TAMARAT MAKONNEN ’94
Writer | Producer | Film Director
VUU LAUNCHES CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF HBCUS, 1ST IN THE NATION

Virginia Union has launched the Center for the Study of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), making it the only research center of its kind in the country dedicated to focusing on HBCUs. VUU President & CEO Dr. Hakim J. Lucas serves as the Center’s Executive Director and VUU Provost & Sr. Vice President of Academic Affairs, Dr. Terrell Strayhorn, serves as its Director.

The Center for the Study of HBCUs is a national research center, whose vision is to become the country’s preeminent institute for the advancement of relevant scholars and scholarship. The Center has a discovery agenda that ranges from foundational inquiry to translational science and disruptive, transformational innovation that ensure the sustainability of Black colleges. Center staff and affiliates conduct rigorous, evidence-based research that aims to advance the research agenda, expand institutional capacities, transform institutions, eradicate institutional inequities, and ensure the future of HBCUs in the nation and beyond. The Center achieves its mission through four (4) primary objectives:

1. **CONDUCT** research and scholarship;
2. **CONVENE** the HBCU scholarly community and constituents;
3. **MOBILIZE** resources in support of advancing HBCU research;
4. **DISSEMINATE** research and scholarship broadly.

Learn more about the Center for the Study of HBCUs at [https://center4hbcu.vuu.edu/](https://center4hbcu.vuu.edu/)

"The United States of America has reached a cultural tipping point related to race and culture, and the Black community is at the epicenter."

VUU president, CEO, and professor, Dr. Hakim J. Lucas is teaching ‘Topics in African American History’ (HIS 466, 3 cr.) during the Spring 2021 semester! This timely course will offer an in-depth exploration of selected events, circumstances, personalities, ideas, themes, problems, and issues which arise within the historical life and culture of African American people. Register for this class via [MyVUU.edu](http://MyVUU.edu).
Virginia Union University is excited to present the honorees of the 43rd Annual Martin Luther King Jr. Beloved Community and MLK Legacy Awards in the areas of Health, Education, Economic Justice and Legislation.

These individuals and organizations embody the spirit of Dr. King’s legacy and work tirelessly to realize his dreams of racial, social and economic equity. We honor their individual and collective sacrifice, and salute their vision, tenacity and commitment to Dr. King’s “beloved community.”

**McGUIRE WOODS DONATES $250,000**

McGuire Woods donated a total of $250k to our beloved VUU. The Ruth Coles Harris Leadership Foundation will receive $10k, and the remaining $240k will be directed to Virginia Union University student scholarships.

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Governor L. Douglas Wilder
Martin Luther King, Jr. Legacy Award
“The time is always right to do what is right.”

Children’s Hospital of the King’s Daughters
Martin Luther King, Jr. Beloved Community Award, Health Equity
“If you can’t fly then run, if you can’t run then walk, if you can’t walk then crawl, but whatever you do you have to keep moving forward.”

Reverend Dr. Patricia Gould-Champ and the Faith Community Baptist Church
Martin Luther King, Jr. Beloved Community Award, Faith & Education
“Faith is taking the first step even when you don’t see the whole staircase.”

Virginia Poverty Law Center
Martin Luther King, Jr. Beloved Community Award, Economic Justice
“No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

Sisters Network Central Virginia
Martin Luther King, Jr. Beloved Community Award, Health Equity
“Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, ‘What are you doing for others?’”

Delegate Delores McQuinn
Martin Luther King, Jr. Beloved Community Award, Policy & Social Justice
“I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality, and freedom for their spirits.”

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Presenting Sponsor
VUU’S EVELYN REID SYPHAX SCHOOL OF EDUCATION AWARDED A $10,000 RESEARCH GRANT TO ADDRESS THE CRITICAL SHORTAGE OF TEACHERS OF COLOR

Virginia Union University’s Evelyn Reid Syphax School of Education, under the leadership of Dean Kimberly Gaiters-White, has been awarded a $10,000 research grant by Albany State University’s Center for Educational Opportunity (CEO). The grant will assist in funding a new research study, “Beyond the Test: Making Teaching an Attainable Career for Teachers of Color”, to assess obstacles that prevent culturally and linguistically diverse candidates from becoming teachers.

Recognizing the critical shortage of teachers of color, this study aims to find ways to overcome challenges and prepare more teachers to enter the workforce. The research will focus on understanding the barrier of passing requisite licensure exams and identify data-driven strategies that will improve the pass rates of test-takers of color. Results will be utilized to refine the VUU Licensure Exam Preparation Institute. The refined Institute model will be embedded into the undergraduate teacher preparation program, as well as its post-baccalaureate teacher licensure program. More importantly, the information will be widely disseminated to other teacher preparation programs nationwide via conference presentations and publications.

