

HIGH PROFILE

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Kwendeche



“Not to say that I disrespect or disavow my family [name]. But I took the personal ... right, if you want to call it that, to live the rest of my life [with] the name that I felt more close to in terms of my heritage.”

(Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/Cary Jenkins)

A single word can't describe this Little Rock architect, but his self-styled moniker adds mystique that invites the world to know him.

RENARDA A. WILLIAMS
SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

It would be an understatement to say that the architect currently known as Kwendeche is a creative genius.

His work — arresting, thought-provoking, refreshing — graces structures as far away as Jakarta, Indonesia, and as near as various historic homes and other structures in Little Rock, including the Daisy Bates House, the Max Mayer House, the Observation Trail Entry Gate of the Audubon Wildlife Trail and the Esse Purse Museum.

Oh, and that whimsical chair in Bernice Garden in the South Main district ... the pyramidal one, with the bird perched on top and boots as legs? That's Kwendeche's doing.

Owner of Produksi Arymeus, Kwendeche, 71, describes himself as “sole proprietor and headmaker” for various and sundry projects that include historic preservation architecture, photography, wearable art, abstract painting, furniture, tribal masks and sculptures. He works from his studio at “my grandfather's dream house” — the Lamb-McSwain House, house, built

in 1925 in Little Rock's Wright Avenue Neighborhood and listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Kwendeche is known for being fun, quirky, off the beaten path. But he's all about business when it comes to his work with nonprofit groups that are striving to preserve historic structures, especially the Rosenwald Schools built for Black children in mostly rural Arkansas communities in the 1920s.

“I had the pleasure of meeting Kwendeche many years ago and have continued to see his work extend into several communities in southeast Arkansas and northeast Texas,” says Kandi Williams, who represents the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff/Silas H. Hunt Community Development Corp.

On behalf of the organization, Kwendeche has spoken to high-school students about his career as a historical architect, Williams says. “Through his presentations, the students gained an appreciation of what our ancestors endured, the purpose of historical structures, how communities once thrived, and the importance of preserving our heritage.”

“It is such an inspiration to hear his passion for preserving historical structures and cultural heritage,” Williams adds.

On Oct. 29, Kwendeche will do a virtual presentation about his career for his organization, the American Institute of Architects. Chances are, he won't have the time to share all aspects of what has indeed been a storied career.

His distinctive single name has its own story.

One of three children born to Black schoolteachers John B. McSwain Sr. and Bernice Lamb McSwain, Kwendeche (pronounced “Kuh-wen-day-shay”) grew up as John McSwain. In 1985 — after having honored his father's request that he research the family, and connecting with the white McSwains with whom he shared relatives — Kwendeche decided to change his name in honor of his father ... whose ancestors, he knew, had not been McSwains originally.

In 1989, while working as an architect in Indonesia, Kwendeche sponsored a boy from Malawi via the Save the Children program. When he and the boy developed a pen-pal relationship, Kwendeche shared

his plans to change his name to something with nine letters. “I'm a numerologist, in a sense that nine is important to me,” he says, noting that the numbers in his street address add up to 9.

“I said, ‘What about Kwende?’ It's a common name [in Malawi] ... It means ‘let's go.’ It's a very inspirational name ... it sort of gives you sort of a reason to be better in your life. But then, it needed three other letters.” He added c-h-e and had his name legally changed.

“Not to say that I disrespect or disavow my family [name],” Kwendeche says. “But I took the personal ... right, if you want to call it that, to live the rest of my life [with] the name that I felt more close to in terms of my heritage.”

Long before that name change, Kwendeche, who grew up with an older sister and younger brother, spent the first few years of his life in McAlmont, which adjoins eastern North Little Rock. Around the time Kwendeche was in first grade, his parents decided to move to Little Rock. They relocated to a home near Stephens Elementary School, where he enjoyed

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Black Arkansans fighting CF with national nonprofit agency

SEAN CLANCY
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

For more than 50 years, Terry Wright had no idea he was suffering from cystic fibrosis.

Oh, he was sick. So wracked by pain that from the time he was a child growing up in Little Rock he considered Arkansas Children's Hospital his second home.

But the source of the agony in his gut was always misdiagnosed — usually as a gastrointestinal virus, or perhaps ulcers (screenings of newborns for cystic fibrosis are now required in all 50 states).

“I suffered as a child,” Wright says. “It was a painful life. I would hide it from my parents and wouldn't let them know that I had problems. ... I would just push forward. I wanted to stay active and keep a good attitude.”

