





Connecticut People's World Black History event: 'Building the Third Reconstruction'

March 4, 2021 | 2:33 PM CDT | BY JAHMAL HENDERSON



Dr. Lewis R. Gordon, right, was the keynote speaker at the 47th Connecticut People's World African-American History event. A youth march, lower left, was an earlier component of the weeklong celebration.

NEW HAVEN, Conn.—On a Sunday afternoon I logged on my computer to attend the 47th Connecticut People's World African-American History Month Celebration, which was being held virtually due to the coronavirus pandemic. This year's theme was perfectly titled, "Georgia On My Mind, The Third Reconstruction," and emceed by Mary Thigpen.



Testimonials and experiences were shared by several New Haven organizers, clergy, elected officials, and community members who traveled to Georgia as part of a group of 70 New Haven Rising and Unite Here union members to flip the runoff elections in favor of Democrats.

For six weeks starting in the month of December last year, this brave dedicated group sacrificed holidays with their families to be door-knocking non-stop every day to bring hope and empowerment to Georgia and its residents. This was the mission at hand while on the front lines in the “Peach” state.

In the end, the victory was won, and it was a successful victory not only for Georgia but for the whole country, especially the panel that went down for a month to organize, engage, and educate people about the power they had to take back the U.S. Senate from right-wing Republican control.

Manny Camacho, chair of the local Young Communist League and Ice the Beef youth president, presented the panel with questions focusing on their experience canvassing in Georgia and what it meant to them.

Remidy Shareef, a long-time community organizer, pointed out that “a lot of people around the country and in Georgia feel the system of government is broken, and it’s hard to see why it is important to vote.”

He described a conversation which turned one young man around. “I helped him understand we are living in a time that takes many levels of cooperation from each other to win freedom, justice, and equality. You can’t just fix it from the street or just from politics. I helped him see we must all work together on all fronts coming together to get these things done.”

“There was enthusiasm in the atmosphere,” said Ron Hurt, Alder for New Haven’s City Council’s Ward Three. “People were realizing a change had to take place, and they were the ones going to make change happen. I got a booster shot to step up my game and bring that same enthusiasm back to Connecticut and help put my community further into liberty.” ↑

Activist Marcey Lynn Jones's highlight was seeing "every voter that went to the polls after I spoke with them." One young woman with four children who had never voted before talking with Jones is now organizing in her neighborhood and keeps in touch with the Connecticut volunteer. "It goes beyond the Senate race," Jones said, speaking of the longer-term impact of the work done in Georgia.

Jestine Torres told of a voter who had a U-Haul in her driveway, forced to move out of her home because she could not afford both health care for her daughter and the house. "After we talked, she felt her vote would matter to make some sort of change. My highlight was not only to see that work needs to be done but also to be a beacon of hope," Torres said.

"It was electric," said Rep. Robyn Porter, who co-chairs the Labor Committee of the Connecticut State Legislature. "I was with young people and they inspired me. To watch them in action talking to constituents and hear the responses from people who had already voted absentee or knew where to vote was amazing. They helped people understand the importance of keeping the momentum going so there can be more victories."

Related stories:

[New Haven youth target gun violence, inequality at Black history month march](#)

['Georgia On My Mind: The Third Reconstruction': Connecticut Black history event planned](#)

[133,010 steps to take back the Senate](#)

[Connecticut UNITE HERE activists canvass Georgia to take back Senate](#)

Asked what the experience meant to them, the answers of the panelists varied from "We have to go harder, holding our elected officials accountable," to the need to empower people, the importance of voting, directing the youthful passion at the doors, and strengthening the u [↑]

of Black and brown Georgians. These stories of overcoming challenges and inspiration found in the Georgia communities were life-changing and humbling events that panelists said stay with them forever, giving motivation for the fights still ahead.

The event was highlighted beautifully by keynote speaker Lewis R. Gordon, a social activist, musician, scholar of Africana philosophy, professor, and head of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Connecticut in Storrs.

Appreciating the video shown of the Black History Month Youth March, Gordon applauded the young participants, whom he said represent “the present moving the fight forward into the future.” Gordon said his fondest memories from New Haven are of the People’s Center and its foundation of humanity-hood.

For him, the youth march through the Newhallville/Dixwell neighborhood last week evoked the memories of the ancestors and the fight for democracy and empowerment.

“When we say Black Lives Matter, we are saying this country has to own up to what it is to respect the lives of human beings. And when we think about that, it means that Black Lives Matter is a struggle for democracy,” Gordon said.

“On the sixth of January at the Capitol, there were individuals who didn’t even vote who were going in there to fight for what? While waving that Confederate flag, they made it a fight for enslavement and disempowerment. On that day, however, there was also a declaration of a victory for empowerment, for freedom, and for democracy.”

“That day,” said Gordon, “when Warnock and Osoff were declared winners in the Georgia Senate races, was a very important moment in the fight for the dignity and freedom of humankind. The whole world was holding its breath. And holding your breath is no small matter.”

Gordon spoke about the forces of disempowerment and their links to capitalism. “We need to understand that the fight for democracy is a fight for public empowerment. It’s for a differ [↑]

model of the globe. It's for a model in which all of us are empowered to walk out in a world in which we have dignity, freedom, and respect.

“W.E.B. DuBois, in the book *Black Reconstruction in America*, pointed out that each

reconstruction is part of the struggle for freedom,” said Lewis. “Nobody can change the world if you don't step up and get out there and do something. Each time you do it, the forces of the system that fight against you have to re-calibrate because their greatest weapon is for you to undercut yourself with the words ‘I can't.’”

In closing, Gordon posed the question, “When you think about our enslaved ancestors Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Bailey—Frederick Douglass's mother when you think about all the obstacles they faced, the profound question is how and why did they act?”

He gave three answers. First, they weren't acting just for themselves. Second, he said, “You get to a mountaintop by looking right in front of you each step of the way because each step of the way requires all of us to do our part. You don't get there alone.”



Winners of the 'Georgia on my Mind: Building the Third Reconstruction' art competition. Left: 1st Place, 'End the Cycle,' by Maya Akilotan, age 15. Top right: 2nd Place, 'The Amazing Black Women That Helped Turn Georgia Blue,' by Karyme Baranda, age 17. Lower right: 3rd Place, 'Equality,' by Ashly Portilla, age 16.

“And the last,” he said, “it’s a profound act of love when you think about acting for something greater than yourself. It rolls down the corridors of history to those who are anonymous. In the end, the struggle for freedom is always about the commitment to what matters.”

The program also included awards to some of Connecticut’s talented students from grades 8-12 who participated in the Black History Month Arts and Writing Competition. This year’s first-place winners were Maya Akilotan for her artwork “End the Cycle,” Demarques Stevens for his essay “The Third Reconstruction,” and Bryan Lozano for his poem “Vote!”

The night ended with a beautiful drumming performance by Brian Jarawa Gray.

Lewis Gordon at "Georgia on my Mind: the third Reconstruction"



TAGS: [Black History](#) [Connecticut](#) [People's World](#)

CONTRIBUTOR



Jahmal Henderson



Jahmal Henderson is a union and community organizer in New Haven, Connecticut.

RELATED ARTICLES