The Center for Educational Opportunity is funded by the Thurgood Marshall Foundation and was established on April 13, 2018, to support outcomes-based, impact research with a focus on four pillars:

- educational opportunity,
- educational models,
- educational innovations, and
- educational access.

VUU’S EVELYN REID SYPHAX SCHOOL OF EDUCATION AWARDED $25,000 TECHNOLOGY IMPLEMENTATION GRANT

Virginia Union University’s Evelyn Reid Syphax School of Education, under the leadership of Dean Kimberly Gaiters, is a recipient of the 2020 American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) Video Observation Technology Implementation grant, offered in partnership with Edthena. The grant is awarded to enhance video-based training and feedback for future teachers in methods courses, field observations, skill-building, and group learning via advanced technology. Of the 20 institutions receiving the award, VUU was the only HBCU selected.

AACTE: The Leading Voice on Educator Preparation

The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education is a national alliance of educator preparation programs and partners dedicated to high-quality, evidence-based preparation that assures educators are profession-ready as they enter the classroom. The 700 member institutions include public and private colleges and universities in every state, the District of Columbia, the Virgin Islands, and Guam. Through advocacy and capacity building, AACTE promotes innovation and effective practices that strengthen educator preparation. Learn more at aacte.org.

Edthena: Video Observation and Collaboration Platform

Edthena is the leading video observation platform for using teaching videos as part of the teacher training and supervision process. Teachers upload classroom or Zoom-teaching videos, and colleagues or supervisors leave timestamped comments. Perfect for methods courses, field observations, edTPA skill-building, and group learning. For more information and video-focused training resources, visit edthena.com.

Each week we will share exciting, innovative, and groundbreaking news about Virginia Union University as we make progress to Best in Class.
TWO VUU SCIENTISTS NAMED TO LIST OF 1,000 INSPIRING BLACK SCIENTISTS IN AMERICA

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 applaud VUU alum and Assistant Professor of Biology, Dr. Vernon Ruffin ’99, and VUU alum, Dr. Andre Hudson ’00, who are named on the list of 1000 Inspiring Black Scientists in America.

The list was released by the Community of Scholars to celebrate excellence and to “dismantle the myth that outstanding black scientists make up a small percentage of the scientific community.” The list includes scientists who have made a meaningful impact on science and helped push us to the next level.

Dr. Vernon 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. Learn more about Dr. Ruffin’s research at https://www.vuu.edu/academics/schools/department-of-natural-sciences/faculty/ruffin

Dr. Andre Hudson is a class of 2000 graduate of Virginia Union with a degree in biology. He earned a Ph.D. from Rutgers University in 2006. Currently, he is Professor and Head of The Thomas H. Gosnell School of Life Sciences at the Rochester Institute of Technology. Dr. Hudson says he “fell in love with science at VUU.” Read more about his story at Hudson Lab.

For the full list of 1000 Inspiring Black Scientists, see: http://crosstalk.cell.com/blog/1000-inspiring-black-scientists-in-america

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Tony E. Colden

January 21, 1986 – January 13, 2021
THE DIRECTOR’S CUT:
INTRODUCING ALUM
TAMARAT MAKONNEN ‘94
Justin-Mychal White

If you were to research the name Tamarat Makonnen, you would find a 1994 Virginia Union graduate from the Empire State, who gained critical acclaim as a writer, producer, and film director. However, if you were to ask Mr. Makonnen to describe himself he will humbly respond, “I’m a storyteller”. With ideas as vivid on screen as they are in his imagination, Makonnen’s journey to the director’s chair started long before he arrived at 1500 N. Lombardy. Fortunately, his time at VUU provided Makonnen the opportunity to follow his calling and led to his big break in the film industry. The following will chronicle Makonnen’s expedition from coast to coast, as he continues living out his dream.

Q: I featured your childhood friend Mr. Guerlain Paul for the November edition. He shared that he got his start with the NBA following your example when it came to pursuing film. I’m curious to know what got you started?
A: It all started in Long Island, NY. In school, I could never seem to focus on my classwork. I was always somewhere in the clouds, lost in my imagination. I knew early that I was going to do something in the creative field.

Q: Growing up, what was the moment you knew film was your calling?
A: Growing up in the 80s, personal home video cameras became a thing. So I used to sneak out the family video camera. My little brother and I would make our own ninja movies. I would do camera tricks to make us disappear and reappear. That’s where I really caught the bug to become a filmmaker. I would show the movies to my buddies, who became my first audience. We then began making movies together. It was me, Guerlain and a bunch of other high school friends.

