Material Memory Season 3, Episode 1
Our Ancestors' Wildest Dreams
Transcript

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Sharon M. Burney: Hello and welcome to Season Three of *Material Memory*. I am your host, Sharon M. Burney, and this season, we are going to travel through the cornerstones of cultural heritage that make up the HBCU Library Alliance. We will highlight the libraries, collections, and people at the Historically Black Colleges and Universities where history and primary documents collide in the storytelling of us.

Historically, college-bound students in the Black community have participated in an educational rite of passage, the Historically Black Colleges and Universities college tour. In recognition of this experience, we have organized this season as an audio road trip. Our first stop on this journey is Atlanta, Georgia, the headquarters of the HBCU Library Alliance, where I have the pleasure of speaking with its director, Sandra Phoenix. We'll continue to Charlotte, North Carolina, where we'll talk to the Alliance's board chair, Monika Rhue.

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Sharon M. Burney: It is difficult to speak about the HBCU Library Alliance without a discussion about its executive director of 13 years, Sandra Phoenix, whose vital work and continuous devotion have been integral in making the HBCU Alliance the organization it is today. I asked Sandra if she could share background on how the HBCU Library Alliance came into existence.

Sandra Phoenix: The Alliance had its beginnings at what was SOLINET, which is now LYRASIS, and this idea was part of a board discussion in the late 1990s. Loretta Parham, Janice Franklin and other HBCU library directors were members of that board. In October of 2002, for the first time in history, 103 library directors came together for the inaugural meeting of what was then the Historically Black Colleges and Universities Library Initiative. And here we are today as a voice of advocacy and more importantly, a body of knowledge for HBCUs.

Sharon M. Burney: Would you like to expand on that a little bit?

Sandra Phoenix: This body of knowledge?

Sharon M. Burney: Yes.

Sandra Phoenix: So, Sharon, we read a lot about this unique community of HBCUs. And when I think about the uniqueness of this community, I think about education, of course, first and foremost, and I

think about persons who were educated during a time of legal segregation. I think of the challenges of attending an institution so that we can learn, so that we can contribute, so that we and others can recognize who we are and the power within us. And I believe that it is these HBCUs, this body of knowledge, that gives us this power—who we are as individuals and who we are as a community—and the strength that we possess and the power that we possess to make changes so that my children, my grandchildren, and those who are to come, will be infused with this power.

Sharon M. Burney: As Sandra mentioned, she sees the HBCU Library Alliance as both a body of knowledge and a voice of advocacy. I asked her to expand on the ways we see this advocacy in action.

Sandra Phoenix: How do I see advocacy in action and our being a voice for those institutions? I've seen it very specifically in the Alliance's early days around leadership development for our library staff. I've seen it through activities to promote and support photographic collections at HBCUs so that this knowledge is shared broadly. I see it through the work we're doing around the internship project, where interested undergrads are invited for six weeks to learn more about conservation preservation skills, where our distinguished undergraduates participate either virtually or face to face, with agencies such as the Library of Congress, Duke University, Harvard, and where we see that, although this is such a phenomenal opportunity for our undergrads, that the bigger picture of this is that it is these organizations who are now privileged to participate with distinguished HBCU undergraduates.

Sharon M. Burney: Sandra's been thinking about the organization's future and the history in its care.

Sandra Phoenix: The vision of the HBCU Library Alliance is transforming for tomorrow while preserving the past. That transforming for tomorrow piece of it really does think about "what is it that our libraries need"? How can we advance to more, kind of like a 21st century library?

We sit on these beautiful gems of history, these gems of history. And much of this is not accessible or discoverable. So the big piece, the big chunk of our work is to make these collections discoverable and accessible and to own this, you know, this is for the HBCU Library Alliance. Others can participate in this, but this, this is my voice. This is my community's voice. And we ought to tell it.

