the sighs of breaths taken by those who have gone to nest.

I can pass the brown paper bag test.

I can speak in tones that put slang to rest.

I am free.

But freedom lies only in this moment for me.

The absence of subjection, of injection, of rejection.

But where’s the protection?

For Trayvon Martin?

For Michael Brown?

For Tamir Rice?

For all the lives unfound to have been taken for any reason but one.

So before you offer yourselves a pat on the back or a high five for progress, consider the slack.

One nation. Under God. Indivisible.

Freedom and justice is supposed to be for all.