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New Orleans

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News Weekly

"The People's Paper"

Viola Davis in the "The Woman King"

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Forever A Fighter

The Troubles and Triumphs of Dr. Kyshun Webster



Dr. Kyshun Webster life's work and passion is centered on helping the youth of the City of New Orleans live better lives.

Karin Hopkins
Data News Weekly Contributor

Knocked Down And Dazed

When Kyshun Webster reflects on Hurricane Katrina from a personal perspective, he sees how the

worst time in his life molded him into a man of confidence, character, and courage.
This was a period of stark contrast for him. In 2005, he was awarded a doctoral degree, the highest educational status a person can attain. That same year, his wife gave birth to their first son and their daughter transitioned easily to the role of big sister.

Life was good and the future was bright until Hurricane Katrina ravaged New Orleans.
He was 28 years old in August 2005, at the time his large extended family evacuated to Dallas to escape horrifying conditions at home only to encounter a brand-new crisis. Newly minted as Dr. Kyshun Webster, he faced grim prospects about money, housing,

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P.O. Box 57347, New Orleans, LA 70157-7347 | Phone: (504) 821-7421 | Fax: (504) 821-7622
editorial: datanewseditor@bellsouth.net | advertising: datanewsad@bellsouth.net

Terry B. Jones	Contributors	Art Direction &
CEO/Publisher	Karin Hopkins	Production
Edwin Buggage	Eric Connerly	Pubinator.com
Editor	Tyana Jackson	Editorial and
Sharonda Green	Elise Schenck	Advertising Inquiries
Executive Assistant	Stacy M. Brown	datanewsweeklyad@gmail.com
June Hazeur	Dionne Character	Distribution
Accounting		by Terrence Lee

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and everything else in life. Just a few days earlier, he had been the young darling of the family, the exceptional student who made his grandmother and mother so proud. In this time of distress, they now looked to him for answers. A natural born problem-solver, he found ways to feed his family and address other immediate needs. At some point, he even began thinking about the long-term potential for work.

He pondered whether returning to his job at Xavier University would be possible. He loved working closely with Dr. Norman Francis, who brought Kyshun into the administrative inner-circle shortly after Kyshun completed his B.A. degree at Xavier. He also interviewed for jobs in other cities but ultimately decided to return to his roots. This led him to reimagine the initiative that was his first entry into education.

As an 11-year-old adolescent, he founded a tutoring program in the family's garage. This was actually motivated by a series of traumatic experiences. He remembers struggling in the first grade and feeling humiliated. He also recalls painful gut punches to his six-year-old self. "I had a grandfather who died that year. And then I saw my uncle brutally murdered. This caused our family to flee from public housing to the Lower Ninth Ward. I went inside myself and was not coping well. My first-grade teacher failed me, because I wasn't able to focus. When I somehow recovered from that, I became this overachiever who had to prove myself. And so, I decided at an early age that I wanted to help other kids to know that they too could achieve academic success."

A Child In An Adult Area

This peer tutoring project was the seed for Operation REACH, which he founded while he was an undergraduate student in college. He engaged other college students to work as tutors helping under-resourced children with their school lessons. This program was initially set up in the St. Bernard Housing Project, where Kyshun was raised as a child. It was a sustainable model that grew over the years, helping more children, attracting more college students, and requiring additional staff support.

Swinging Back About Operation Reach

Like so many other organizations, Operation REACH was devastated by Hurricane Katrina. Yet, a reboot was percolating. Still in exile, Dr. Webster and his close friend and colleague, Hamilton Simons-Jones, came up with a bold idea. They mounted an aggressive



A light-hearted moment for college students serving as tutors and New Orleans children who received services from Operation REACH.



Over the years Dr. Webster have been the epitome of resilience. His work with children has been recognized locally and nationally. Many in the community feel he is a valuable asset.

effort to recruit college students for volunteer service with an Operation REACH subsidiary. Dr. Webster was amazed at the response to the project they named GulfSouth Youth Action Corps (GYAC). "Mind you, we had no money whatsoever when we began this recruiting campaign. To our surprise, eighty students from across the U.S. signed up to become GYAC members. Within 60 days, we had raised more than \$500,000 to assist the New Orleans Recreation Department operate summer camps for youth in 2006."

Hamilton Simons-Jones says, "These camps didn't just provide middle school students a meaningful space for fun and safe recreational activities after such a traumatic experience, but also gave them a chance to share their perspectives on recovery with decision-makers, and design and engage in community projects to help the city and their peers recover."

