



Memphis Music Initiative
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MMI Welcomes New In-Schools Director as Organization Centers Creative Liberation Programming

Memphis Music Initiative (MMI) is proud to announce and welcome Lawrence Blackwell as the Director of its In-Schools program.

Originally from New Orleans, Blackwell brings a wealth of experience in both the arts and Creative Youth Development sectors to the role. He began his professional career as a performing artist before pursuing theatre education, serving as a professor of African American theatre at Columbia College, Rhodes College, the University of Memphis, and Southwest Community College. As an educator and artist, Blackwell has created, directed, and performed in over fifty pieces that explore diverse contemporary American social issues nationally and internationally. Most recently, Blackwell held the title of Director of Education at Hattiloo Theatre.

“What drew me to MMI was the fact that they are unapologetic in their mission to empower Black and brown youth,” said Blackwell. “To lift [students] up, and validate their life experiences.”

Across Shelby County, Memphis youth are settling into new classrooms—whether in-person or virtual—against the backdrop of COVID-19 and civil response to racial and social injustices. These overlapping crises have exposed the cracks in our social and economic systems, highlighting just how far we are from true equity. Last fall, MMI announced a strategic pivot toward Black and brown creative liberation as a guiding principle in its work. As this semester gains steam, MMI is continuing to hone an organizational definition of creative liberation, and to integrate curriculum and communications centered around this shift, while maintaining strong footing in music instruction and creative youth development.

As part of its work toward a better understanding of what creative liberation looks like, both internally and in the classroom, MMI had the honor of hosting Dr. Charles McKinney, Neville Frierson Bryan Chair of Africana Studies and Associate Professor of History at Rhodes College, as a virtual guide on this journey.

Dr. McKinney collaborated with MMI this summer as part of a “Program in Health Equity, Human Flourishing, and Well-Being” Andrew W. Mellon foundation grant. Specifically, Dr. McKinney proposed to design and implement an organizational curriculum rooted in a liberation mindset for Memphis’ young people— “one specifically tasked to addressing the perils and prospects for Black and brown students in Memphis and Shelby County.”

“As we know, this is the population of students who face considerable challenges in Shelby County,” said Dr. McKinney. “These challenges are rooted in a long tradition of racial inequality woven into the structures and institutions of the city. Segregation, redlining, racially disparate suspension and expulsion rates, lack of access to health care, virulent anti-immigrant sentiment, and the entrenched economic disparities faced by students in schools and neighborhoods conspire to create stunted educational outcomes for Black and brown students.”

Amber Hamilton, Executive Director at MMI, noted that while MMI has always centered youth agency and music as a lens through which to imagine new possibilities, Dr. McKinney’s guidance, as well as Blackwell’s hiring, have been integral in exploring what Black and brown inspired creative liberation looks like in each of MMI’s core programs.

“‘Creative liberation’ as a guiding principle is not new for MMI,” Hamilton said. “We’ve been integrating this principle from the very beginning, even if we weren’t using the exact framing. This summer, we were able to further refine a more intentional pivot toward creative liberation for our organization. With Dr. McKinney’s guidance, and Mr. Blackwell’s fresh perspective and passion for youth empowerment, we are laying important groundwork for an organizational approach to liberation-driven programming that is woven into all aspects of our work. What our students, who are most impacted and oppressed by ongoing and pervasive racism, need more now than ever, is a sense of radical freedom and creative liberation.”

As Director of In-Schools programming at MMI, Blackwell will guide the In-Schools team as they continue to elevate liberation in their program mission and in professional development sessions with MMI’s music engagement Fellows—specifically, to help Memphis’ Black and brown youth break down barriers to imagine a limitless future for themselves.

“Going into this school year, we really want to encourage youth to aspire,” Blackwell said. “We are in a time where people are more worried about surviving than any other period in our lifetime. And for our youth, their ability to imagine a different future is the gift that I hope we can give them, because right now we’re living in a time where that imagination is critical.”

As MMI continues to refine its creative liberation strategy, it aims to create a classroom in which young people recognize and acknowledge the challenges of current systems, yet feel equipped with the skills, agency, creativity, and liberation mindset to disrupt these systems for the benefit of self and community.

MMI leverages targeted philanthropic investments, programmatic offerings, and strategic capacity building to strengthen youth, community arts, and music engagement activities for primarily black and Latino youth in communities across Memphis and the Mid-South. MMI invests in two ways: through direct programs that connect youth to high-quality in-school, after-school and summertime opportunities, and by providing funding and resources to advance organizations working with young people.

In addition to operating direct programs that expand access to music engagement opportunities for black and brown youth, MMI also supports the ecosystem of community organizations that work to extend music and arts engagement opportunities for black and brown youth. Their supports enhance the capability of nonprofit organizations to deliver programs and to secure funding/resources beyond those provided by MMI, so that youth always have access to high-quality music programming.

For more information on how we are impacting youth, through transformative music engagement, visit our website at <http://memphismusicinitiative.org/> or find us Social Media: Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @mmusinitiative.