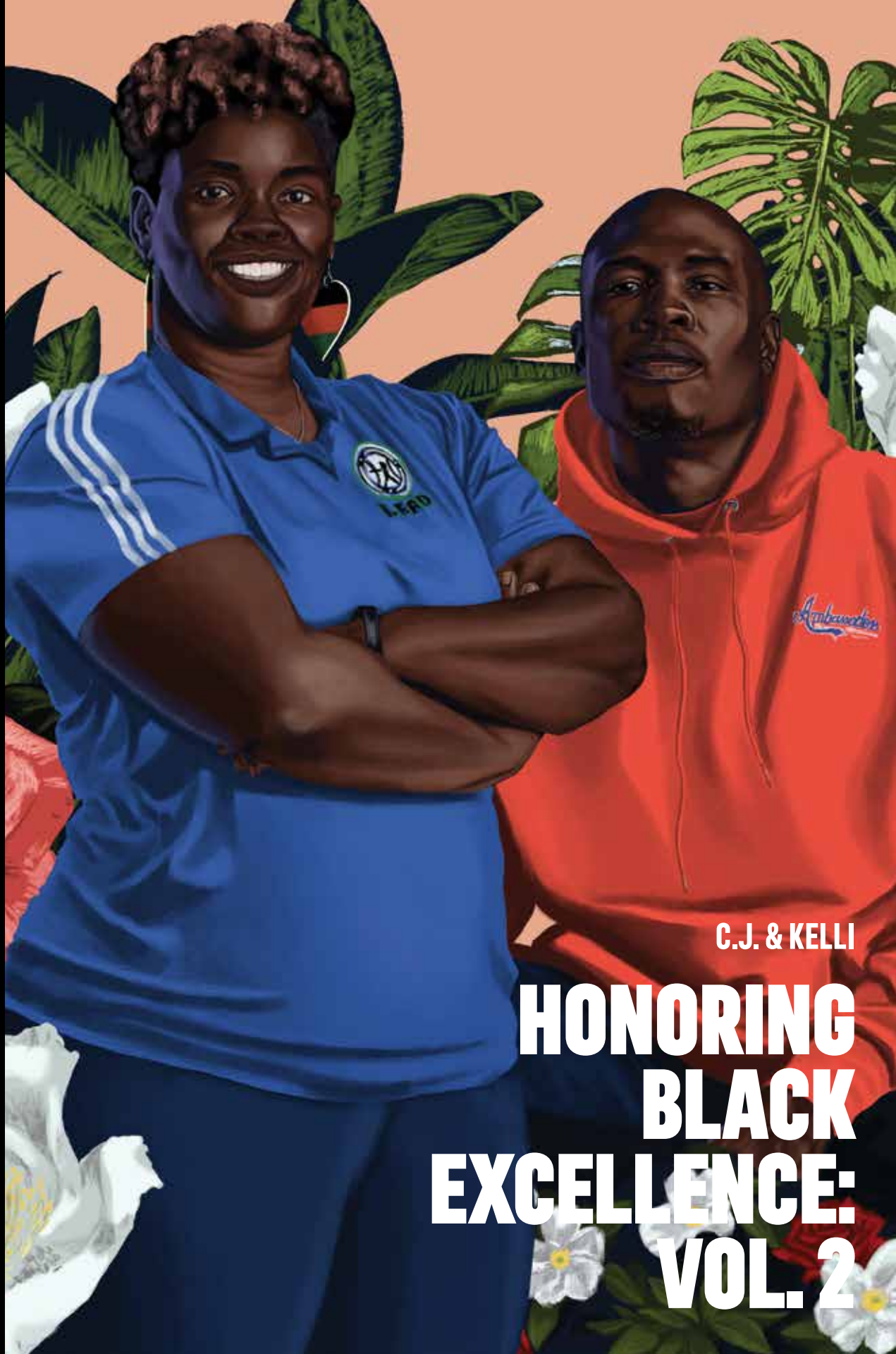


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C.J. & KELLI

**HONORING  
BLACK  
EXCELLENCE:  
VOL. 2**



# THE KINGDOM

## IS WHERE BLACK EXCELLENCE LIVES

Honoring Black Excellence is an adidas initiative that celebrates the achievements of Black individuals and Black culture as a whole. Sport, culture, and service are rooted in the Black community. For that reason, we're highlighting honorees from all across the country, from elite athletes like C.J., to everyday individuals dedicated to service, offering each one a platform to help give back and share their stories. We are honored to bring you the story of C.J. and Kelli Stewart's athletic career and love of service.

