

## **Grand Rapids African American Arts and Music Festival**

The Grand Rapids African American Arts and Music Festival is much more than an annual event celebrating the contribution of African American artists in Grand Rapids -- but it's a community celebration and partnership of the work organizers and artists are doing locally.

This year, organizers of the event, Lisa Knight and Kara Wood teamed up with community members to host multiple events prior to September's Grand Rapids African American Arts and Music Festival (GRAAAMF).

"We want to create many opportunities for equity and accessibility for Black artists in this city," says Lisa. "This is a great collaboration between many different segments of the community, we manage to work together and create a great space for all people to feel connected."

One of these collaborations is the Juneteenth event hosted by Jewellynne Richardson. Richardson has been a longtime organizer of the West Michigan Jewels of Africa Juneteenth celebration.

"We didn't want to step in or duplicate the efforts of the community, instead we wanted to come alongside the community and support them in the way they wanted," explains Knight.

For Juneteenth, it meant GRAAAMF would be a sponsor of the event and help invite residents in the city to continue the conversation of Black liberation.

"This year has been incredibly difficult for many of us and many of us are tired of acting like we are okay with systemic oppression and racism," Lisa adds. "We want to create the opportunity Black people to come together, be their authentic selves and celebrate who they are."

For Kara and Lisa, the events are about creating a sense of community and belonging. "Black communities are creative, expressive, and deserve the access to showcase their creative talents," says Lisa.

Kara says the events are not just for the Black community but are an opportunity for everyone in the city to immerse themselves in a space led and directed by Black people.

"People can immerse in community, art, music, dance and food and reflect on the diversity of the African American Community in Grand Rapids and West Michigan," Wood explains.

While it hasn't been easy to adapt to the changing pandemic orders, Lisa says she's excited to be helping host events that create in person opportunities. Through a partnership with the Grand Rapids Public Library -- everyone in attendance will have the chance to connect with resources available locally and receive free books and library cards.

“People who don’t understand the difference have always been the dividers of our communities -- but equity and accessibility have to come hand in hand and that's what we are pushing for in these events,” Lisa says. “Black artists deserve a space at the table as well as an opportunity to make decisions about the ways they showcase their art.”

By honoring the many facets of the City’s diversity, Lisa and Kara say they hope to promote the resiliency of Black residents as well as the importance of continuing to have conversations around social justice and the enhancement of quality of life for Black people in Grand Rapids.

With the help of the Neighborhood Match Fund, the project will continue the organization's ongoing effort to celebrate the outstanding contributions of African American artists in the Grand Rapids community.