TAVARIUS “TJ” THOMPSON
Author | Motivational Speaker | Unionite
The 43rd Annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Leaders’ Celebration will be broadcast and streamed virtually on Monday, January 18 at 9am.

For the very first time, we are pleased to be able to celebrate Dr. King’s legacy with an estimated one hundred thousand households throughout the Richmond and Hampton Roads’ areas through a new media partnership with WTVR-CBS 6 in Richmond, VA and its sister station, WTKR CBS 3, in Hampton Roads. In addition, the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) has joined with us in a shared effort to achieve the economic justice Dr. King sought by increasing educational attainment opportunities among underrepresented communities.

During the broadcast, we will not only reflect on Dr. King’s legacy and his local impact, but also we will recognize leaders and organizations both in Richmond and in the Hampton Roads regions whose efforts embody Dr. King’s spirit of selfless giving for the benefit of our “beloved community.” Learn more.

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**SWAGGER LIKE US**

Lights! Camera! And a lot of action is taking place on Lombardy Street as Virginia Union host NBA Super star, Kevin Durant, Forward for the Brooklyn Nets.as he brings ‘Swagger’ to RVA. Swagger is shooting a 12-part series produced by Eye Productions Inc.

SWAGGER is a sports drama set in the world of AAU basketball that gives a view from every seat in the house. We meet players, their families, the coaches and sneaker companies. This is an American story about young adults coming of age in a world that often does not make sense to them. Amidst opportunism, corruption and heartbreak, they fight for their love of the game, and for each other. The show is executive produced by Kevin Durant and based loosely on his experiences as a young star player in the DMV area.

Alongside KD on set includes prominent actors such as O’Shea Jackson, Winston Duke, and Teyana Taylor. As the cameras roll, anyone who happened to walk in Barco-Stevens would hardly recognize the gym, as it was transformed into Soldiers Gymnasium, the location of a tournament that would reshape the landscape of AAU basketball for Durant and his team.

The cast and crew also utilized the Living and Learning Center in addition to the Henderson Center. With all the additional foot traffic on campus, the university has constructed a COVID-19 task force to ensure the safety of the production crew, actors, and VUU employees. Protocols include daily testing entering campus along with mobile sanitation stations and mobile bathrooms placed strategically around the campus.

Although the bulk of the production was centered around Barco-Stevens Hall, another major scene was filmed using the Graham street entrance to create a bus scene for episode seven. Beyond that, the crew has been spotted throughout the city such as the Calhoun Center, Jackson Ward, Mama J’s, Maggie Walker and even in Hopewell.

Swagger is set to air on Apple TV+ in the Spring of 2021. Tune in, and see if you can spot your VUU!
VIRGINIA UNION UNIVERSITY RECEIVES DOMINION ENERGY GRANT FOR STEM PROGRAMS, RENOVATIONS, AND SCHOLARSHIPS

Virginia Union University will endow a STEM studies program, create the “Dominion Energy Scholars” scholarship program, complete renovations of Huntley Hall, support a workforce development and training program, and underwrite technology upgrades to 40 classrooms, thanks to a $6 million grant from Dominion Energy.

Virginia Union University is one of 11 historically black colleges and universities benefitting from Dominion Energy’s six-year “HBCU Promise.” The program will support endowments, capital projects, operating expenses and educational programs in clean energy at HBCUs in Virginia, Ohio, North Carolina and South Carolina.

“We are grateful to Dominion Energy for awarding us this grant to support Virginia Union University’s growth as we continue to expand our offerings to the next generation of scholars,” said Dr. Hakim Lucas, President of Virginia Union University. “The funds will assist the university in making necessary changes and renovations to work towards becoming a ‘Best-In-Class’ institution.”

The grant to Virginia Union University will help launch a STEM studies program, including scholarships, faculty enrichment, research, and additional programs designed to develop Black STEM professionals, and endow the “Dominion Energy Scholars” scholarship program, which will cover two students’ tuition per year. Additionally, the grant will expand the workforce development and training program, where participating students will receive a stipend, applied directly to tuition costs, to work at the school and in the community. Finally, the grant will support the much-needed renovations to Huntly Hall, and allow technology upgrades to be made in 40 classrooms on campus.

“We know that education can serve as a springboard for social and economic mobility,” said Ed Baine, president of Dominion Energy Virginia. “We’re honored to support HBCUs that are doing a great job developing the future workforce and leaders of our nation.”

Dominion Energy also has committed $10 million in scholarships to assist African American and other underrepresented minority students who reside in the company’s service area. Students can learn more and apply at DominionEnergy.com/EquityScholarships.
VUU LAUNCHES P-12 EXPERIENCES AND EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES APPOINTS DR. MCQUEEN-WILLIAMS AS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

During her career as a professional educator, Reverend Dr. Michelle Kelly McQueen-Williams has shown a deep concern for the educational, social, and emotional well-being of the children she has encountered as a teacher, assistant principal, and elementary principal for Henrico County Public schools. She was named the first principal of Harvie Elementary, the 45th and most recent elementary school to be opened in Eastern Henrico County, Virginia. She recently retired as the Director of Elementary Education in Henrico County Public Schools. She has now assumed the role of Executive Director of P-12 Experiences and Educational Initiatives at Virginia Union University.

