

Wilmington's stories of gun violence can be seen in national ballet on a mother's grief

Marina Affo, Delaware News Journal Published 5:00 a.m. ET Jan. 27, 2020

Jeremy McQueen didn't find out that his mother had breast cancer until she'd undergone months of chemotherapy and had lost all of her hair. The black mother didn't want to burden her son, a ballet dancer in New York.

It's the black mother way.

Mary McQueen did what so many like her do: She kept her pain and grief hidden deep within herself because she didn't want to distract her son from achieving his dreams.

It was witnessing the silent sacrifices of his mother that led Jeremy to create The Black Iris Project, a ballet company focused on bringing the stories of African American and black people to the stage.



Fana Tesfagiorgis in A Mothers Rite. (Photo: Amitava Sarkar)

Last Thursday, he brought one of his works "A Mother's Rite", a play about the gut-wrenching yet concealed heartbreak a black mother experiences when her son is murdered through gun violence to the Delaware Art Museum.

The story hits home to many in the arts community here in Wilmington, a city that has seen over 40 people killed by gunfire in the last 365 days.

[A YEAR OF GUN VIOLENCE: A database tracking gun violence in Delaware](#)

"A lot of times there's things that we want to say but we don't have the words to say it, but art can express those things," said Jonathan Whitney, manager of performance programs and community engagement at the museum.

Local groups work with youth and adults who have been affected by gun violence and abuse to express themselves through art.



These programs work to help participants heal but also provide education so they can express their experiences in a constructive and positive way.

Life-changing

Chandra Pitts sees what being able to see one's story can do for a young African American in Wilmington.

"It definitely changes their trajectory," she said of artistic expression. "Not only does it give them voice but the most important thing they find through the arts is value for themselves and for their lives."

Pitts is president and CEO of One Village Alliance, a Wilmington nonprofit that uses the arts as a tool for African Americans to tell their stories. The organization featured "A Mother's Rite" as part of its

Raising Kings, a monthlong mentorship program.

Participants in the program, which started in 2009, have had art featured at the Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington's art loop and other venues.

She said arts like writing and painting are a gateway for young people to see their stories are important – and give them confidence.

But it's not just youth who use art as a form of healing.



Musician and activist Richard Raw (Photo: Courtesy of Richard Raw)

Richard Raw has been the target of violence in Wilmington, yet he does not let that pain fester.

He uses experiences like having his house firebombed in 2016 and escaping with his wife as fuel in his work both as a rapper and as director of the nonprofit, Cultural Restoration Project, Inc.

That organization helps kids who have experienced violence create music to tell their stories and hopefully heal a bit.

Raw, 40, said when he was a kid he didn't have an outlet to express his emotions and rap music was frowned upon. He said now it is the way many in the city are able to cope.

"They don't have a platform, or really a voice," Pitts said. "So we try to open those platforms up."



Artistic director and choreographer Jeremy McQueen is the founder of The Black Iris Project: A Mother's Rite, a contemporary ballet that explores a mother's journey through her grief after her son's racially motivated murder. The ballet was performed at the Delaware Art Museum in their performance series. Jennifer Corbett, Delaware News Journal

A Mother's Rite

Jeremy McQueen wants his dance company, The Black Iris Project, to bring more people to ballet.

The California native said that growing up he did not have a lot of access to black ballet teachers. After he graduated from the Ailey/Fordham BFA Program in New York City, he wanted to bring African American and black stories to the stage.

He knew the strength that comes from seeing one's own story in a medium they enjoy.

In 2012, when his mother told him about her cancer, he used that sadness to choreograph a ballet about the strength of black women like his mother, his godmother and his aunt. He named it Black Iris, after Georgia O'Keeffe's Black Iris III painting – which he saw at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York that motivated him to create.

Fast forward to 2016. His collaborative is dedicated to telling stories like his mother's and other black people, like Nelson Mandela.

The idea for "A Mother's Rite", which premiered in 2018, came when he was watching a Solange Knowles concert in 2017 in New York. She had become very emotional during the song "Mad", which deals with the anger that black women carry with them but must push down to be the strong ones in a household or in black communities, something McQueen has seen first-hand.

Following the concert, McQueen researched how black women deal with these emotions. He read the accounts of dozens of mothers who have lost their sons to gun violence and "A Mother's Rite" was born.

Commissioned by the Bronx Museum of the Arts, the ballet, which is mostly a solo, follows a mother as she deals with the grief process alone.



Fana Tesfagiorgis and Khayr Muhammad in A Mothers Rite. (Photo: Amitava Sarkar)

The ballet was danced by former Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater soloist Fana Tesfagorgis.

"Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Philando Castile, Sandra Bland and then, even today like Atatiana Jefferson in her own home being shot. Stories like that we hear that shouldn't be stories anymore but they still are very much present in our culture, history, are enough of an inspiration to tell through dance and through acting, through movement," Tesfagorgis said.

For more information on the Black Iris Project, visit www.blackirisproject.org.

*Contact Marina Affo at maffo@delawareonline.com.
Follow her on Twitter at [@marina_affo](https://twitter.com/marina_affo).*