Photo courtesy of adidas







Photos by iSmooth (@ismooth)

# INTRO

**C.J. &**

@IAMCJSTEWART

**KELLI**

@KSTEWARTLEAD



For a long time, Black people were shut out of sports in America. Systemic obstacles were put in place to try and prohibit the success of African American athletes. They were deprived of resources and faced serious inequities—and yet they persevered, and went on to change the game forever. In the 1800s, the country's first Negro Baseball League was formed, and its collaborative efforts still resonate more than 200 years later. The fight for acceptance and equality created leadership roles in the Black baseball community. It's from this proud tradition that C.J. and Kelli Stewart draw their inspiration.

Although they came from disenfranchised communities, C.J. and Kelli have worked towards the goal of fostering Black Excellence on and off the field. Their passions for baseball and effective influence led them to create L.E.A.D. (Launch, Expose, Advise, Direct): a charitable organization that specifically caters to Black boys growing up in Atlanta.

This is a story of joint dedication, and of staying committed to others while remaining unapologetically Black.



# THE TRAINING GROUND

Former Chicago Cubs outfielder C.J. Stewart grew up in the housing projects of Northwest Atlanta and dreamt of playing professional baseball. Then, he received an opportunity to play in a neighborhood baseball league on the affluent side of town. This sports-based lifestyle granted Stewart a clear vision of the possibilities and potentials that baseball and adequate resources might help people realize. “We moved into Collier Heights, a historically Black community, but we were not on the bourgeoisie side, we were over on the Section 8 side,” recalls C.J.



“ ”

WE MOVED INTO  
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8 SIDE.

At first, he hit rocks in the air outside of his home and wrapped styrofoam cups around his wrists, mimicking wristbands worn by former Black baseball players Lee Smith and Gary Matthews. Exposure to baseball and mentorship allowed Stewart to not only achieve his dream of playing professionally, but also develop a passion for leading young Black athletes.

C.J. ROCKING THE  
ICONIC PINSTRIPES.

Photo courtesy of C.J. Stewart







“ ”

I'VE JUST BEEN  
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MANY ADULTS ...  
I JUST WANTED  
TO MAKE SURE  
I MADE THINGS  
EASIER FOR  
CHILDREN.

Kelli Stewart's difficult childhood led her to develop an entrepreneurial spirit. From a young age, she was determined to empower Black youth by committing to her role as a supportive authority figure, and by stretching the lens of Black Excellence to encompass much more than just sports. Although neither of her parents were consistently part of her life, Kelli's grandmother was a constant presence, and taught her how to plow and plant seeds. "I've just been failed by so many adults, and so many systems, that I said to myself growing up: whatever role I play in life, I just want to make sure I make things easier for children," explains Kelli.

Kelli did not start out with an interest in baseball: she was a budding entrepreneur, who sold her own crops at the local farmer's market in Oglethorpe County, GA before participating in the ROTC throughout high school.

**KELLI IN GREEN JACKET  
WITH LITTLE SISTER KELSEY GANTT.**

Photo courtesy of Kelli Stewart









# ALL-STAR TEAM

In the summer of '96, right after graduating high school, Kelli made a difficult decision: she would leave her grandmother and her younger sister and move from Athens to Atlanta. There, she was startled by a young man who seemed to be following her up to a gas station. That was how Kelli met C.J.

The two were smitten; within a year, they were married. "My grandmother told me, 'you've been in the country too long—you don't know nothing about these city boys,'" says Kelli, "and don't get up there and get with the wrong crowd and the wrong man cause he'll do you in."





Photo courtesy of adidas

Kelli didn't know it at the time, but her and C.J.'s serendipitous encounter would determine their destiny and ultimately led to their joint success. Merging C.J.'s passion for baseball with Kelli's desire to provide positive mentorship, they sought out to effectively execute for others what they had appreciated for themselves in their youth.