Michelle is a product of the Richmond Public School System and holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Journalism from Virginia Union University, where she was crowned Miss Virginia Union University. Additionally, she obtained a Masters and Ph.D. in Educational Leadership from Virginia Commonwealth University. She also attained the certificate of completion from Virginia Tech’s Aspiring Superintendent’s program. Dr. McQueen-Williams graduated with honors from the Samuel Dewitt Proctor School of Theology at Virginia Union University, with her Master of Divinity and is now matriculating in the Doctor of Ministry program there. Dr. McQueen serves the board of directors of the Henrico Police Athletic League and as 1st Vice President of the Chesterfield Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta. Licensed and ordained, she currently serves as an Associate Minister at the First Baptist Church of South Richmond.

DR. NARBE KALANTARIANS, PHYSICS, JOINS ELECTRON-ION COLLIDER USER GROUP DIVERSITY & INCLUSION COMMITTEE

Dr. Kalantarians has been appointed to serve on the Electron-Ion Collider User Group Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) Committee. The Electron-Ion Collider (EIC) is the next planned major facility for nuclear physics in the world and will be housed at Brookhaven National Lab in Long Island NY. Six committee members were selected out of a pool of peer nominations. The charge of the D&I Committee is to compose the value statement on diversity and inclusion for the International Committee. The value statement will affect the charter and membership structure including its leadership. The committee is working towards a completion deadline of March 2021.

Dr. Kalantarians’ research is in experimental nuclear physics, most of which has been carried out at Jefferson Lab in Newport News, VA. He has mentored nine VUU undergraduates in research funded by National Science Foundation grants. Students get the opportunity to work on instrumentation and data analysis. One of his students authored a paper and another won a research assistantship award.
DR. VERNON RUFFIN INVITED TO DELIVER KEYNOTE ADDRESS FOR THE RONALD E. MCNAIR POST-BACCALAUREATE ACHIEVEMENT PROGRAM

Virginia Union University’s faculty are recognized as experts in their discipline, conducting cutting-edge research, generating innovative theory, and adopting inclusive teaching practices in the classroom. Today, we recognize Dr. Vernon Ruffin ’99, Assistant Professor, in the Department of Natural Sciences within the School of Arts & Sciences. Dr. Ruffin was invited to deliver the keynote address for the Ronald E. McNair Post-baccalaureate Achievement Program. The McNair Scholars Program is a federal TRIO program designed to prepare undergraduate students for doctoral studies through involvement in research and other scholarly activities. McNair participants are either first-generation college students with financial need or members of a group that are traditionally underrepresented in graduate education and have demonstrated strong academic potential.

Dr. Ruffin is a 1999 graduate of Virginia Union and joined the faculty in 2014. He teaches courses in biology and physiology and has previously taught ecology, embryology, writing in sciences, and research techniques among other natural science courses. Dr. Ruffin is the Principal Investigator of the first biomedical research neuroscience laboratory at VUU. The basic science research conducted in the Ruffin NeuroLab examines the regulation of intracellular pH in the mammalian brain by members of the Solute-Carrier (SLC) protein super-family (SLC4 and SLC9). These proteins are the major acid/base transporters within the brain and recently have been implicated in the regulation/coordination of neuronal excitability in hippocampal neurons.

PRESIDENTIAL DISTINGUISHED LECTURE SERIES

Virginia Union University launched VUU Global, taking the HBCU experience to the cloud with the introduction of the exciting new “Presidential Distinguished Lecture Series.”

Current ABC/ESPN analyst and former 13-year NBA star Jalen Rose is one of the few professional athletes to maintain a high profile post retirement. Long known for his post-game quotes and great relationship with the media, Jalen continues to show his versatility in the broadcast booth, in the entertainment world and as a philanthropist.

Stay tuned for more information!

If you missed any of the Lectures with Roland Martin or Dr. Michael Eric Dyson, watch past episodes via Facebook and YouTube!
As a kid from the inner city, Tavarius J. Thompson, most commonly known as “TJ”, grew up in one of Richmond’s most notorious housing projects. Couple that with the influences he has been subjected to his entire life, its makes one wonder, how he has made it to become one of RVAs top selling authors and a prominent motivational speaker.

His first book Told was released October 21, 2012. “Told” is described as an insight of the journey into a life of pain, sorrow, and hardship TJ overcame in an effort to becoming successful. Chronicling the struggle to avoid becoming a product of his environment but rather to lead young people like himself in a new direction. “Told” is a story meant to inspire the youth and provide hope. The book also includes a number of TJs original poetry as well as his accounts of life changing events surrounding his friends and family.

His second book “Study Guide” can be described as anything other than your typical study guide. This Study Guide helps with mental health awareness. Topics including family, friends, love, and depression, as well as how to avoid giving up on the process, seeing it all the way through and decision making. Study Guide provides information that can be taken advantage of on the journey to becoming a better version of ones self and most importantly being happy and enjoying life. The following will go in depth with TJ and explore the inspiration for his books as well as how he inspires others.