Sharon M. Burney: As Sandra said, it's critical not only that this story gets told, but that we are the ones telling it. It's the sad truth that many Black people in the United States are kept from learning about their own history because the U.S. is embarrassed by its past involving us. As a result, the story that we hear is often one that is opposite of our lived experience. We know better and the collections, especially those in HBCU archives, are our proof—the remnants of what we know to be the truth—despite efforts to erase us.

Sandra Phoenix: So, when I think of archives, I think of this source that is—this probably isn't the right term—but it's kind of life-giving because it allows you to see, possibly a piece of yourself, and it allows you this wonderful privilege of this touch, this touch with your community. And those family members, ancestors, and then you begin to see your history. You begin to see your community, you begin to see your place in, in this space of history and culture.

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Sharon M. Burney: Since we're on the topic of preserving and telling our own stories, it only feels appropriate to introduce Monika Rhue who, at the time of this interview, was director of library services at Johnson C. Smith University and chair of the HBCU Library Alliance's board. No one knows better than Monika how essential an HBCU and a library can be to a community.

Sharon Burney: What was the first time you realized you fell in love with the library?

Monika Rhue: When I was a teenager in high school, I used to work on a bookmobile in Georgetown, South Carolina, and I loved it. I guess I'm telling my age, but most people don't realize they're, you know, especially when you're in small communities, that the bookmobile really served a great purpose to that community. And then fast forward, I had no idea that I would be a librarian because that was not something that I wanted to do growing up. So my beginning was in sales, after I graduated from Johnson C. Smith university, I was a sales assistant at *the Charlotte Observer*. It was like, I don't know, this is not what I really want to do, it made good money, but it wasn't something that I wanted to do.

So fast forward, I started volunteering at the city public library here in Charlotte, North Carolina, when a position came open for a library assistant. I worked in the children's area. My background is I'm a professional Griot, so I tell stories, and began to do programming for them. I think I worked harder in the library than I worked in sales. And so I realized that if they're going to work me like that, then I need to get paid, compensated for that. And that's when I really started exploring, going back to school to get my master's degree in library science.

Sharon M. Burney: Monika described herself as a griot—a storyteller, performer, and keeper of oral traditions in West Africa and the diaspora. I asked her to talk about the importance of the griot in Black communities.

Monika Rhue: When you think about history and how history was passed, the griot was instrumental in keeping the stories of the community. So they were responsible for, you know, not only sharing stories, but like I said, to make sure that the stories are preserved, the history of that community are preserved. And so when I think about my role as the griot, the storyteller, and my role in, you know, as the archivist at that time, and actually my role now, and just making sure that stories are not only shared, but helping people tell their stories. And that was really the importance of the griot. I mean, the griot was like, for the lack of better word, sacred in a sense, because the people of the village really looked up to the griot

because if you want to know anything about that village, you would go to the griot for that information. And that made them very important to the village.

Sharon M. Burney: In many ways, her work as an archivist and librarian is a continuation of her work as a griot. I asked her to share an example of some of the work she's done to help her community remember, tell, and preserve its stories.

Monika Rhue: Actually I'll talk about a current project. So Reclaim 37 is a project that talks about the impact of urban renewal. And it's really talking about the exit right off Beatties Ford Road, which is 37, and how the highway went right through the community and really divided the community.

Johnson C. Smith University sits around one called Biddleville. So right now, Johnson C. Smith University is facing gentrification around the university. So I thought it was very important that as people, new people who come in that community, understand the legacy of that community. [There] would not be a Biddleville community if it had not been for Johnson C. Smith University, and the people who lived in Biddleville were early faculty members, staff, people who graduated from Johnson C. Smith University that helped build that community.

So I thought it was very important that we share that story and share the stories that how these highways came through these communities and disrupted families and churches and businesses. And you know, that story is not unique to Charlotte, it's something that has been happening throughout the United States when you think about Black families. But I thought it was very important during this time to say, no, you can come in this community, we welcome you, but you're not coming in a community that was broken. You're coming in a community that has survived and still surviving. It has a rich history and legacy.

