A Legacy Of Abolition And Love In The Work Of A Washington, DC Organizer

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SAVE THIS

Dr. Bruce Purnell at his Love More Movement Office, holding a portrait of his (clockwise from top) great grandmother, Theodora Purnell; his great great great grandmother, Mary Jones; and his grandfather Lee Purnell (M Ranganathan).

A legacy of abolition runs deep in the ancestry and work of Washington, DC community organizer Dr. Bruce Purnell. Purnell founded the **Love More Movement** in 2007 in Washington, DC to "heal from the wounds of the past and build communities that actualize the dreams of their ancestors." Purnell is a fifth generation descendant of abolitionists John and Mary Jones. **John Jones** was born to a freed, formerly enslaved person in North Carolina in 1817 and moved to Chicago in 1845 with his wife, Mary, and only $3.50 in his pocket. He opened a tailoring business in downtown Chicago, learned to read and write, and, with the aid of his wife, authored a key abolitionist text, *The Black Laws of Illinois: And A Few Reasons Why They Should be Repealed*. Also known as the "**Black Codes**," these laws restricted African American movement into the state and denied them the right to vote, serve on a jury, and attend school.

By the time he wrote the text, Jones had experienced overt and insidious forms of oppression from both southerners and northerners. While indentured to a tailor in North Carolina and Tennessee in his youth, for instance, he had had narrowly escaped being sold into slavery. When he moved to Chicago, he was forced to purchase a "**certificate of freedom**" for $1,000, without which his status as a free man could not be guaranteed.

Establishing his business and political career in Chicago (he would go on to chair the Convention of Colored People in 1856 and be the first person of color to be elected to public office in the state), the Joneses used their home as a **station** for the Underground Railroad, sheltering, nourishing, and shepherding fugitive enslaved people to their freedom in Canada. They also hosted secret meetings for fellow abolitionists Frederick Douglass, John Brown, Henry O. Wagoner, and Allan Pinkerton, among others.

These are stories that Bruce Purnell grew up hearing. While Purnell's ancestry is one of abolitionism, it is also one of love. As he describes it, "there were intimate relationships between the station master families of the Underground Railroad — these were people committed to the abolitionist cause. They fell in love with each other." Purnell's great grandfather, William Whipper Purnell, was a descendant of abolitionist **William Whipper** and related to **Mary Ann Shadd**, a Black Canadian-American anti-slavery activist, suffragette, and the first Black female publisher in North America. A Civil Rights activist and surgeon, William Whipper Purnell met and married Theodora Jones, the granddaughter of John and Mary Jones, and united two families with a long history of fighting for freedom.

Purnell's great great grandfather, James Purnell, partook in abolitionist **Martin Delany's** "Back to Africa" movement in the 19th century and **John Brown's** anti-slavery convention in Canada in 1858 — a year before the white abolitionist was hung for attempting an anti-slavery rebellion in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. "It was a diverse group of people that believed in freedom," said Purnell of the convention. "They put everything on the line. John Brown was a white man who chose to hang to make a point. To know that means there is hope for everybody."

After completing his doctoral dissertation in psychology titled "The Anatomy of Resilience" at the University of Nigeria in the early 2000s, Bruce Purnell returned to the city of his childhood, Washington, DC, and used the Kenilworth neighborhood as a base for his work. This was also the city where his grandfather, Lee Purnell — among the first Black people to earn an engineering degree from MIT — chaired the engineering department at Howard University. But it was also where Bruce Purnell witnessed the War on Drugs first hand. "Kenilworth was a hub for drug distribution in the '80s. Many people I grew up with fell. If we were to start a movement towards social reconstruction, this was the place to start."

The Love More Movement aims to create resilient communities and theorizes that resilience is shaped by history, not by outsider experts.

It centers the trauma of slavery, segregation, incarceration, and, as Purnell summarized, "this era which they call the New Jim Crow" in its work. Purnell is dedicated to addressing the "root causes" of trauma associated with new and old forms of racial violence, and what abolitionist scholar-activist **Ruth Wilson Gilmore** called "carceral geographies." At the same time, Purnell's work insists on hope, love, and healing as key tenets for moving forward. "I don't think anybody is healed from these things, but we're healing. It's a process… we're still moving towards liberation and freedom," he said.

Purnell uses art and music to reach youth in DC's Ward 7. "With young brothers who experience drug and gang related violence — I tell them to write a soundtrack to a script. The content could be a conceptual piece about Willie Lynch [a British enslaver in the West Indies credited with the heinous and anachronistic 1712 "**The Making of a Slave**" speech], for instance," he said. "We have a recording studio and a place with instruments. They write it and perform it. Then we start discussing it. Why do we still use the word n—? How does this history still matter to our liberation?"

The Love More Movement also works with seniors, who come together for a weekly program called "Seniors Offering Unconditional Love" (SOUL). The group sings Black freedom songs and shares personal struggles. "Our seniors are history in real time; that's going to be us in a few years" Purnell observed.

The Underground Railroad lives on as an operational metaphor in the Love More Movement. "We can't have physical freedom without mental liberation," explained Bruce. "So the Underground Railroad must evolve into the overground freeway." Trust is a key element in mental liberation, he added. "You step out of that plantation and you have to trust people you don't know. That's how important freedom is. We have to step out again."

About the Author

Malini Ranganathan is an assistant professor at American University's School of International Service, where she researches and teaches on issues related to urban geography and history, race and intersectionality, and environmental and social justice. She is also the faculty affiliate of the Antiracist Research and Policy Center and faculty fellow at the Metropolitan Policy Center. Follow on her Twitter @maliniranga