Q: Let’s dive in with your first book, what inspired you to write that?
A: My English professor inspired my first book at the time, Dr. Monique Akassi. It covers my life up until that point. My daughter had just been born a few months before. While I was writing the book, we were also filming a documentary. It’s called “Heard”. A man by the name of David Powers produced that. He reached out to me, just to tell my story, and how I gained success. From there he reached out to a few other people, so there are six of us being featured in the documentary, it’s still available on YouTube.

Q: With the book “Told” being about your life, explain where it is you come from and the significance that had on writing the book.
A: Most people would refer to it as Jackson Ward, but I am from Gilpin Court, a housing project right off Chamberlayne before you get to the VCU area. My family has been here for generations, and I use to consider that a curse but I kept pushing on. I graduated from John Marshall High School and went to a school in West Virginia to play football but that didn’t work out, so I came back home and went to Union. Unfortunately, I didn’t have the money to keep myself enrolled and eventually had to drop out.

Q: After you dropped out, you already had the first book and the documentary. I imagine you turned your focus more toward that than school.
A: Absolutely. I did a speaking engagement for the Richmond Housing Authority at a luncheon speaking about the documentary. At the end of the event, I met a woman by the name of Gretta Harris. She came up to me and said “TJ you inspired me and I want to help you with anything you need”. I told her my goals and aspirations and she said, “You need to go back to school”. I told her I wasn’t interested in going back at that time, I wanted to finish but I just didn’t have the money, but she kept pushing it. She told me to go to Union and just see what I needed to do to get re-enrolled and how much it would cost. So I went up there to inquire and they told me I didn’t have a
balance. I made her double check, and even after she doubt check I still continued to ask her if she was sure that she was looking at the right account. I called Ms. Gretta to tell her I didn’t have a balance, and I got registered that same day, and began my first class that same night.

Q: So how much longer will you be taking classes?
A: I AM DONE!!! Even when I went to re-enroll I was worried about how I was going to pay for school but I kept pushing, kept working hard and I managed to pay my way through the rest of school. First in my family with a college degree.

Q: Speaking of your family, you mentioned earlier that you felt like being in Gilpin Court was a curse, do you still feel that way?
A: All my family and friends were born and died here. End of story. What changed for me is my support system. Everybody wants me to do better than them. It is weird and it’s a lot of pressure at the same time but it’s a good pressure, and I accepted the challenge. I know the hurdles I have to jump through to be successful, but compared to the way I grew up I am successful.

Q: When people hear the name “Gilpin Court”, the automatic assumption is that it’s a housing project infested with drugs, crime and violence but is that a misconception? What is it really like living in Gilpin?
A: It’s all those things. What people fail to realize is that we’re people just like them. These are the circumstances we have to deal with, but the legacy I want to leave is that I’m surrounded by all this chaos but mentally I’m somewhere else. A lot of people can’t separate the two. Furthermore, not everybody out here is into the negativity, and a lot of people don’t want to be involved in it. The difference with me is again my support system and the willingness to get up and go do something with my life.

Q: What is it that keeps you on the straight and narrow?
A: I see the end goal. I want to make it out of here and never come back. Of course, I’ll be around to help out and visit, give back to the community. So many people depend on me to make things happen. Its slow because I’m doing the right thing, and I’ve had a few setbacks but my will to keep going is strong.

Q: With so many people depending on you, what is it that keeps you from buckling under all this pressure?
A: It gets to me a lot. I can walk outside right now and everyone would greet me and show love like I the president or something. It’s that kind of love here but the reality is that I’m still here. That’s what continue to keep me going.

Q: What does the future hold for TJ?
A: I want to move south. Buy some land and start my career. I really want a house. I’ve never lived in a house before.

Q: Now that you’ve gotten your degree, what is your career goal?
A: I really don’t know. I’m working as a counselor now so something in that realm. I have my BA in Criminal Justice so I would love to work as a corrections counselor or work in the Department of Juvenile Justice or something but I really don’t know.

Q: What has been the most enjoyable part of this journey?
A: The most enjoyable part is being able to experience this with my daughter. She’s eight, so she was in the documentary with me a lot and having my wife by my side. She’s proud of me. We’re looking to have the wedding whenever all these restrictions are lifted, Covid messing up the original plans a bit but to experience this with these two have been the best part.

Q: How is the married life?
A: Marriage is different. We’ve been through the good and the bad and stuck by one another. I always hear, there’s no blue print to success but there’s really no blue print to marriage. We’ve known each other since we were 14/15 years old. We’re both willing to do it, both willing to listen and communicate. 2020 has brought a lot of pain to a lot of people but its been good to me.

Q: You mentioned moving south and possibly working for the DOJ, but are there any more books coming in the future?
A: Study Guide, my most recent book is still fresh, so I’m really pushing that. I want my book in all the Richmond schools. A lot of kids think reading is lame or writing a book is lame but I want them to see me and think “oh maybe its not lame, maybe that’s something I can do to”.

Q: What does the future hold for TJ?
A: I want to move south. Buy some land and start my career. I really want a house. I’ve never lived in a house before.
View our 2020 Reopening plan at www.vuu.edu/vuu-opening-plan

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