C.J. was twice drafted by the Chicago Cubs, first in '94 and then in '96. His career came to an end in 1998, which gave him the time to learn the logistics and nuances of coaching from his mentor, Joe Logan. He became one of the best coaches and instructors in the country. He also became preoccupied with another challenge: how to resolve the declining numbers of Blacks in baseball. Reflecting on the boys he trained and his own experience on and off the field, C.J. told Kelli about wanting to start a non profit organization, and this dynamic duo literally took to the field.

“ ”

IT'S LIKE YOU  
CAN DREAM  
ALL DAY,  
BUT WHEN  
SOMEONE  
GIVES YOU THE  
RESOURCES TO  
MAKE IT COME  
TRUE, THEN  
YOU HAVE  
TO PROVE  
YOURSELF.







PHOTO ART BY STEVE WEST (@STEVWESTPHOTO)



T-SHIRTS BY @CRUVIECLOTHING





# MAJOR LEAGUE CITIZENS

C.J. and Kelli initially opened L.E.A.D. up to all of Metro Atlanta, but then tightened their focus to Atlanta Public Schools. After all, this was the system that had the most profound influence over C.J.'s educational, social and community life. From his own lived experience, he understood that the children living in Atlanta's inner-city neighborhoods weren't able to afford the resources to develop serious athletic skills—which is why, despite the challenges it presented, C.J. offered his services free of charge.

"I didn't want to price kids out of something they love to do just because they were born in a family that didn't have the resources. How is that fair?" asks C.J. "Just making sure that our boys understand the fight that they are in is very important."

With no budget for logistical programming, but a clear vision in direction, a parent from his for profit business shocked the pair by donating \$60,000 to kickstart and establish their organization: L.E.A.D.





Photo by iSmooth (@ismooth)

C.J. and Kelli were impeded at every step of their journey—asked to give up parts of their truth, parts of their Blackness, in exchange for success. But through each roadblock, they retained the support of the people close to them, including program developer Margarett Purvis and coach/L.E.A.D. parent Zabatka Walden. The Stewarts persisted and never once gave up on their truth.

L.E.A.D. (Launch, Expose, Advise, Direct) is a platform for Black boys to succeed—a place where they'll always get the benefit of the doubt, and the trust and respect they deserve. Established in 2007, the organization pairs C.J.'s athletic background with Kelli's passion for stewardship. Providing valuable lessons through sports-based youth development programming and civic engagement activities, members are taught the skills they need to overcome poverty, crime, and racism. L.E.A.D. teaches leadership and Black history in spirit and truth. What started with sports unfolded into a life lesson for Black boys in the city. C.J. and Kelli began with serving merely 18 families. Without knowing where their efforts would take them, C.J. and Kelli's vision has carried them through life. "Through that whole time when I was being challenged, it was just like: I see it," C.J. said. Gradually, they proved themselves, added to their team, and built on the support they received as they pursued their vision.

C.J. and Kelli's organization targeted their services to Black boys specifically. L.E.A.D. explicitly mentions their focus on serving Black boys and not broadening their mission's vocabulary to appeal to potential funders. The risk they took in sticking to that decision allowed the Stewarts to show up authentically and openly Black. They knew setting this example unapologetically would ultimately empower and equip the Black youth they served.

“ ”

IT WAS ALL  
WORTH IT  
TO REMAIN  
GENUINE.



Photo by iSmooth (@ismooth)



C.J. observes as Tyler Williams, a L.E.A.D. Ambassador alum and sophomore at Texas Southern University, repeatedly smashes a punching bag under the supervision of his dad, Dexter. “They allowed me to come to their home to watch them train, and it inspired me to execute the same drill with our other L.E.A.D. Ambassadors,” explains C.J. “It’s now a staple in my toolbox of skill-building drills.”



