

LEGAL OUTREACH ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

Newsletter

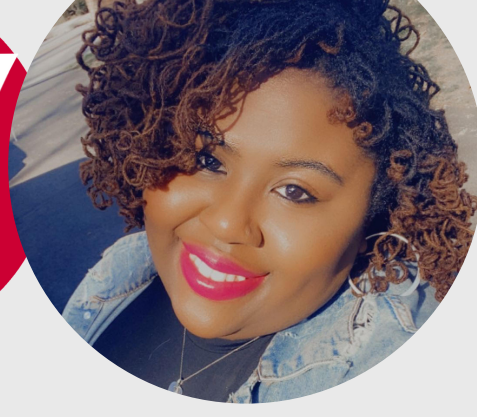
Leading Through Healing

James B. O'Neal,
Exec. Director

We're living in trying times. What an understatement! Inequities and challenges that exist have been exacerbated by COVID on top of the social and political issues dominating the headlines. People from every background have been affected with many finding it difficult to deal with the stress, anxiety and trauma. With challenges, however, come opportunities. Two of our alumni have focused their professional efforts on bringing healing to communities and individuals who are struggling and seeking methods for coping. Below are their stories. Be inspired by their efforts and seek outlets to sustain or improve your own mental and emotional well-being.



Oludaré Bernard
KIIRE Wellness
LO Class of 2010



Kianga Bunch-Thompson
Sunshine Vertex
LO Class of 2010

What inspired you to go into the wellness industry?

OLUDARÉ: The times in which we live point directly to the need for wellness. It's been really important for me to step up and publicly practice the ways that my African ancestors understood wellness, breathwork, and meditation in order to produce physical and holistic health. I've been a practicing priest of certain African traditions since I was 13 years old. Those traditions still exist in the black church, in black music, in black dance. It exists all over the diaspora, everywhere we go. It's so important that we refocus the power of dance, song and rhythm back to its original purpose – a place where we can all intentionally come to heal, to deal with the trauma and erasure attached to being African in a foreign land. To achieve wholeness, wellness and true healing, we have to remember our roots.

KIANGA: In 2017, I was working as a teacher and was always taking care of my students essentially as their doctor, their lawyer, or their therapist. I was also a new mom going through the mental challenges of nurturing a new life. As I juggled all of these responsibilities, I knew I needed to start taking care of myself again so I started seeing a therapist who motivated me to focus on self-care and setting boundaries. The goal was to become whole so that I could more effectively help others. For my birthday party in 2020, I was planning to hire someone to come and do a Paint and Sip class with my friends. My friend asked me why I would pay someone to do that when I have all the talent to do it myself! I'm a painter and a teacher, so it made sense to combine those skills and start my own business offering self-care and wellness through painting.

Can you explain the concept of your business?

OLUDARÉ: KIIRE Wellness is based on select West African traditions and ways of life from the Yoruba and Kikongo ancestry. The goal is to bring you to a place of awareness so you have agency – so you can respond to your trauma rather than react to it. So our whole practice is based on building awareness and consciousness. Through these connections and an understanding of our history and traditions, African descendants – and anyone else who chooses to engage – can find the path to wholeness. These traditions were practiced well before yoga, well before Eastern medicine, well before colonization or slavery. They have never left us but they, oftentimes, must be reawakened within us.

KIANGA: I've always been an artist and I love to paint. I had never pursued a career in it because I come from a Caribbean household that didn't believe I could support myself through art, but I still painted as a hobby. So at the end of 2020, I caught COVID and was quarantined in my house without anything to do. I started doing my own paint and sips as a form of self-care. It dawned upon me that I could use my talent to bring people together to connect as a form of art therapy. The name Sunshine Vertex comes from combining my first name which translates to Sunshine in Swahili with Vertex a math term which means apex. Everything just came together to create Sunshine Vertex.

What services do you provide?

OLUDARÉ: Typically, whether in-person or virtually, we begin with a seated breathwork practice, and then we get up on our feet and turn that breathwork into movement using dance or song to guide us. I always make sure to start with that foundation of breathwork and then branch out into other forms of communication with the body. We work with people of all ages and races. Everybody is welcome, but the emphasis is on people of African descent because there are so many health problems in our communities, from asthma, diabetes, hypertension, depression, anxiety, where resolution is needed. It's very important that the emphasis is on healing and reconnecting to the African traditions of wellness.

KIANGA: I organize painting parties for people of all ages, with either the classic paint and sip, or a doormat painting, or even a paint splatter exercise. Currently, I provide a mobile service so I travel to a person's house or a company's offices to host the classes. It's actually been really great during the pandemic giving people a chance to recreate that close knit community with their friends and family who don't want to go out in public. I also have a collection of shower steamers for kids and adults to promote aromatherapy as self-care.