He never gave up on that whole good attitude thing.

Despite his ailments, he excelled in sports, playing baseball and run-

ning track in school. As an adult, he completed multiple marathons, became an avid cyclist — he's a founding member of the Major Taylor Cycling Club of Little Rock — and worked as a certified personal fitness trainer.

He's also a certified master gardener and certified master naturalist and was named the 2016 Pulaski County Master Gardener of the Year.

Wait. There's more. In 2011, his Cracklin' Cornbread won Best Amateur, Best Traditional and Best Overall at the 2011 Arkansas Cornbread Festival.

Wright was doing all of this while dealing with the ravages of CF, a life-threatening, hereditary disease that affects the lungs and digestive system and causes the body to produce thick, sticky mucus that can clog the lungs and obstruct the pancreas.

By 2001 things were looking grim, and he underwent an eight-hour sur-

gery to remove part of his pancreas.

“He was on death's doorstep,” says Wright's wife, Michele. “I truly believe if he did not have that [surgery], he wasn't going to make it.”

He bounced back after the surgery, but took a serious downturn in late 2016 and was hospitalized twice.

“I knew we were out of options and he was going to die,” says Michele, an engineer with a doctorate in public policy.

A former pharmaceutical salesperson, Michele insisted that Terry see an infectious disease doctor, who noted that Wright had the signs of cystic fibrosis, but it was dismissed because only about one in 17,000 Black people have the disease.

At their wits' end, the Wrights decided to check out the cystic fibrosis angle and Terry underwent a sweat chloride test, which measures the concentration of chloride that is excreted in sweat and is used to screen for CF.

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Terry Wright sits in the barber's chair at his North Little Rock home. Wright, who was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis when he was 54, won a \$10,000 grant in July from the national Cystic Fibrosis Foundation. (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/Cary Jenkins)

Wright

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And in the spring of 2017, at the age of 54 and after decades pain, discomfort and confusion, countless hospital stays, ER visits and prodding and probing by doctors, Terry was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis.

"Now I knew why I had suffered like this," he says of how he felt when a name was at last given to his illness. "Now I knew why all these things had been going on with my body."

How did he keep his spirits up all those years of suffering?

"I always felt like I couldn't stop," he says. "You find your niche, something you enjoy doing, like the gardening and stuff. That kept me encouraged and active. When you are inactive, that's when things set in."

SHAKING THINGS UP

Speaking in late August, Terry, whose hospital visits were almost monthly, says it had been about a year since he had been in the hospital.

As part of his treatment, he suits up twice a day for about a half-hour in a blue, vibrating vest that looks like a flotation device. The special vest helps shake up and loosen the mucus that develops in his chest. He also inhales on a tube that sends medicine to his lungs.

"It's important to always take your treatments," he says. "A lot of times you think you are feeling good and you don't want to take your treatment, but it makes a big difference."

Terry and Michele, both energetic and outgoing, formed the nonprofit National Organization of African Americans with Cystic Fibrosis (noaacf.org), which aims to "connect, help build



Michele and Terry Wright of North Little Rock are co-founders of the nonprofit National Organization of African Americans with Cystic Fibrosis. (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/Cary Jenkins)

diverse communities and raise CF awareness in the African-American community and beyond."

Terry has also written "Terry's Journey to CF Land: A Children's Story and Coloring Book" that was illustrated by Dwight Stegall, Jr., and will be published Nov. 3.

On July 24, Terry became the first Arkansan to be awarded a \$10,000 Impact Grant from the national Cystic Fibrosis Foundation.

He was among four grant recipients, which included the founder of a CF-related podcast, the creator of a program that provides adults with CF and their caregivers job training and the maker behind a livestreamed dance class for those with CF.

In an announcement about this year's grants, the foundation spotlighted the importance of Wright's efforts to advocate for Black CF sufferers.

"According to the CF

Foundation Patient Registry, approximately 5% of people with CF identify as Black, and are more likely to have rare mutations that cannot be treated with current modulators, making additional support for the Black community an important step to improve outcomes and quality of life."

Kelly Bullington is executive director of the Arkansas Chapter of the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation.

"Prior to mandatory newborn screenings, many African Americans with CF went undiagnosed because it was seen as a Caucasian genetic disease," she says.

Talking about Terry, Bullington says: "He is very unique. To live undiagnosed until 54 is pretty amazing. Most people, left untreated, die prematurely ... but he had a real commitment to a healthy lifestyle. He stayed really fit and ate really well to help his quality of life. That's probably part of what helped

him live so long without a proper diagnosis and treatment."