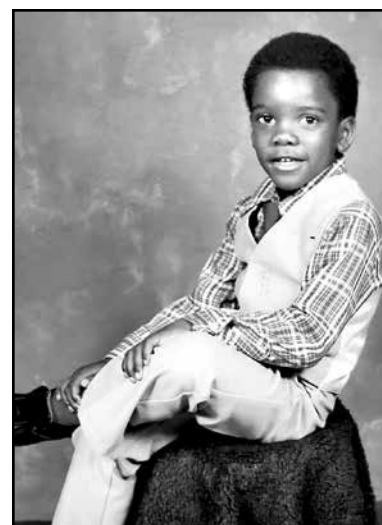
The concept impressed officials at the highest levels of government.

Dr. Webster was personally contacted by The White House and invited to expand the program across the Gulf South, eventually reaching about 10,000 young people and deploying hundreds of college students. The expansion placed Dr. Webster and his New Orleans based project among an elite group of national service organizations, including Teach for America and Habitat for Humanity.

While Hurricane Katrina crippled Operation REACH, a betrayal destroyed it. A disgruntled top administrator within the organization accused Dr. Webster of financial mismanagement. These allegations were proven to be totally false, and Dr. Webster was vindicated but the damage done to Operation REACH was irreparable.

Stopping Is Not In His Vocabulary

He was hurt but still productive. After Operation REACH, he developed a concept to provide burned out non-profit executives with a fi-



Kyshun Webster as a little boy.

nancial cushion for much-needed time off from work. This morphed into Compassion Society Benefits, an insurance company with the missing piece of the puzzle for national, paid family care leave. He attracted investors, secured office space, and built a team, including a CEO and an operations manager who ran the company. This

arrangement was in place when he accepted a job with the City of New Orleans in 2018 to reform the juvenile detention facility, renamed the Juvenile Justice Intervention Center (JJIC). Entrusted by Mayor LaToya Cantrell with the tall-order mandate to transform JJIC, he is proud of his work there and feels the New Orleans community would be pleased to know JJIC experienced positive and measured change while he was the director, such as a 70% increase in school attendance and a 90% reduction in youth assaults.

These statistics are the result of policies and procedures Dr. Webster implemented and they are consistent with the opinion held by consultant and executive coach, Linetta Gilbert. "I met Kyshun in the early 1990s as a youth participant of the New Orleans Chapter of the 21st Century Leadership Camp. Creating effective solutions through innovative programs and policies for his community is a big part of Kyshun's DNA. Twenty+ years later, Dr. Webster is a trusted partner, a thought leader in change management and education and a critical social entrepreneur."

He took the heat in January 2022 when four juveniles escaped from the facility. He did not identify the employee who broke the rules by going into a section of the facility alone, allowing the juveniles to overpower her, take her swipe card and run off. He says, "I fell on the sword because as a leader, that's my job."

Punching Holes In News Headlines

This attitude is no surprise to respected New Orleans minister, community organizer and civic leader, Bishop Tom Watson who says this about Dr. Webster. "His service to the local community is outstanding and valued on many fronts. He is a servant leader with high moral character and a solid spiritual foundation." Bishop Watson also commends Dr. Webster for tackling complex concerns, "His passion to develop and implement actionable solutions to problems and issues has elevated him to the status of visionary leader."

Dr. Webster chose to resign his position as JJIC Director in May 2022 for personal reasons. It is now just another experience that made him stronger, just like Hurricane Katrina.

Still Standing Strong

Storms, whether whipped up by Mother Nature or stirred up by controversy, don't break him nor define him. Instead, tough times sharpen his confidence and further reveal his character and courage.

Viola Davis Stars in the Epic Film "The Woman King"

Elise Schenck
Data News Weekly Contributor

In the age of MeToo and women raising their voices, this film is one that speaks to the moment, while looking back at the historical greatness of women.

On Sept. 16th Oscar and Emmy winner Viola Davis is displaying her greatness on the big screen in the new film "The Woman King," Davis stars as General Nanisca in the epic, which also features John Boyega, Lashana Lynch, and Thuso Mbedu. Also, the film is being directed by Gina Prince Bythwood, an African American woman, who is best known for the classic Love and Basketball.

In the epic film, "The Woman King" tells the "remarkable story of the Agojie, the all-female unit of warriors who protected the African Kingdom of Dahomey in the 1800s with skills and a fierceness unlike anything the world has ever seen," according to Sony Pictures.