What have you experienced or observed that convinced you that there was a need for the services that you provide?

OLUDARÉ: Life itself – with all of its complications and manifestations – provides sufficient evidence for the services I bring. It was actually the year before COVID began that I really started blueprinting the flow of the sessions and how to make sure that when folks left, they experienced rejuvenation and renewal. Once COVID hit, it became even more important for people to focus on breathing every day. I offered meditation sessions morning, midday, and night every day, just holding space for people who I knew needed the services I was providing. If the onset of COVID were not enough, the violence perpetrated within the Black community created a new level of trauma. When George Floyd was killed, he was literally saying "I can't breathe." There was so much that was pointing to the fact that African descendants needed to be able to breathe and that our right to breathe was literally being taken away by force and the illegitimate use of power. So it was really important – politically, emotionally, mentally – that I focus on the holistic restoration of life through breath.

KIANGA: During the pandemic, a lot of people were dealing with being isolated, not being able to socialize with others at their favorite restaurants or theaters. It was definitely affecting their mental health. Some people chose to see therapists and psychologists but others were looking for more creative ways to maintain their mental well-being, to find peace of mind. People desired to stay connected in ways that relax and bring calm and tranquility. My number one motto is "My peace is my priority." Sunshine Vertex helps facilitate that.

Can you share a bit about your college and career trajectory that led you to this project?

OLUDARÉ: When I got to Trinity, I wasn't sure what college necessarily had to offer me in terms of a career path because I come from a healing, ceremonial space. I became a theater major because it felt like the closest thing that I could pursue in terms of using my body through dance and music as a form of communication and healing. I graduated in 2015 and immediately started touring in Europe performing in the musical Hair. After a while, I felt that my ability to make music and perform through song and dance was inauthentic. It all felt too performative. I just had to remove myself from that, so I came home and started working on my own mental health with the goal of centering myself. When the pandemic hit, I had already begun my outreach to the community and thus I was in the perfect position to be of service to others.

KIANGA: I attended Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts and also did a domestic exchange program at Spelman University. At Spelman, I participated in Greek life and joined AKA where the motto is "Be of service to all mankind." While in school, circumstances helped me realize the importance of "paying it forward." Thus, upon graduating, I joined AmeriCorps. From there, I pursued my passion for teaching. Eventually, I joined the Progressive Life Center which allowed me to become more involved with families. I still work there even as I pursue the expansion of my wellness business.

Working in the wellness industry now, what are some skills or lessons you learned from being a student at LO that have served you well?

OLUDARÉ: Definitely writing and debate. Both are powerful tools to really understand how to present oneself and communicate in a way that people will understand. Recently, I wrote my own book because I wanted to share my knowledge from my perspective as an African descendant. It ended up being an almost 300 page book called Breathing with Orisha. I published the book in August of 2020 and by January, it was being used in classrooms at Harvard and Dartmouth. The book was also used as a thesis study for one of the scholars in Duke University's first ever MFA in Dance program. It was amazing to find these prestigious programs showing interest in what I had to say. But it was all because I was able to effectively communicate my message through my writing.

KIANGA: LO definitely taught me the importance of perseverance. I still have the mantra in my head, "Perseverance is the touchstone of great character." I had to persevere through everything that I've done since the beginning of LO. I also acquired the skills to network, build relationships with people, and utilize my resources to my advantage. I also appreciate learning how to communicate with professionals while still being genuine. Those skills have really helped me.

What are your long term goals?

OLUDARÉ: I eventually would like have a space to host sessions, to bring together experts on the African diaspora, and develop a curriculum to truly cultivate wellness practices that speak directly to African descendants. I want to enfranchise them so they can manifest their talents for rhythm or dance into their own wellness journey. I just want to create a safe space for people to actually process their emotions in ways that lead to self-improvement and enhancement according to the African ancestral pathway.

KIANGA: My goal is to find and open a physical space for the business which will allow me to host the paint and sips and other activities, including candle making, paint splatter and other crafts. I want it to be a Zen place where you can find peace within by working with your hands. It would also be great to have a little shop as part of that space to sell the steamers and other products I create.

If people are interested in accessing your services, what's the best way for them to contact you?

OLUDARÉ: First, I just want people to know that everybody's welcome whether you're Black or not. Everyone needs to be focusing on wellness right now. Our website, Instagram, Facebook and Linktree will lead you to contact information for sessions, how to make a donation to help build the business, and to all of our free mental health resources and videos.

KIANGA: People can contact me through my website, Instagram or Facebook to set up a guided activity. Currently, I'm in the DC area, but I can discuss travel options anywhere between Virginia and New York.

KIIRE WELLNESS

Website: [KIIREwellness.com](https://kiirewellness.com)
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