COLORFUL JOURNEY

The Wrights live on a ridge in North Little Rock overlooking woods with the Little Rock skyline in the distance. Their living room is quirky, colorful and filled with plants. There is a barber's chair and a vintage jukebox with records by Elvis Presley, James Brown and others.

The steep hillside that is their backyard has been cleared of vegetation by Beavis and Butt-head, a pair of La-Mancha goats Terry has had for about a year.

"Beavis is the bully, Butt-head is the smart one. He's the escape artist," Terry says.

Talking about the National Organization for African Americans with Cystic Fibrosis and his book, Terry says, "It's about bringing awareness, getting people engaged,

keeping them encouraged. And the coloring book itself is the story about my journey."

He hopes the book and his story will help comfort young CF patients, who are often kept apart from others because of their weakened immune systems.

"You have all these fears when you are very young," he says. "You're wondering: What's going on with my body? And a lot of times it's hard to connect because the only thing you see are all these doctors around you and they have diagnosed you with this terrible disease, but I want to let them know there is hope."

The money from the impact grant was used to help produce the book and develop the NOAACF website, he says.

On Oct. 21, Terry and Michele, whose own children's book, "The Water Tales: Ten Life Lessons From My Water Buddy and Family" will be published Oct. 20, will speak on a panel about culturally competent CF care during the North American Cystic Fibrosis Conference.

The Wrights say they would like to collaborate with the CF foundation, the pharmaceutical industry and hospitals to help bring awareness of CF in the Black community.

"Not just on a regional level, but global," Michele says, "where we are serving as a liaison between those minorities and African Americans with cystic fibrosis."

"It's important to have someone advocate for you," Terry says.

They also hope to host a conference for Black people and other minorities with rare diseases.

"I'm at peace," Terry says of his state of mind since being diagnosed. "Now I'm driven to help others. If I can make a difference in someone's life, my hard work would not have been in vain."

Weddings

White-Hollenberg

Sophie Blue Hollenberg and Samuel Mason White were united in marriage Saturday at the Little Rock home of the bride's grandmother.

The parents of the bride are Jan and Tannen Hollenberg of Little Rock. The parents of the groom are Amanda White and Alfred White III, also of Little Rock.

The couple will make their home in Little Rock.

Engagements



Alexandria C. Smith and Thomas F. Herbert have made plans to marry Oct. 17 at the Venue at Oakdale in Sherwood.

She is the daughter of Dedra and Marcus Smith of Sherwood and the granddaughter of Janet and James McDonald of Little Rock, the late Adea Green and the late Tyler Keels. She is a graduate of the University of Central Arkansas with a bachelor's degree in interior design and is in the U.S. Air Force.

His parents are Jean C. and the late Douglas A. Herbert of Richmond, Va. He is the grandson of the late Erma A. and Fredrick D. Johnson and the late Rebecca E. and Thomas H. Herbert. He has a bachelor's degree in business information systems from Bellevue University and is also a member of the Air Force.

Policy

The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette publishes in the Sunday High Profile section announcements of engagements, weddings and anniversaries of couples married 50 years or more.

Basic announcements are free with the option to buy space for extra information and a photograph.

Publication is subject to submissions meeting deadlines as well as the judgment of the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette. Only announcements regarding an Arkansas resident or those with family in the state will be considered.

FORMS — Engagement, wedding or anniversary announcements should be submitted on forms available on the Democrat-Gazette website at weddings.arkansasonline.com. For those who prefer to work offline, PDFs of the basic announcement forms are available for download at the same webpage. For a paper or faxed copy, contact the wedding editor at telephone: (501) 378-3496; email: weddings@arkansasonline.com; or regular mail: Wedding Editor, P.O. Box 2221, Little Rock, Ark. 72203.

FEATURED WEDDINGS — If you have family in Pulaski County and wish to be considered for a High Profile feature story, a completed engagement form must be submitted at least eight weeks before the wedding.

FEES — Basic announcements are free with the option to buy space for extra information and a photograph. See weddings.arkansasonline.com for information about upgrading an announcement for a fee.

DEADLINES — Engagement announcements must be submitted at least eight weeks before the wedding and two weeks before desired publication date.

Wedding announcements must be submitted at least two weeks before the wedding to run the Sunday after or no later than four weeks after the wedding.