Sharon M. Burney: And this is just one example of how Monika and Johnson C. Smith University Libraries are trying to preserve and protect the community around it.

Monika Rhue: When you come on the campus, I would say the library that I direct is very different. It's not your typical academic library because we have exhibits in there and it's intentionally to educate our students and educate people who actually come onto our campus about the history. So [the] Reclaim exhibit is one, the Courage exhibit is another one. And like I said, those things are intentional to add on to what I call the cultural experience that we should be able to provide for our students to complement their education. You have to also give them that culture of understanding

Sharon M. Burney: Throughout my interviews this season, there were a couple of questions I liked to ask everyone, and one of them was this:

If you had five minutes to grab three things out of your library, collections, and archives before it self-destructed, what would they be?

Monika Rhue: Well, the first thing that came to mind, I would grab our finding aid book because it tells all the history and all the things that we have that's in our archives, I will try to save as many of the photographs. You know, we have a key place where we used to—I'm not in archives anymore—but we had a key place where we actually put some photographs that are essential. So I would grab those essential photographs that tell the history of the university. And maybe some permanent documents that are relevant to the history of the institution.

Sharon M. Burney: For Monika, every item she picked was related to preserving the history of her HBCU and the community around it. This doesn't surprise me, given the threat of gentrification the Biddleville community is currently facing. To her, the most precious gems in the collections were about the place itself--its culture, memories, and people. Because we know that if we lose the people, we lose the history.

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Sharon Burney: When you spoke earlier, you said Johnson C. Smith Library is much more than just a library, or it's not the typical library. Can you speak to the importance of the influence of libraries in the Black community?

Monika Rhue: I think we have a crucial role to influence our communities, especially if you work at a historically Black college or university, because you're in the heart of the community. So you have the opportunity through your programming, through activities outside of the walls of your university to invite the community and to share something different, to have them be exposed to archives, or exposed to the different exhibits that you create. Especially for our younger generation. Like I said, I stumbled on being an archivist. I didn't know what that was. You know, I was given that opportunity. And so we have an obligation to broaden this field, an obligation to have a diverse field, especially among African Americans to understand the role of librarians and how they are instrumental in the education of anything that you touch.

Sharon Burney: And for many in the Black community, the library has been more than just a place to check out books. Like you said, you use yours as a cultural hub. And I'm interested to get your perspective—since you started off in the children's section—the importance of the library to children in the Black community, and what kind of resources are there for children in the Black community?

Monika Rhue: I think libraries for children is so important. It's not only a safe haven for many of them, but it's a place where I tell people, that is the only place that you can go and travel around the world. It's the one place that's free that you can explore.

And I think that's very important. I think we're losing that, too, to be able to teach this younger generation, why libraries are so important, it's not just full of books. You know, libraries do programming, libraries have internet accessibility, libraries have devices. And I think that's why storytelling for me is so important, because you have to tell the stories of why libraries are important.

Sharon M. Burney: And the services libraries provide to children and college students are just part of the story. Through my conversations with librarians this season, I heard about how libraries in Black communities bring people from nursing homes to the library, or offer a place to receive health education, GED tutoring, and information on colleges and universities. These libraries are doing food drives, offering safe spaces for homeless people, and connecting people with mental health resources. They function as unofficial daycare centers and offer a place where kids in Black communities can find books curated for them. The library is also one of the few places to go for resources on gentrification.

And the libraries in Black communities are often doing all this with fewer resources and more obstacles than libraries based in predominantly White communities. At this point, I'm going to return to my conversation with Sandra Phoenix, who spoke about what these structural inequities mean in practice for HBCU libraries.

Sandra Phoenix: You know, what I can say is that we all know that our institutions are underfunded, and that really, of course, impacts the way that we can do the work. And with the under-funding also comes lack of funding in a number of ways around hiring and retention and professional development and opportunities to learn from other institutions, how they are managing their resources and any infrastructure changes needed to sustain what could be a digital collection.

