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## Finding Place Through Music and Arts: HC Black Music & Arts Association (HCBMAA)

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# FINDING PLACE THROUGH MUSIC AND ARTS: HC BLACK MUSIC & ARTS ASSOCIATION (HCBMAA)

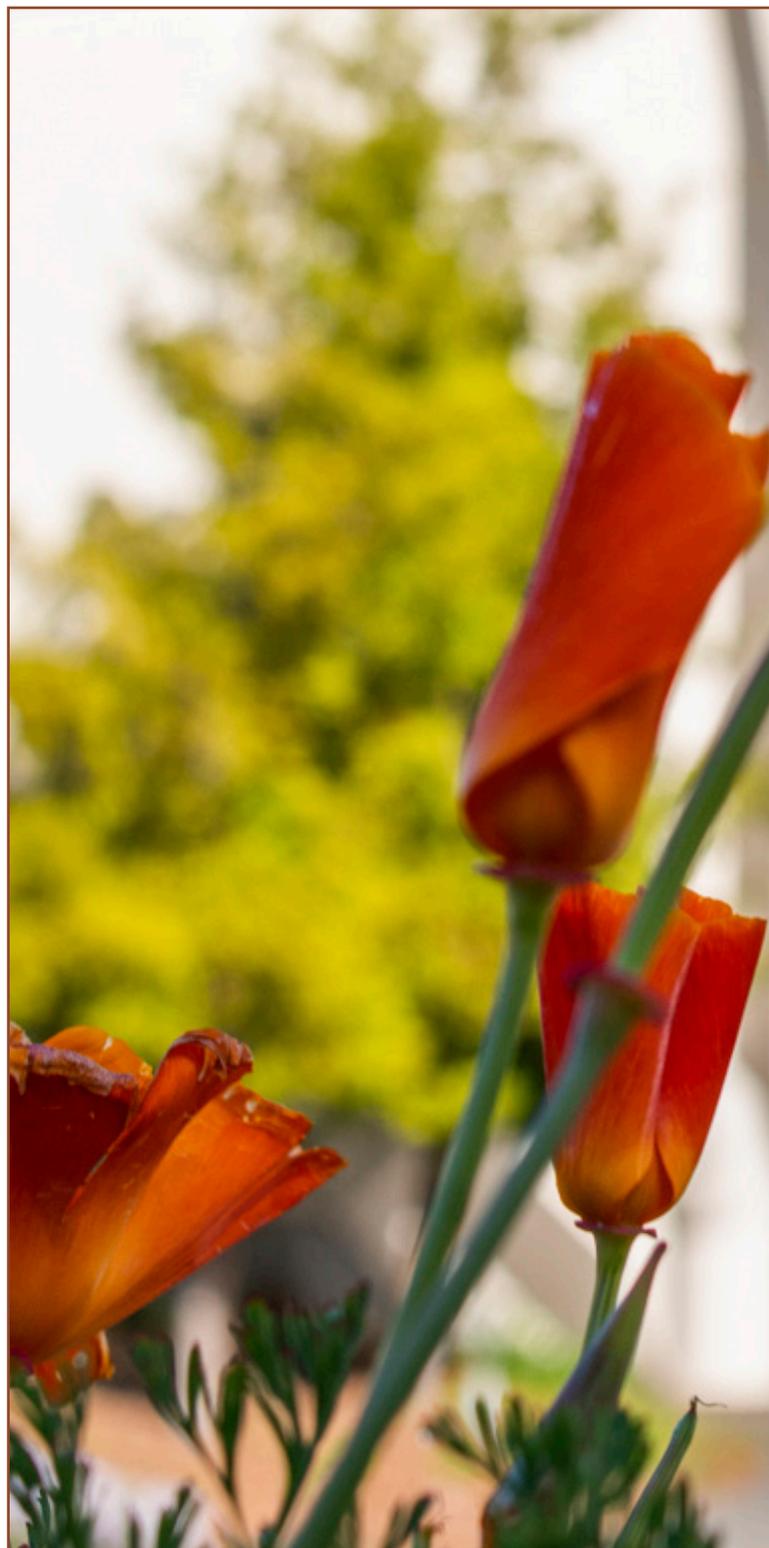
By Kyra Skylark

**T**he work that we do is always with the people, it's where our hearts are - with the people, and we need to meet the people where they're at, financially, emotionally, physically, and spiritually; so all of our programs come from that," said Valletta Molofsky.