Anniversary announcements should be submitted at least two weeks before the desired publication date.

PHOTOGRAPHS — A professional-quality formal portrait, either a 5-by-7-inch print or high-resolution digital image, is required.

Digital photos are preferred and can be submitted with the online form (preferred) or by email to weddings@arkansasonline.com. Digital images must be JPEG (.jpg) format with at least 200 dots per inch and the file size should be 7 to 8 megabytes.

Printed photographs can be dropped off at the newspaper's offices at 121 E. Capitol Ave., Little Rock, Ark. or mailed to the wedding editor at the address above.

Photos accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope will be returned, or, with prior arrangement, photos can be picked up at the newspaper's information desk after publication. Photos are kept on file for 90 days.

Waning supplies cause wig shortage in pandemic

CYNTHIA GREENLEE
THE NEW YORK TIMES

When Mia Birdsong was around 8 or 9, she would prance around in cowboy boots and a spiky Tina Turner-style wig.

As a 'tween, she coveted fake manes in a wig store for their sleekness and eminent manageability, compared with the vigorous multicolor hair she had inherited from her Black father and white mother.

"You know the story: Black kid with white mom who doesn't know how to do her hair," said Birdsong, an author in Oakland, Calif. "I would have these big bangs I'd do with a curling brush. Basically, the front and sides would be straight. And the back wouldn't."

Wigs give the illusion of all-over-the-head uniformity, she thought. "It was all about, like, long flowing hair, too," she said. "I was super into wigs that gave me white women's straight hair."

Those childhood yearnings aside, it wasn't until July, almost four decades later, that Birdsong, 47, bought her first wig that wasn't for a special occasion or play.

Actually, she bought six, all with generous and sleek bangs. Among them was a Twiggy-esque short number in orange Creamsicle colors, another with electric blue waves and three basic black wigs with names like "Mariella" or "Flirt." They arrived with another delivery: a machete. With her wigs, a giant knife and a stocked pantry, she declared herself ready for intransigent shrubby weeds in "the garden, honoring my Jamaican roots, and the apocalypse," she said.

LOOK PRESENTABLE

Birdsong has been unable to see her hairdresser since March because of the pandemic, and she wanted to look presentable in Zoom meetings. During them, she had been absent-mindedly trimming her curly hair, and soon cut her beyond the forgiving length of even the shortest ponytail.

She's one of many women in the United States, particularly Black women, who have changed their hair routines and stocked up on wigs. They fear future salon closures in states where cases are surging, warnings about hair salons as potentially high-risk transmission sites, and sometimes glacially slow delivery and spotty supplies from online retailers.

Holly Stepp, who works for a biomedical company and lives in Raleigh, N.C., found herself in the club of wig novitiates. Stepp, 46, knows how



Mia Birdsong wears a wig at her home Sept. 20 in Oakland, Calif. (The New York Times/Sarahbeth Maney)

to make a "relaxer" last. She typically gets her chin-length bob chemically straightened every four months, stretching well past the conventional salon wisdom that she should get a "retouch" to smooth new growth every six to eight weeks.

Stepp has worn her hair natural only briefly, during college. She didn't want to take her chances if the pandemic lingered and she couldn't get a fresh perm. Unable to see her hairdresser, she went online and, for the first time in her life, shopped for wigs.

At the six-week mark when many people with relaxed hair would be headed back to the salon, she felt the siren call of Instagram marketing. "You see all these ads for wigs, the hair companies, and the influencers showing themselves unboxing their wigs and how quickly they can put them on," she said. "I thought: 'You know what? That could be a thing to do.'"

LACE-FRONT BOBS

Stepp bought about \$600 worth of midpriced wigs — five conservative lace-front bobs that "looked reasonably like my own hair" — and all the accoutrements: tweezers, scissors, glue, canvas stands and tripods to prop them up. She promptly discovered that, despite her ideas of plop-and-go, the wig installation learning curve is steep. After numerous YouTube tutorials and efforts to get the hairline right, she gave the wigs to her 27-year-old niece, who Stepp said "will wear a platinum blond" to work.

Stepp hasn't felt comfort-

able changing her hair drastically or obviously in professional settings, and she long held some notions about wigs being "something not done" in her middle-class family and community. Even so, she occasionally fantasizes about ordering a \$3,000 hand-knotted made-to-order wig from a salon in Washington. In June, she cut her hair short and is going "seminatural."