Sharon Burney: What are the distinct challenges that you see, in the process of digitizing these collections for the HBCU Alliance members?

Sandra Phoenix: So for a number of our institutions, there are smaller library staff, collections that are not processed; for our HBCU Library Alliance there are, regrettably, institutions that have closed and collections that may have disappeared. So I see a major challenge is identifying, prioritizing, and adequate support to digitize collections. And then the sustainability piece of that: how is this work managed financially over time?

Sharon M. Burney: In response to these inequities, HBCUs and other Black nonprofit institutions are often pressured to partner with weathlier PWIs (or predominantly White institutions). This pressure to collaborate has only grown as funders, including CLIR, have pushed to prioritize underrepresented histories and BIPOC professionals. Far too many of the records related to Black history are currently held

by predominantly White institutions, who now have new incentives to partner with HBCUs. In these circumstances, it's important to think about the nature of these partnerships. I asked Monika about this.

What does authentic and ethical partnership look like to you? Or how do you define it?

Monika Rhue: I define it as–I would coin this phrase as win-win, meaning that, you know, we're all, when we enter in these partnerships, that it's not just one person or one entity getting the bulk of the partnership, I should say, but it's a partnership where we come together, because we have a mutual mission or something that we're trying to accomplish, but at the same time, we're looking out for one another, as far as whether it's a dollar associated with it, whether it is publicity associated with it, but a true partnership is that we're doing this work together, you know, we're all benefiting it together.

Sharon M. Burney: Inevitably, not all of these partnerships end up feeling authentic. Unfortunately, Sandra in her work with the HBCU Library Alliance has experienced this.

Sandra Phoenix: You and I know, Sharon, that HBCUs haven't always had this kind of recognition and it's really interesting that this had to happen during a pandemic. And so I also think about, as I do my work, now, my email is just an overflow because I get these communications about partnerships.

Sharon M. Burney: Recently, there has been increased conversations about diversity, equity and inclusion (or DEI). While it is fantastic the world seems to be awakening to the value of HBCUs, it is imperative we ask ourselves the hard sincerity questions that challenge our perceptions of authentic partnerships. Are people at predominately White institutions willing to relinquish some of their own privileges for equity and justice? Or are they reaching out in the name of diversity, equity, and inclusion to center themselves for additional resources and a DEI checkmark?

Sandra Phoenix: Responsible partnership has to be mutually beneficial, meaning that I am comfortable in my level of communication, and in your responses to me. When there are things that we do not agree on, we are at a place of learning and, and developing in this relationship, that we can discuss this. And we come to some agreement as opposed to, "we can't do anything other than this."

Sharon M. Burney: I imagine that one reason it can be frustrating is that Sandra knows exactly what she would do with additional unrestricted funding if it were readily available.

Sharon Burney: Let me ask you a question. If I could give you three wishes and money was not an object for the HBCU Library Alliance, what would they be?

Sandra Phoenix: If money was not an object? So if money was not an object, I would like to see every library receive all the support that's needed so that there were no hidden collections. So this is my thinking, kind of moving forward with collections. I want collections to be accessible. Our history must be

very easily available so that there can be new scholarship created, so that we can spread broadly the work and the power and the knowledge that's been held, that's within this community. The second wish for the HBCU Library Alliance, if there were no financial constraints, is that I would really, really like to see more opportunities for student internships.

I believe that we have really put together a dynamic opportunity to provide more opportunities for our students. And we're diversifying the profession by having them involved in conservation/preservation activity. I would also like there to be endowments for every HBCU. You know, I read a lot about, you know, various PWI and some HBCUs receiving, you know, these millions and millions and millions of dollars. So, yeah, a really strong endowment, I think, would be really helpful to our communities.

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Sharon M. Burney: We are blessed to stand on our ancestors' shoulders with these HBCU library collections. In nearly every interview I did this season, I encountered people who were preserving history while making history at the same time. These people whose passion to do this work was so entrenched in their ancestral spirit, they rarely took the time to acknowledge their rightful place in history. I want to close this episode with some final thoughts from the two history makers we've been speaking with. We'll start with Monika.