Photo by iSmooth (@ismooth)

“Among the challenges we’ve had to overcome, aside from the medical pandemic, are the social pandemics Black Americans have dealt with since the beginnings of our country: racism, crime, and poverty,” explained C.J. “We started focusing on that, and I had gone through experiences [which] empowered me to start talking about race.” C.J. envisioned L.E.A.D. serving youth in more ways than just through baseball. He had a grand purpose for L.E.A.D. and he couldn’t ignore the social injustices currently faced in a sport that so often threatens and discourages the Black man.

C.J. and Kelli’s joint commitment to the youth is a response to the authority and resources they desired but lacked during their own childhood years. Neither were properly educated about the Black experience in the US. This deficit propelled their mission far beyond baseball.

“Every day when I show up as a black woman and I fight for my family and myself and I fight for boys in this city,” says Kelli. “I’m using my voice boldly.”

C.J. began with a childhood dream: playing professional baseball. Kelli began with a challenge: effectively serving the youth. Together their love and partnership bred an organization that successfully empowers Black boys on and off the field. L.E.A.D. provides these children with a space to recognize their history and to reach their maximum potential; it equips them with the resources necessary to fulfill their own dreams, whether sports related or not. “The leadership of our city is in the hands of a lot of Black people from Atlanta public schools,” explains C.J. and Kelli. “I don’t know how many of them were intentionally developed to do it, but L.E.A.D. is intentionally developing the next superintendent, athletic director, police chief, mayor, etc. That’s why we’re doing what we’re doing.”





# LEGACY

## THE NEGRO LEAGUES

BY C.J. STEWART

I am a son of Atlanta, a Grady Baby, born in 1976. Grady Hospital was the place where Atlanta's Black, poor and working-class children were born.

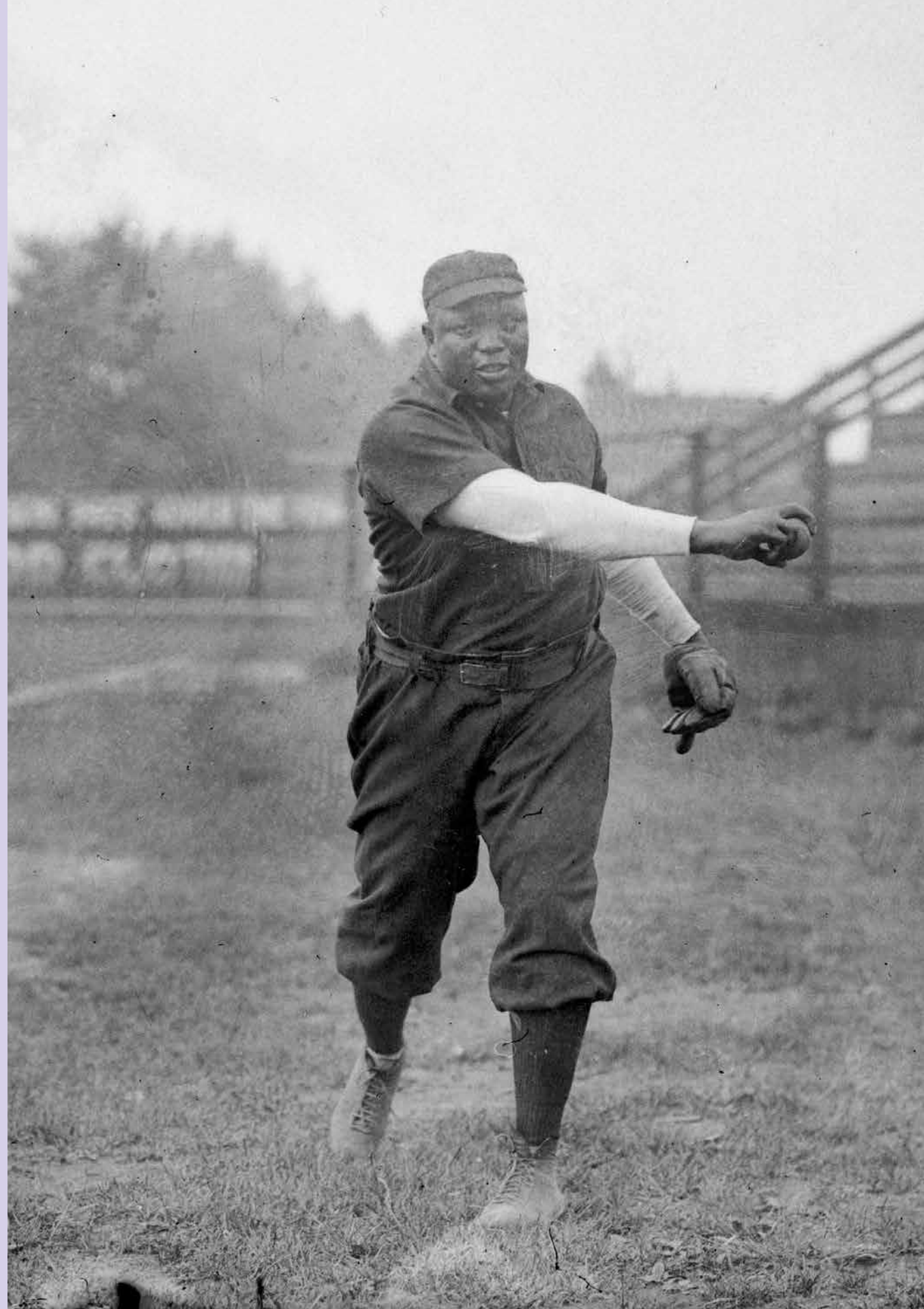
Baseball was my ticket out of poverty. Not born into the Black bourgeois, I had prayer, hope, and "keep holding on" to hold onto.

