

I am here.

By Shaun Spencer-Hester

Gardens are created from dreams and I am here following three generations of visionaries and gardeners.

I was born and lived in San Bernardino, CA, until age 10. My backyard, near Route 66, had palms, sandy beaches, and bordered the San Bernardino National Forest. Dad and Mom retire from the United States Army Air Force at Norton Air Force Base and are busy with eight children and new careers. Dad made chore time, fun time. We sweep the neighborhood curbs, clean out the garage, or, better yet, clean up and treasure hunt in the palm-lined alley. As Dad kept law and order, I escape into the alley jungle and imagine thrilling adventures of survival in the urban jungle. I scout for natural and man-made artifacts, sweep the alleyway free of debris. Pre-siesta, I treat myself to sun-warmed pomegranate juice squeezed directly into my mouth.

In 1934, Dad realized his dream to fly and became a pilot at the Coffee School of Aviation, where Cornelius Coffee offered flight lessons for Blacks at the Harlem Airport in Chicago. Two years earlier, Oscar DePriest, the Black Chicago congressional representative, visited my grandfather Edward (Pop), a businessman and postal worker with an artist's eye and a love of architectural recycling. These finds were later upcycled into garden structures and a writer's cottage named "EDANKRAAL," a haven for my grandmother Anne Spencer (Dranny), his beloved wife and American poet, librarian, and avid gardener.

The Spencers' mecca hosted the leading Black voices of the time. James Weldon Johnson, W.E.B. Dubois, Booker T. Washington, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Marion Anderson, Thurgood Marshall, Dr. Martin Luther King, and George Washington Carver were



David Lapage Shaun

among many others who came to talk about cultural issues, race relations, politics, poetry, education, landscapes, and gardening. Family cookouts and parties and weddings, including mine, continued in the garden.

Two events in 1938 brought further changes to Blacks in aviation: Charles Lindbergh published an article in *Readers Digest* calling flying “a tool specifically shaped for Western Hands,” and the formation in Chicago, IL, of the National Airmen’s Association (NAA). Shortly thereafter approximately twenty Negro Flyers produced an air show viewed by 25,000 spectators at Chicago’s Harlem Airport.

Dad and his friend Dale White could not be stopped. Supported by the NAA and the Chicago Defender, they rented an airplane for a goodwill tour of ten cities to demonstrate the dream to Americans that “Negros Can Fly.”

The tenth city on the tour was Washington, DC. There, in an underground tunnel, the flyers met Senator Harry S. Truman, who kept his promise to put through legislation ensuring that Negro flyers would be trained along with whites under the Civilian Pilot Training Program.

Dad said, “When I am flying is when I feel the freest!” He touched the sky while Dranny touched the garden soil.

Dad’s dream, and the dream of the Challengers Air Pilots Association, National Airmen’s Association, and the Tuskegee Airmen came true in 1941, when the segregated branch of the US Army Corps offered training to African Americans to become pilots and mechanics. Dad and Mom were assigned to Moton Field [in Tuskegee, GA] for the training program of the Black air personnel.

My cultural landscape changes when we move to Michigan. Dad’s Tuskegee buddies, including Highland Park mayor Robert Blackwell, Wardell Polk, and Godfrey Franklin, joined forces to rebuild cities burned out after the 1967 Detroit riots. Coleman Young, former Tuskegee Airman and then mayor of Detroit, joined them.

For the first time, I attend a predominantly Black school. I am too young to participate in news or social movements, but keep up with the music coming out of Motown. I walk up McLean to Woodward Avenue for gallons of milk from Ivanhoe Grocery, take the bus uptown to S.S. Kresge and eat lunch with Mom at the counter. On the way to Belle Isle, I cruise by the monument to Joe Lewis and escape to the McGregor Library to check out the books. I become fascinated with the architecture and culture of my Black heritage.

At age fifteen, Dad and Mom declared yet another landscape change, this time south to Lynchburg, where at least four generations of our black and white ancestors inhabited the lush fertile land of Virginia and where my paternal grandparents were the first in their generation to be born free of slavery. Pop died in 1964 and Dranny in 1975, two years later their beloved home and garden became the nonprofit Anne Spencer House and Garden Museum.

I did not expect to become the museum’s overseer in 2008, when I return to Lynchburg, but find my path there followed by many volunteers devoted to preserving her legacy, including family, residents, and the Friends of Anne Spencer. They all contributed to the listing on the National Register as a Virginia Historic Landmark. In 2020, Anne Spencer was honored with a Voices of Harlem Forever

Earth, I thank you

By Anne Spencer

Earth, I thank you
for the pleasure of your language
You’ve had a hard time
bringing it to me
from the ground
to grunt thru the noun
To all the way
feeling seeing smelling touching
—awareness
I am here!

U.S. Postal Stamp. Anne Spencer’s dreams and visions are thus still alive, making room for our own, in this serene and historic public space. Noted authors and scholars are adding volumes to her legacy, even inspiring my own non-fiction family history book, which is in progress.

The diverse cultures and landscapes of California, Michigan, and Virginia are all part of my feeling, seeing, smelling, and touching. Reflecting on these sensory impressions helps me understand and incubate my own dreams and visions.

Since 1977, the Anne Spencer House and Garden has attracted visitors from 23 countries and now averages five thousand visitors per year. It is the only known intact house museum and restored garden of an African American in the United States.

In 1983, the Hillside Garden Club unveil their first restoration of Anne Spencer’s garden and receive two Commonwealth Awards for their ongoing preservation work. Thirty-eight years later, the club continues to restore, maintain, and volunteer in the public gardens. Edankraal, 25 x 45 feet, is divided into four rooms; the rose, cottage, arbor, and water garden are open seven days a week, sunrise to sunset. We want you to come to keep the shrine alive; we want families, schools, businesses, and neighbors to come and share their own stories and visions in this fertile garden.



Shaun Spencer-Hester is the executive director and board treasurer of the Anne Spencer House and Garden Museum in Lynchburg, VA.

Photo by Susan Saandholland