"I am a child of the Creator who has followed the path of a leader, teacher, student, and mentor," Molofsky said. "This journey of life that I walk started when I became a daughter, sister, wife and mother. The voices of my ancestors come through me in song, scripture, poetry and articles. I am one of many leaving a legacy for my people to be free in Spirit, Body, Mind and Truth!"

The HC Black Music and Arts Association (HCBMAA) came into being in November, 2019. Founded by Valetta Molofsky, after Molofsky experienced a lack of resources and systems to aid individuals, youth, and families of color in this community. They work to serve and provide offerings for the Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) community within Humboldt County and beyond.

"I started this organization for many reasons, one, because connection to place, that's hard; cultural starvation is real, especially here in Humboldt County and in any rural area," Molofsky said. "I know what it's like to be lost among people, even though people are around you, you still feel starved. You feel starved for connection, not only to place but to those who look like you, to spiritual outlets, to healing modalities, to food, and to culture. A lot of that, when I moved here was taken away, and I didn't have those pieces. When I made this organization I found a lot



of people like me in Humboldt County who struggled. Not just who identified as Black or African American but also as Brown, Indigenous and Latinx.”

The HCBMAA was created while Molofsky was completing her Masters in Social Work (MSW) and Pupil Personnel Service Credential (PPSC) requirements at Humboldt State University (HSU). During Molofsky’s MSW and PPSC work she researched and centered her thesis on cultural starvation. Molofsky is currently working through her 3,000 required hours to receive her Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) licensure in pursuing her goals to become an Ubuntu trauma therapist. “I worked through the Masters in Social Work program and I had my mind set to be an integrated behavioral health therapist,” Molofsky said.

As a first generation graduate, Molofsky feels fortunate that she is able to work toward her goals. “Currently I am working towards becoming an Ubuntu trauma therapist because I really love restorative care. I integrate restorative practices into my own work when I’m with the people that I engage with, both youth and families, as well as the relational worldview. I also use the evidence-based practice of cognitive behavior therapy and stress-based practices.”

The HCBMAA is centered around Afrocentric practices, the African American experience, and the Pan-African Diaspora, following the seven principles of Nguzo Saba, from southern and eastern Africa. The Nguzo Saba, Swahili for seven guiding principles, promotes connection to African cultures and helps frame values of family, community and heritage. These are 1. Umoja - Unity, 2. Kujichagulia - Determination, 3. Ujima - Collective Work & Responsibility, 4. Ujamaa - Cooperative Economics, 5. Mia - Purpose, 6. Kuumba - Creativity, and 7. Imani - Faith.

“When I started this organization it was already based on Afrocentric methods of relational world views,” Molofsky said. “Part of the programs are based on some of my earlier work within the community, such as the Sistahood.” Women in Spirit, now known as the Sistahood within the HCBMAA, has been supporting and connecting women for thirteen years. “I started Women in Spirit twelve years ago to help women who were struggling with relationships, depression, intergenerational trauma, or just having a hard time showing themselves love,” Molofsky said. “We had one of the sisters whose mom was passing away and we sang at her mom’s window while she was in her last few days,”

Molofsky said. “That’s what we do, we step up; we step up in ways to support our sisters and know that they can always be encouraged.”

With the Sistahood meetings adjusting to a Zoom platform due to Covid-19, the structure has also evolved. “I can gain a sister no matter what color, race, or gender; some people come in who identify as women and we get that, we’re not here to say you’re not welcome,” Molofsky said. “This body of space that we have on zoom has really been healing.”