Sharon M. Burney: I guess my last question for you—how does it feel when you, when you reflect back on your career and you think about yourself as a teenager on the bookmobile and then your legacy and we fast forward over 20 years later, the amount of experience you've had as a library director, the programming that you've created; How do you feel looking back if you sit back and take a second and think about being our ancestors' wildest dreams, did you ever see yourself here and how do you feel about the footprints that you've left?

Monika Rhue: You know, it wasn't until recently that I kinda reflected on what I really have done. And to me, I'm not one to brag, but it was amazing cause I did it at a very young age, but I think it speaks to my sincerity and passion for what I love to do. I'm thankful because I had mentors along the way. I'm thankful because [the] HBCU Library Alliance played a role in that. I attended their leadership Institute, which started my pathway to becoming a director. And like I said, I wouldn't have been able to accomplish any of those things if it wasn't for people being my champions, you know, my husband, like I said, my mentors, the HBCU library Alliance. So that's why I give so much to the HBCU Library Alliance because they were my champions.

Sharon M. Burney: Monika isn't the only history maker this season whose life has been positively influenced by the HBCU Library Alliance. The alliance is composed of many history makers, whose passionate call to action is so innate, they simply cannot say no to the work of cultural heritage. The alliance is more than a professional network. It's a force and a family, ensuring that Black people in the US and around the world have the ability to tell our own stories. It's the alliance's mission to help us

“transform for tomorrow while preserving the past.” It exists so we can stand on our ancestors' shoulders and live their wildest dreams.

Sandra Phoenix: My great grandmother, who is not with us any longer, lived alone until she was 101, and her name was Lula Geodon. Now my great grandmother, Lula, was as black as my laptop and had these gorgeous blue eyes. And I remember visiting her in the seventies as a teenager and sitting on her front porch of the home that she and her husband built—the wood cabin. And to talk about how far she and her family had come and to talk about the value of her garden and how it fed her family and her community, to talk about the value of the church and the church bell, once rung, bringing the community together, to learn about, to be with, to consult, to seek wisdom, to gain knowledge. I also have a photo of my grandmother in her 1937 classroom. Now, this is a photo with students of all ages in Ms. Brooks’ classroom, and Ms. Brooks is dressed to the core in this very long and stately white shirt, this long black skirt, these boots, with the image of strength, just this image of strength and these young African-Americans students there to learn. Very—just, It blows my mind.

Sharon Burney: The word that comes to mind when you were saying that was legacy. One of the things I’ve asked everybody is why do you do this? You're not doing it because you get millions and millions of dollars. Why do you do this work? And what do you want your legacy to be?

Sandra Phoenix:

So, I believe that I'm doing this work because I'm supposed to. I believe that I'm leaving this sense of the importance of who we are. I also believe I'm leaving with us this sense to continue the journey. I believe I'm leaving this sense that we are here to encourage and to lift each other up, to share our skills and our resources. And I also want to think that I'm leaving with us the importance and significance of the power of this community and that there is so much more for us to do, to strengthen the community.

Sharon M. Burney: For some people it’s just a library, but for Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, it’s the pulse of the community. Over the course of this season, we’ll be exploring what this looks like, as we travel to different Historically Black Colleges and Universities’ libraries, museums, and archives. Not only will we get a chance to learn more about the hidden gems in these collections, but we will also be exploring the topics that are imperative to the HBCU libraries, communities and the people centered in these collections. We’ll discuss the histories behind them that allow us to deconstruct the past in order to forge solutions of a just future.

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Thanks for joining us. To learn more about the collections at the Johnson C. Smith University Library and the HBCU Library Alliance, check out our show notes at material-memory.clir.org. In our next episode, we’ll be talking with Professor Erika Witt at Southern University New Orleans, about their African Art Collection.

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