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University Park, IL,
November
02,
2019

Road to Crowns

When the curtain rises for “[Crowns: A Gospel Musical](#)” at [Governors State University](#) on Nov. 16-17, it will fill the [Center for Performing Arts](#) with music and dance that celebrate black history and culture. It will also resonate with students who have explored its themes in special classroom projects this semester as Governors State examines what it means to “live in the midst of art,” a core value at the university.



The production, directed by Goodman Theatre resident director and GSU alumnus Chuck Smith, tells the story of six African-American women through the hats they wear to church. The audience sees the women attend a morning service, a wedding, a funeral, and a baptism. They are joined by a young Yolanda, who is sent to live with her grandmother in the South after she witnessed her brother's shooting death in Brooklyn.

Yolanda is welcomed into her grandmother's inner circle of older church ladies, "hat queens," and her life is changed, as they nurture and help her heal from the trauma she has witnessed through storytelling, personal revelations and experiences. Each of their hats—crowns—has a story behind it.

Governors State faculty have often used CPA performances to inspire classroom projects and speak to social justice. But this fall, the GSU community came together in response to a challenge from President Elaine P. Maimon to infuse art in the curriculum in the same way [Writing across the Curriculum](#) weaves writing throughout courses and disciplines.

The idea was explored last May during a [robust conversation](#) between students and honorary degree recipients—Chuck Smith, Goodman Theatre’s Emmy Award-winning Resident Director for three decades, and civic leader Terry Mazany, a longtime supporter of GSU through his leadership with Chicago Community Trust. Honored for their work in removing cultural barriers while promoting a vision of equity and inclusion, they stressed the importance of theater in society and students’ development, while praising the university for its dedication to living in the midst of art.



In September, a brainstorming session drew 25 GSU faculty, staff, and students who formed a new Community Engagement Committee and chose the upcoming production of “Crowns” to spark new classroom projects as a pilot program.

“When Chuck Smith met with students, there was a lot of excitement. The faculty at GSU care about what students like,” said Assistant Professor [Vickii Coffey](#), Chair of the Crowns Community Engagement Committee.

“We were building on what (Associate Professor) [Patrick Santoro](#) had done with the [College of Arts and Sciences](#) in developing arts outreach and working with students. And I’d like to see more of it. There are many talented students here, and it’s a novel way to be innovative in the classroom,” Coffey said.

More than a dozen projects sprang up in [social work](#) courses, [media studies](#) studios, and [criminal justice](#) classrooms as well as in an honors course in public speaking, among others. Students eagerly dived into new projects this fall focusing on the play’s themes of family, faith, history, the impact of violence, change, and hope.

Among them is James Thompson of Country Club Hills, one of 10 students who shared stories of their own “crowns” for a “Speakers’ Corner” videotaping based on the musical. Holding a baseball cap owned by his grandfather, Thompson said, “My mom passed a year after I was born, and she wanted him to adopt me. He taught me how to be a man, how to stand up for myself and to work hard every day.”



Media studies students Nia Brown and Alex Pavloski, who co-produced the segment, participated in and were moved by the project. “I love that students had the opportunity to express themselves,” Brown said. Pavloski added, “It’s so interesting to hear everyone’s stories. They’re really impactful.”

The video will be shown before the play on Nov. 16 and 17, as well as on YouTube and GSU’s Campus Live channel.

Some students got a behind-the-scenes look at “Crowns” as [Professor Angela Latham](#) welcomed the show’s costume designer, Evelyn Danner, to a costume design class. Danner explained her process for developing costumes.

“You get the script, then you think of anything that might work for the characters and then talk to the director,” she said. “You want the picture in their head to come out. It’s about portraying the scenes and characters they’ve seen in their head,” she told students in the [Theatre and Performance Studies Program](#).

“Crowns” inspired a number of events beyond the classroom as well.

A panel discussion will be open to the public at 6 p.m before the Nov. 16 performance. Smith will join local pastors to explore millennials’ relationship to the church.

On Nov. 17, a Southern Tea Party at 2 p.m. will host PBS on-air host Sylvia Ewing for a conversation about family, tradition and culture. Tickets are \$50 and can be purchased [here](#).

Coffey said she is pleased with the response to the community engagement pilot.

"It has been phenomenal. Our students have been challenged to use breakthrough thinking—connecting key course concepts to exceptional learning as a community experience. Most importantly, seats are selling out."