The Sistahood community has also expanded beyond those located within Humboldt County. “Allowing these beautiful women of all different races to come together and share their stories, to laugh and cry together, it’s just been so beautiful and healing,” Molofsky said. “Right now we are going through a four week series, it’s called Walk in the Truth. The first week was on intimate partner violence, the second week was on intergenerational trauma, the third on domestic violence, and the last on uncovering unhealthy relationships and targeting ways to find new relationships in a healthy way. Part of the Black Music and Arts Association work is going within ourselves and taking moments to reflect on our inner pain and our inner trauma while we are doing the work with the people in the community as well. We feel that it’s very important to unpack and be present.”

Molofsky’s cousin, Angeletta Dean, joined the virtual group. Dean is a Minister for the United Methodist Church, a Prayer Warrior, and Sista residing in the state of Arizona. In addition to her ministry and fellowship work, Dean works with those who have experienced domestic violence and helps folks to establish “who they are, where they are, and what their purpose is in life” through life coaching. “I was really amazed by the Sistahood group that she invited me to, it’s very transparent and resourceful; I received the invitation from Valetta and from that invitation I can’t stop going,” Dean said.

Dean acknowledged how important it is to have a supportive environment where people are not judged, but rather honored for who they are. “It’s a constant reminder of why I am so special and my strength of being a woman in today’s time, how special that is. You understand your inner-beauty, you understand your strengths, you understand when you’re weak as well. When it comes to Sistahood I feel that it is a blessing to have as a resource in that area.”

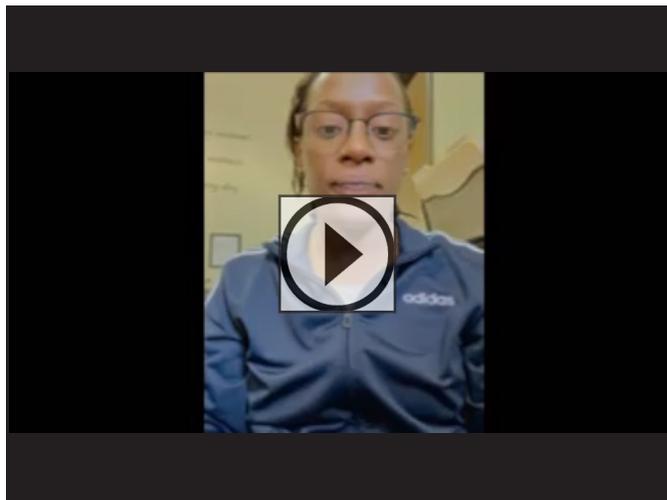
The HCBMAA offers many programs in addition to the Sistahood community, including the Glen Edwards Kumba Literacy program, the Youth Education Support Services (YESS) program: consisting of the Ujima program and the Sister Mentor program, an elder care community, the Prayer Warriors, the Harambee Youth Camp, as well as other youth classes and community offerings.

Molosky explained why she created the literacy program and named it after Glen Edwards. "I started the Glen Edwards Kuumba Literacy program because Glen Edwards dropped out of school at age 14 because he had dyslexia, because he was struggling living with that and he had to hide the fact that he could not read," Molofsky said. "I'm sure there was some shame around that as he raised his children and he got his GED in his early twenties. His story is like many stories that I found while doing my MSW thesis work on cultural starvation. The United States is the only country that has banned reading literacy for people of color that were slaves. They were going to be punished if they learned to read in so many different ways, whether it was a whip, being killed, or dismemberment. Because of those laws Glen Edward and other families struggled to communicate in a language that was colonized for us to learn."