In 2007, when we started L.E.A.D. (Launch, Expose, Advise, Direct), our excitement was through the roof and we knew what we wanted to do, how we wanted to do it and when we wanted to get started.

The what, how, and when is the easy part. Answering 'why' you want to do something is hard. Answering why gets to the soul. Margarett Purvis was our initial Program Development Consultant. Realizing that we were stuck on why we wanted to start L.E.A.D., she gave me the Kadir Nelson book *We Are the Ship*. The title's based on the opening quote—"we are the ship; all else the sea"—from Rube Foster, who founded the Negro National League, and it sets the tone for the rest of the story Kadir Nelson illustrates so beautifully.

RUBE FOSTER THROWING A BASEBALL AT A FIELD IN CHICAGO, ILLINOIS (CIRCA 1909).

Photo by Chicago History Museum/Getty Images







First Black World Series, Kansa City, Missouri (1924) /  
Photo by J.E. Miller/William A. Gladstone Collection

The Negro Leagues introduced baseball to Japan and Latin America. And Jackie Robinson, by becoming the first African American player to integrate the Major Leagues in the modern era, saved the all-white Major Leagues as well as America.

I would be remiss if I didn't tip my cap to Moses Fleetwood Walker for being the very first African American man to play in the Major Leagues, making his debut on May 1, 1884 for the Toledo Blue Stockings.

During several seasons, the Majors struggled to draw fans to their games, and this is why bringing Mr. Robinson to the all White Majors was so important. Negro League players were arguably better than the White Major Leaguers and drew more fans with their barnstorming style of play. For African Americans, the games were a symbol of community pride, and they attended in droves—always dressed to the nines. When Jackie Robinson came to the all-White Majors, the Black dollar followed him.

The Negro Leagues were a hotbed of ingenuity. The sons of enslaved Africans and African Americans who had to carve a new life out of a foreign land and build tools and processes to build America's foundation—under the threat of their very lives with

their families being torn apart every day—it's no wonder that some of the staples of baseball were created in the Negro Leagues. Batting helmets and catcher's gear were invented in the Negro Leagues as well as night games. Those three inventions alone allowed Black players to play more games and to play them safely.

“We Are The Ship; All Else The Sea.”

After learning this history of Black people and baseball, we knew why L.E.A.D. needed to exist. We had our why.

We needed to exist to empower an at-risk generation to lead and transform their city of Atlanta by using the sport of baseball to teach Black boys how to overcome three curveballs that threaten their success: crime, poverty and racism.

L.E.A.D. is hard-work and heart-work.

We remain inspired by the legacy of the Negro Leagues. They were not allowed to continue. However, for the sake of the betterment of Atlanta, America, and the world, L.E.A.D. will remain vigilant in our quest to fulfill our vision to develop Black boys into Ambassadors who will lead their City of Atlanta to lead the world.