Q: Being from New York, during the 80s, how did you hear about Virginia Union?
A: Like many young people that grew up then, we saw shows like “A Different World” and films like “School Daze”. Practically, everyone I know who attended an HBCU was inspired by that show and film. VUU got on our radar through a family friend. My mom liked that it was a smaller school, which allowed for a more personal education. You weren’t just a random face in a large auditorium. They knew who you were. The professors knew your name.

Q: With A Different World and School Daze having such an influence on your school choice, did that same influence cross over to your filmmaking aspirations?
A: Definitely. Directors like Spike Lee and Steven Spielberg really grabbed my imagination. Spike Lee was the first black filmmaker of his generation to be heralded. He was provocative and pushing the edge, so not only did he influence me, but also an entire generation of black filmmakers. His early work was extremely inspirational to me. With Spielberg, he really showed me how far a vivid imagination could take you. I used to get lost in his films.

Q: Without an actual film department on campus, how did you keep that fire burning when it came to your film work?
A: Luckily, my parents bought me a used video camera, which helped me continue on my creative journey. We would shoot different short films on campus and throughout Richmond. Plus, there was a small editing suite behind the theatre in Ellison Hall. The gentleman who was responsible for the theatre would give me the keys, and I would go in there and edit my movies. All of those things helped to keep the ball rolling.
Q: Following graduation, what was your first big break in the film industry?
A: I graduated in the winter of ’94 and moved back to New York. Once I got home, I hit the ground running, working on various film productions. Feature films, commercials, documentaries, any opportunity that I could get to be on set. I was absorbing the information like a sponge. My professional break as a director came from my friends. My buddies who went to Virginia State University had a rap group called The Boogiemonsters. They got signed to a record deal. When they released their second album, I asked them if I could direct the music video for the first single. I was already working on a short film called “Images” and they were in the film, so they already knew how passionate I was about filmmaking. Vex Da Vortex and Mondo McCann (members of The Boogiemonsters) agreed to give me a shot. In a meeting at EMI Records, I played the short film “Images” for the Video Commissioner. They really liked it and gave me the green light to direct the video “The Beginning of the End”. After the video premiered, the group invited me to do an interview with them on BET’s Rap City. It was an opportunity for me to be introduced on a large popular platform. After the interview, a production company in Los Angeles contacted me. They flew me out there for a meeting, where I signed on to direct music videos.

Q: Currently, you’re in Los Angeles, what drove you to make that move?
A: I moved out here in 2001 and it was really a leap of faith. I started writing scripts and eventually wrote what would be my feature film debut, “Dreams and Shadows”. I then went on to direct and produce the award-winning documentary, “In Search of the Black Knight”. In addition, it was also produced by three fellow Unionites, Oscar Dill, Cle Johnson, and Guerlain Paul. The documentary takes a humorous and thought-provoking look at the current state of black relationships in America. “In Search of the Black Knight” has a special place with me, because I was working with my brothers. I’m proud of what we accomplished together.

Q: Every career has its ebbs and flows, what is it like trying to maintain work and relevancy in the film industry?
A: This is a feast to famine kind of industry. I never put myself in a position where I had to rely solely on my artistry. I earned my degree in English Language Arts and I’ve utilized that degree many times throughout the years. Without other sources of income in this industry, you may starve. So having a degree from VUU has given me the support I needed while I pursued my passion. When I was still living in New York, I would substitute teach as a side hustle. When I got to LA, I began working in the non-profit sector. However, my film ambitions have always been the passion and the priority.

Q: What advice would you give to anyone looking to break into directing?
A: Everything is so different now. When I started we were shooting on 16mm and 35mm film, but now we live in a digital world, and you can shoot a movie on your iphone. I would say, use the resources you have and don’t worry about what other people are doing. Shut the world out and follow your ideas. You’re an original so don’t imitate the next person.

Q: With that being said, how does one prevent their creativity from being tainted by those that they are influenced by?
A: I think you need to find your own voice. Nowadays, everybody kind of follows the next person, but when I was growing up it was cool to have your own style. Don’t be afraid to take chances. Those are the people who change the world.

Q: What’s on the horizon for you, are there any films we should be on the lookout for?
A: Yes! I’m working on an animated short film right now. It’s based on a crazy night I had as a teenager. A really funny, adventurous, coming of age story that I thought would make for a great short film. The one thing I don’t have in my body of work is animation, so I’m excited to be working on this film. I’m also developing other feature film projects. I look forward to showcasing some of my new work really soon.
Join us for our chapel services!

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STVU

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