The Glen Edwards Kumba Literacy program began in fall 2020, with Andrea Jones, the HCBMAA Literacy Coordinator, reading during the Arcata Farmers Market. Jones is an intern who is pursuing a Bachelors of Social Work at HSU. "I wanted the opportunity to share education, which is why we do it at the park," Molofsky said. "I am Glen Edwards' daughter. I know that his story is my story. It's my siblings' story and it leads to the community."

The Kuumba Reading Circle is held each Saturday at 12:00pm with Jones reading on the Arcata Plaza under one of the trees. "Every weekend we're at the Arcata plaza reading books to all of the community people who want to participate. We read multi-ethnic books; we're in schools reading books." Due to the work of Molofsky and Jones, the program was recently added to the National Literacy Directory for Humboldt County.

The newest offering of the HCBMAA is the Youth Education Support Services (YESS) program, which is in collaboration with Humboldt State University. It currently includes the Ujima program and the Sister Mentor program. The Ujima program is a favorite of



*A video created by Andrea Jones on her experience reading to the community as the Literacy Coordinator for the Glen Edwards Kuumba Literacy program, as well as her experience as a Sister Mentor with the HCBMAA.*

Molofsky's and one she has been working on for many years. "It's a parent peer support for parents, grandparents, relatives, and foster parents, who are raising black, brown, and African children that identify as such," Molofsky said. "It's really been a blessing to be able to start these classes, a 14-week series where we have conversations with these parents and offer peer support. It's a restorative practice and it's really beautiful because we see that we are all just humans trying to do the same thing of parenting, but we parent in different ways."

The individuals that attend the Ujima program are then able to sign their children up for the YESS Sister Mentor program. The Sister Mentor program is the largest part of YESS, offering a 16-week Sister Mentor from HSU to a youth-mentee between the ages 5-18, from local primary, middle, and high schools; the program piloted in March, 2021.

"What Sister Mentors do is they offer an hour and a half of their weekly time to students of color," Molofsky said. "They spend thirty minutes doing homework, thirty minutes doing exercise, and thirty minutes offering nutritional lunch with the kids. This is an in-person service. Kids can meet someone in-person safely distancing," Molofsky elaborated, "because kids these days are already so involved on Zoom."

"We require these mentors to take mentor training and to attend the Cultural Bearers meetings once a week," Molofsky explained. "Currently at the Cultural Bearers meetings we are doing what's called culture engagement, so we offer an olive branch to all Hum-



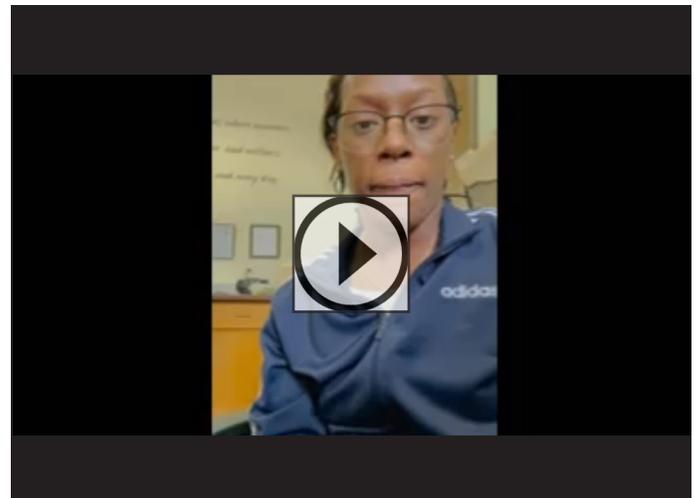
*HCBMAA Literacy Coordinator Andrea Jones hosting the Kuumba Reading Circle on the Arcata Plaza from 12:00-12:30 on Saturday April 3, 2021. Photo taken by: Valetta Molofsky*

boldt County teachers who are teaching youth of color to come into the space to learn how to communicate and how to work with children that are different; those who learn differently and need support in other ways. The Sister Mentors will be coming to these trainings that we offer every Wednesday for our own teachers of color, just to have that restorative time to do check-ins and make sure that we're conscious and aware about the language that we give. The language we use can be harmful if we don't check our actions with our language. We have those conversations and then we check in with the kids to make sure that they're ok."