In an age where many people from the African Diaspora are looking towards the Motherland in the spirit of Sankofa (looking back to move forward) many still feel pulled back to the continent, and the drumbeat that is the heart of the pull on the souls of those whose ancestors left the shores of Africa centuries ago. Today they are now re-discovering with immense pride its great history.

This is echoed by the film's star Viola Davis in a recent interview promoting the film, "I first went to Africa when I was 25, as student at Juilliard," she explains. "[I went to] the Gambia because I was trying to find myself, to redefine myself. Not as an artist, but as a Black woman. It was like I was screaming inside: 'I know I'm more than what you're telling me I am!'"

As have many because of the 1619 Project and a renaissance in appreciating Black Beauty and excellence, Davis says she has now traveled extensively across Africa, including to South Africa to make The Woman King, and each time she feels that same release. "Every single day it was as if I had meditated for five hours. I had absolutely no anxiety. I had no problem sleeping. It's the feeling of just being."



Award Winning Actress Viola Davis is the star of "The Woman King" she continues to inspire through playing roles of strong, powerful Black Women on the screen.



The Moment of Now



Diva Dionne Character
Female Empowerment
Columnist

Past events can haunt us all when we live in yesterday not looking forward to today because we are so focused on what was, what could have been and not the moment of now. We are here to experience today at this very second, even when the future weighs heavy on all of our shoulders, even mine, as I had to let loose of my imaginary bat of despair that of which I've been dragging down the lovely streets of Los Angeles, echoing how much I had to let go of in order to reposition myself to this new way of living.

I allowed the world to become my primary focus, slightly interrupting my flow. The noise around me became so annoyingly louder and louder as everyone seems to be asking too much of us all in our survival of unshackling our own minds in an attempt to get back to the joyous things which really matter.

I too had to take a moment as I stepped back and realized that the sanctuary of my mind had been disrupted by those who had no clue of my peace and harmony and while things



had become so disturbing around me, I took back my life and realized the beauty of the palm trees around me and how they had weathered all sorts of ups and downs and yet, they were still standing tall and full of wonder.

Life in general these days have become so overwhelming. We have to

take the time to remind ourselves that we are here now, and in this very present moment we are alive, healthy, and full of spirit. We as women are strong enough to withstand the storms headed our way but we must toss self-doubt and fear realizing that we are in control of our feelings and happiness.



We can change our perception of the world and we can change our mindsets reverting back to our peaceful resolutions of now because in this moment, we are here to make the most of the time we still have to enjoy the future.

Dionne Character can be reached at www.characterhollywood.com

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New Orleans Mayor LaToya Cantrell Faces Recall Petition

Eric Connerly
Data News Weekly
Contributor

Last week an official petition to recall Mayor LaToya Cantrell has been filed in state offices in Baton Rouge.

According to the Louisiana Secretary of State's office they confirmed that the recall petition was filed on Friday (Aug. 26).

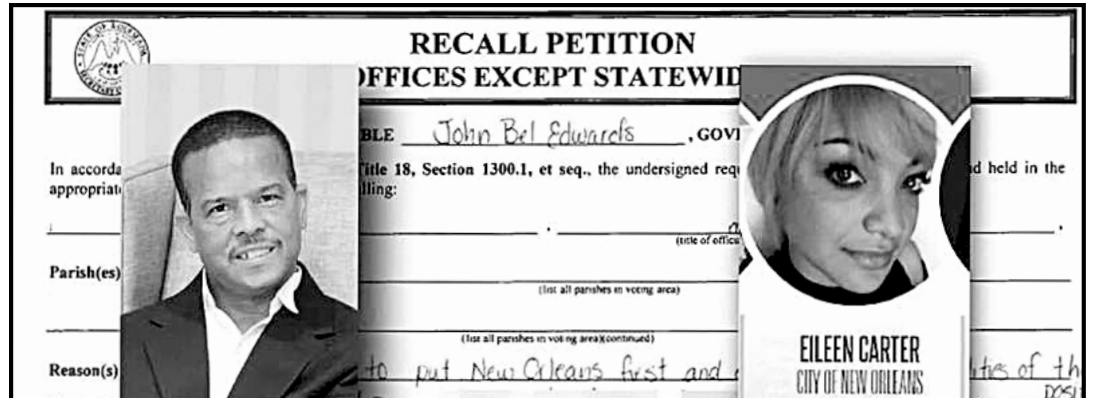
The petition was filed by Eileen Carter, former Social Media Manager for the City of New Orleans and Beldon "Noonie Man" Batiste, a former mayoral candidate and culture bearer.

The reason given for the request for the petition was "Failure to put New Orleans first and execute the responsibilities of the position."