“ ”

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# AMBASSADOR

## JOHN PHILLIPS

Meet John Phillips. He's an aspiring artist, rising senior at Frederick Douglass High School in Atlanta, and a L.E.A.D. Ambassador. Phillips has maintained this distinguished honor for three years via his exemplary achievements in the program's ABC'S: Attendance, Behavior, Curriculum (grades), and Service.

"Being an Ambassador means the world to me," explains Phillips. "Words can't actually describe how much of a great program this is for me and my life." The 17-year-old hopes to become an illustrator and role model to his community and family. It's a concern that he faces head on: "I worry about my grandad and dad not living long enough to see me be successful."

Phillips dreams of "fixing poverty" one day and plans on giving back to his city, a place that's very special to him. "The best thing about Atlanta is the people, because we all are the same in some type of way."



Photo by iSmooth (@ismooth)



Art by John Phillips



“ ”

Black excellence is honoring those that helped along the way.  
— C.J. & KELLI

Black Excellence is our beacon, our North Star that must glow brightly to lead us toward a purposeful destination. As we seek to build generational wealth, it is essential to have cultural wealth and Black Excellence must be its foundation.  
— BYRON AMOS  
*Community Leader/Washington High School, Alum & GO Team Member*

# BLACK EXCELLENCE

# IS

“ ”

Black Excellence is a state of mind—a culture forged out of the fire of being relentless in our pursuit of Racial Equity. The capacity to “fuel up” on the adversity of navigating the ever-present challenges that we face daily in a carbon monoxide environment.  
— CARTER DREW  
*President/Co-founder Carter & Reynolds Group*

Black Excellence is overcoming every obstacle and glass ceiling that is placed in your way because of the color of your skin.  
— SHARODON JENKINS  
*South Atlanta High School Alum '2020, Langston University '24*

Black Excellence is achievement ‘in spite of.’ The ability to overcome countless obstacles that the mainstream world does not see nor understand.  
— RON SKEETE  
*Nonprofit Executive, Community Leader*

“ ”

Black Excellence is a journey not a destination. It’s the embodiment of diligence combined with purpose-filled action in our everyday lives. It’s important that we honor Black Excellence as it highlights the lineage of strong leaders who impact our history and inspire the next generation.  
— ANDRE DICKENS  
*Atlanta City Council Member, At Large; Candidate for Mayor City of Atlanta*

Counter to a standard, I like to bestow the ‘Black Excellence’ sash to those that beat the odds in all walks of life. Even in the worst environments and predicaments, this person found a way to achieve a certain level of success that in turn motivates others to do the same.  
—TERRANCE MAYS  
*Frederick Douglass High School Graduate/Architect*

Black Excellence is meeting, and overcoming, every natural and artificial barrier between where you are in life and where you want to be in order to achieve your life purpose. It means trying to do your very best at everything you do. Never letting anything or anyone get between you and your chosen destination.  
—SAMUEL-AUSTIN EVANS  
*L.E.A.D. Ambassador Alum, '15/Texas A&M Graduate*

“ ”

Honoring Black Excellence is to recognize those who consume an ideology of service to community followed by actions that lead to embracing, empowering & equipping others to cultivate and harvest their own goals.  
— ROSE SCOTT  
*Emmy Award Winning Journalist*

Black Excellence is Black people working together, living and walking a collective purpose to uplift each other.  
— COURTNEY ENGLISH  
*Educator/Community Builder/Candidate Atlanta City Council President*

Black Excellence is working twice as hard to get half as much; perseverance, determination and fortitude. Black Excellence is creativity—expression, the generation of ideas, solving problems, providing alternatives, and possibilities that could only come from our experience.  
— ARETTA BALDON  
*Atlanta Board of Education, District 2*



“ ”

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A BLACK FLOWER TO  
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A COLOR AND  
AS A PEOPLE.  
— KELLI STEWART**



Cover art and illustrations by Brandon Breaux | @bbreaux





**LEAD**<sup>™</sup>  
WE SCOUT THE COUNTED OUT



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