In addition to serving the BIPOC youth of Humboldt County, Miss Alice Barbee facilitates a community elders group on Fridays through the HCBMAA, for people to come together in a safe space. The Prayer Warriors is another community group that Molofsky has worked to cultivate in Humboldt County. "When COVID-19 came we were meeting at the waterfront in Eureka, and it was mostly the prayer warriors that were meeting; not just the Women in Spirit, but the Prayer Warriors," Molofsky said. "The Prayer Warriors would come to pray, to pray over the nation, for families. These four sisters Lauren, Wilda, Latrice, and myself, we would come once a week and we would sit by the water and pray, we would share and check in. It felt so

good to have that moment by ourselves away from our families to still check in and not lose what we knew."

"Being a Prayer Warrior, that's just something that's in the line of who I am, it's a blessing to be able to pray for those in need of prayer," Dean shared. "When it comes to being a Prayer Warrior, it's having the heart and wanting to intercede for those who are not able to. Those that don't pray, we still pray for them, we take requests, there's no limit to anything that is in need of



*Andrea Jones's concluding thoughts on her experience as the Literacy Coordinator and a Sister Mentor with the HCBMAA.*

prayer. Prayer just brings everything together, prayer gives healing when it's needed, it gives strength when we are weak, it gives clarification; that's what I received from being a Prayer Warrior in the group, and just being a sister. I like being able to be there for anyone who needs me."

Lorenza Simmons, musician, music teacher, and Youth Coordinator for the HCBMAA, has lived in the area for most of her life and met Molofsky through their mutual love of music. Simmons helped to start the youth program within HCBMAA, alongside Molofsky, and worked to provide services for families, youth, and teens in Humboldt County. She helped create the support that she herself desired from the community in her youth. "I am of mixed race descent and experiencing what this area has been like over the years, what I and other youth like me - Black and Indigenous youth - weren't able to have as children made me want there to be more happening here," Simmons said. "Especially for the youth, but BIPOC people all around."

Simmons went on to describe the program. "The first program that we did that was really successful and really close to our hearts was in August of last year, the Harambee Youth Leadership Camp," Simmons said. "The weather was perfect and we were able to do it outdoors utilizing a couple of parks and beaches to do so safely. We brought in dance teachers, drum

teachers, art teachers, and were also able to do mentorship with the teens for the young ones, as well as rights of passage ceremonies for the teens. It was all centered around our philosophy and how we're operating around Afrocentric practices boosting that up and building that up in them."

The camp spanned two weekends, with the youth ages 6-12 participating in the morning. "We had some butcher paper donated, and we had them trace themselves out and draw themselves just so that they could represent themselves and all their parts, just trying to encourage them," Simmons elaborated. "That's a big issue that can come up, especially with youth of color, not seeing a representation of themselves or not being comfortable in themselves. I'm a music teacher so I did some music and movement classes with them and I have experience with different music from the diaspora so I was doing some songs from the Congo with them and also we did some songs from the African American experience as well. To do this camp and provide some insight for them while doing these songs. It's really a part of the culture to sing, while we're rowing down the river, while we're walking; it was really special for me."

The workshops for the teenagers included reflection, writing, art, dance, and building connections. "Valetta did a series with them called Harriet's Journey, which





*Kemetic yoga in the Arcata Redwood park taught by HCBMAA cultural bearer AJ. Photo taken by: Valetta Molofsky on April 10, 2021*

was based on Harriet Tubman's journey through the underground railroad, but also just the process of going through hard things and being able to talk and write about it," Simmons said.