In attempting to recall a candidate in the State of Louisiana comes efforts in the past have proven difficult to accomplish. According to



New Orleans Mayor LaToya Cantrell, who came into office with a vision of hope and optimism continues to be popular among many voters, but recently a petition for a recall election was filed on August 26, 2022.



The petition for a recall election have been filed by Eileen Carter, former Social Media Manager for the City of New Orleans and Beldon "Noonie Man" Batiste, a former Mayoral candidate, community leader and cultural bearer.

the Sec. of State's website, 20 percent of legal voters need to sign the petition. 53,000 signatures need to come from the total of 266,714 registered voters of Orleans Parish.

The goal needs to be met within 180 days.

This filing comes on the heels of a firestorm of criticism of the popu-

lar mayor who made history as the first woman Mayor of New Orleans. The winning in a landslide re-election bid last year.

But a recent spike in violent crime in the city and skirmishes with some members of the New Orleans City Council regarding travel and expenses and her appearance

at a sentencing hearing for a juvenile offender have become problems for Mayor Cantrell.

But even as those who are her critics admittedly say they admire the mayor, but feels she needs to do a better job leading the city in the fight against crime and other issues plaguing the city.

Throughout her years as a community and elected leader, Cantrell has been able to work to build coalitions to get things done. This recent occurrence will test whether she has the ability to lead a city that is in much need of answers and routes to solutions in the City of New Orleans moving forward.

State & Local News

Lower Ninth Ward Hosts First Festival

Story and photos by
Tyana Jackson
Data News Weekly
Contributor

On the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, many neighborhoods in New Orleans are still finding ways to recover, and revive their neighborhoods, both physically and economically from the damages and loss from 2005. Since the lifting of public gathering restrictions across the state, community events have played a considerable part in the rehabilitation of various parts of the city.

The Lower 9th Ward Homeownership Association hosted the Lower 9 Fest, on August 27, 2022, at the Oliver Bush Playground from noon to 4 pm. The organization said its goal was to work to create and preserve homeownership within the community while developing adequate ways to support housing justice and disaster rebuilding since Katrina and Ida. The association invited several local businesses to allow them to showcase their services and products.

"We have been committed to the community ever since right after Katrina, while thinking of ways to



The festival featured food, music and fun for all to enjoy.



One of many art vendors of African-American works features her pieces at the Lower 9 Festival on August 27, 2022.

bring people together and we realized this would be a great way to get everyone in the community to learn about the resources available to them," said M.A. Sheehan, a former community volunteer for 10 years.

Residents of the 9th Ward were able to gain access to community resources and enjoy live music with food vendors. However, the number of challenges that residents are still continuing to face years after Katrina still creates an uncertainty as to when residents will actually be able to see the improvement in their communities.

"It feels good to see people work-

ing together and coming together, I think that is one of the ways we can all benefit," said Rashida Ferdinand, a Lower Ninth Ward resident who is the founder and Executive Director of Sankofa Community Development Corporation, which works to address issues of sustainability and food access in the community. "But there is still a lot of work we all have to do - like this neighborhood that still needs systems, policies, and infrastructure development."

The community resources promoted at the event consisted of first responders, environmental groups, health, and dental care along with

separate entities from the business district. This included several pharmacy students from Xavier University of Louisiana, who were in attendance to educate residents about blood pressure and nutritional facts among other wellness areas.

"I really think it's important for us to raise awareness in this community because of the stereotypes about high blood pressure so we can get people to check it," said Kaylin Miller, a second year College of Pharmacy student at Xavier.

"When we get the results, we can look from there to help people decide what better eating habits

we can develop and better your lifestyle," said Katelyn Quinterro, who is also a second year College of Pharmacy student at Xavier.

The Whole Village Art Therapy was one of the sponsors for the children's activities such as providing blow-up houses, face painting, and arts and crafts. They promote the reduction of systematic barriers to mental health services all throughout New Orleans.

"The festival was an effective way for people to see us and make art. It allows people to connect with others and it lets people take a minute to refresh themselves," said Holly Wherry, an Art Therapist and Counselor with The Whole Village.

Overall, the Lower 9 Fest was one of many events in the city that encouraged the overall advancement of predominantly Black neighborhoods. Organizers and residents recognized all of the positive attributes of the festival and continued to celebrate their collective efforts to revive the Lower Ninth Ward.

"This was actually the perfect event for us because you get to see your neighbors even the ones you don't know and the turnout was perfect and we can get even better," said Tee Carey, a resident.

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