"[The older youth] did a lot of journaling and a lot of study of the seven principles," Simmons said. "They were also able to take dance classes and take some of the Afrocentric art classes. But the biggest aspect for the teens was that we also trained them to be mentors for the younger ones, so we paired them with the younger ones and through the camp we trained them on how to interact with the younger ones, how to be a mentor, and how to there for their mentee and also encouraged them to be connected with each other. That was part of our goal too, to bring these youth and these teens together so that they would build friendships and build connections, which did happen."

The members of the teen camp also went through a rite of passage ceremony at the end of the two weeks. "Over those two weeks we had them go through different practices to build up to a ceremony, which we were able to do at Moonstone Beach at the end of the camp," Simmons said. "We had them go through a rite of pas-

sage which was very sacred, we had a fire, we had each teen design masks for themselves, we had them walk across the water, they danced, and we had them find their spirit animals, and that was a part of their ceremony as well, embodying that animal and its principles. We were able to have the parents there and be a part of it as well."

Harambee means community, and the Harambee Youth Program at HCBMAA involves classes beyond the camp, offered by local sages and Cultural Bearers. These include an Afrocentric arts class, a bilingual musical theater class, and a Kemetic Yoga class. "We have an Afrocentric art class with our cultural bearer Nicky who is an amazing artist. She focuses on Afrocentric art practices and building up confidence in youth and teens, helping them to be able to express themselves through art and be the expression of themselves. Then on Saturdays in Redwood Park we are offering a bilingual musical theater class with our cultural bearer, Oliva. They are doing activities centered around theater and movement, but with an emphasis on incorporating Spanish. After that we have Kemetic Yoga with our cultural bearer AJ. Kemetic Yoga is a beautiful practice that comes from eastern and central Africa."



*This Theater workshop is offered by the HCBMAA's newest cultural bearer Oscar Nava this April and May 2021. Provided by: Valetta Molofsky*

AJ also facilitates open mic sessions each month on a Friday night where folks can present their work, and one individual can win a dinner.

New classes and workshops, both long-term and shorter series are always on the horizon with the HCBMAA. An additional theater workshop has been added to their offerings by their newest Cultural Bearer, Oscar Nava.

The HCBMAA also works to uplift the BIPOC organizations and amplify the desires of BIPOC youth programs in the community. "We've collaborated with schools like the McKinleyville Black Student Union (BSU), the Arcata High School's BSU, and we're supporting St. Bernard's BSU," Molofsky said. "We try to make sure that whatever they've got going on, that we host it in such a way that people can come and hear more about them."

Their programming and support goes beyond the youth to the whole family. "Also part of our philosophy is wrap-around-support, so in supporting the parents and supporting the youth and the teens, that also includes food outreach," Simmons said. "We had a food drive at the end of February where we were able to serve over 300 families. They were thankful for that and we will continue to also provide food drives through our youth services; always making sure that they have a snack or a meal as part of what we are doing in our mission."

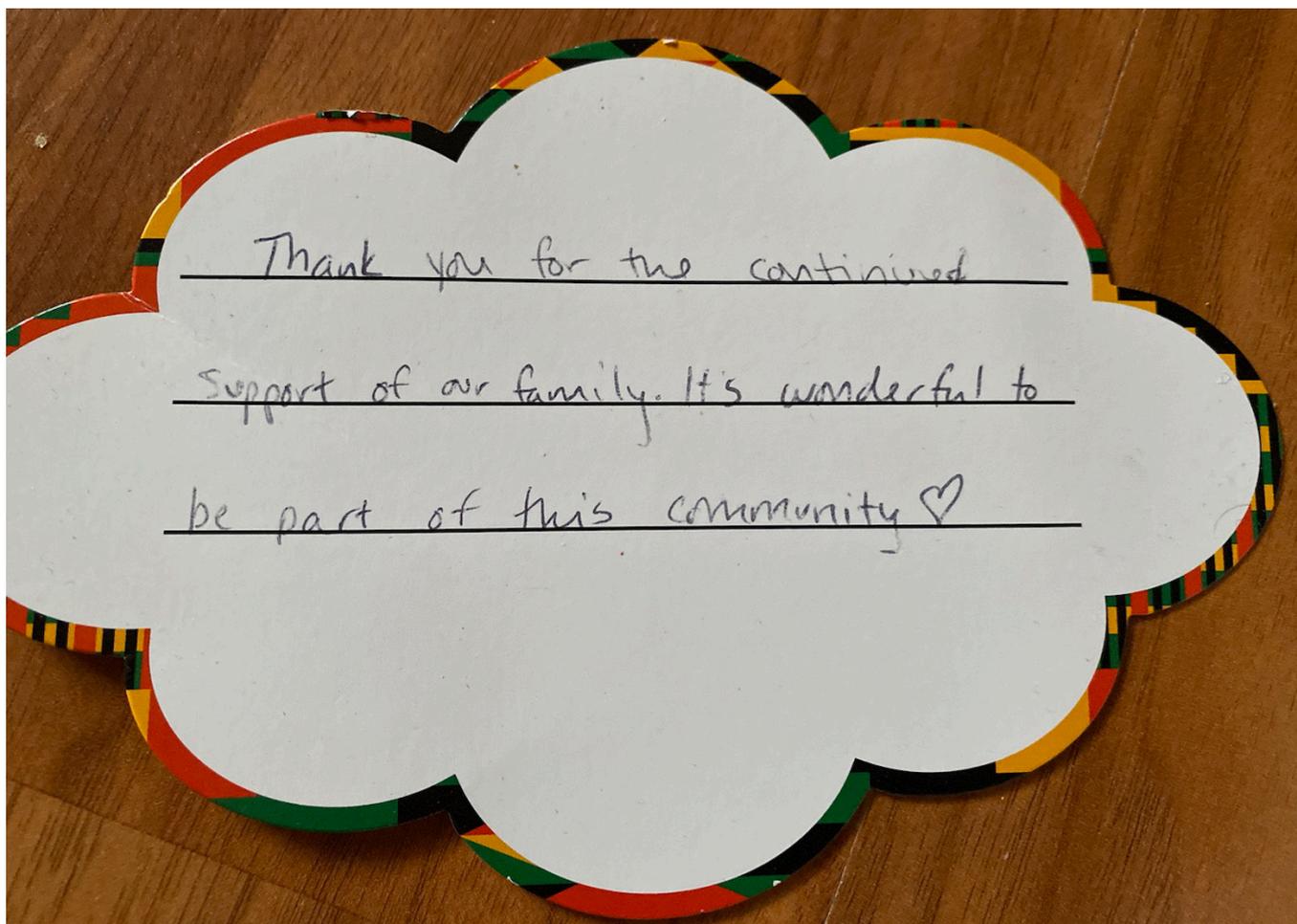
Molofsky shares the importance of giving back to her community. "I also teach other social work students how to become a great Social Worker in Humboldt County and that's my part of giving back, because Harambee is also that part where you give back," Molofsky said. "So in order to have Umoja - which means unity, you have to do some self reflection in yourself and make sure your cup is always filled too. That's what I do, I try to keep a balanced life and continue doing everything in love."

For those interested HCBMAA is currently looking for volunteers. For more information email: [info@hc-blackmusicarts.org](mailto:info@hc-blackmusicarts.org).

To learn more about the HCBMAA visit their website: <https://www.inkpeople.org/dreammaker-data/hcbmaa>

To stay up-to-date on their events and offerings visit their Facebook page here: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Nonprofit-Organization/HC-Black-Music-Arts-Association-104727504645663/>

**Note of correction of error:** The name of the HC Black Music and Arts Association was incorrectly written and represented within the original publication of this magazine. It was revised on May 10, 2021 and now accurately represents the name of the organization. We sincerely apologize for the disrespect shown to Valetta Molofsky and the entire HCBMAA community through this error.



Handwritten note from a HCBMAA community member and parent in the YESS program. Provided by: Valetta Molofsky