Ida Harris, a writer and graduate student in Oxford, Miss., was similarly unpleasantly surprised by the work of putting on a wig. A hair chameleon, she often rocks long, flowing middle-part extensions that recall Mona Lisa or Solange Knowles. Sometimes she'll choose big, bohemian, bouncing Afro, though she thinks the time she went bald "was my best look."

A lover of extravagant extensions that obviously aren't issued by her own scalp, Harris, who is in her 40s, thought wigs would be much the same as weaves and ordered two.

'IT'S CUMBERSOME'

But "it's cumbersome; you got to lay it out, spray it down, melt it," she said. "It has a whole new language. I don't want to do no hair."

Harris opted for buying hair and getting a hairdresser to make it into a two "forever wigs," right for her face and head measurements. Even so, she hit several snags. When her wigs arrived, one was just too full.

"The world knows I don't have this lion's mane," Harris said.

There was another problem: Her globally sourced hu-

man hair was on back order. The hair originated in China, was shipped to her contact in Atlanta, then to New York, where it would be fashioned into wigs.

Even as many Black women are transitioning to wigs or buying multiples, those wigs aren't as easily obtained as they were just months ago. Chantell Carrtherol is a Los Angeles stylist and wigmaker who learned how to make hairpieces on Broadway and also helps clients customize wigs she designed.

Her premium handmade wigs can sell for up to \$6,000. Since July, she said, sales at Her's by Chantell have dropped 75%. Economically uncertain buyers have delayed purchases of luxury wigs, but she finds it challenging to source the hair she needs to fulfill new orders.

Carrtherol, 39, had trouble getting the lace for the cooler, lighter lace-front wigs that are popular. South Korea is a major player in lace manufacturing, and its production was delayed when the coronavirus raged through the country earlier this year. Switzerland sold out of lace for a time.

HARD TO FIND

Lace closures — typically, a horseshoe-shaped piece onto which the hair is sewn — have been hard to find. Prices have risen accordingly; a square foot of sturdy lace can now top \$120, up about 20%. Hair shipments from the two vendors in Asia that Carrtherol uses slowed to a business-killing trickle.

"With one company, I put in an order in July and I'm still waiting," she said. "It's been really challenging to get any concrete answers or real information from the suppliers. If you can't promise a client, what do you have?"

Arthur Ramlal, a consultant for the China International Hair Fair from the Netherlands, said geopolitics, trade disputes and the pandemic have created a uniquely frustrating situation for hair vendors and buyers, be they corporations, small-business owners or consumers.

"India had a very strict lockdown, and something like 80% of the hair for wigs and extensions comes from India, mostly from the temples" where people donate hair, Ramlal said. Furthermore, he said, the political relationship between China and India "is not so good at this moment, with boycotts" and threats of impending trade wars.

Less hair is being donated, and some workers have been afraid to process hair or go to work, rupturing the supply

chain. The international hair fair that Ramlal represents was canceled in late August; annually, the expo attracts up to 30,000 visitors, with separate conference halls for Chinese and English speakers.

AS MUCH AS 90%

And that may have a disproportionate effect on the U.S. market and its Black buyers. Ramlal estimated that Black American hair buyers like Carrtherol (who previously spent a year traveling to find vendors in China and India) make up the overwhelming majority, perhaps as much as 90%, of the foreign visitors who come to the Guangzhou hair show.

And then there are stateside delays. In July, U.S. customs officials seized a hair shipment from China — one of the biggest "sending countries," along with India, Brazil and Malaysia. U.S. Customs and Border Control believes that the hair came from forced labor camps largely holding ethnic Uighurs, a Muslim-minority group from western China.

News like that is a worry to a wig and extensions industry that's a continent-spanning business. In the United States alone, wigs and hairpiece stores net \$391 million annually, according to Ibis World Analysts. Black Americans are among their most faithful customers. A 2017 Nielsen Homescan report noted that Black consumers spent \$473 million on hair care that year and another \$54 million on "ethnic hair and beauty aids."

Antionette Kerr, a writer and nonprofit media consultant from Lake Norman, N.C., is watching for any hints that her wig pipeline is further endangered.

On March 28, she ordered her favorite wig online. The model — an Isis "Brown Sugar" human hair blend that often costs less than \$40 — arrived a full two months later, on May 30. She searched around online, but it was consistently sold out, except in colors she balked at wearing during her frequent online trainings.

'SELECTION WAS SLIM'

"I went to HairSisters.com," Kerr said. "The selection was slim. They only had purple left. And I love purple hair." But it "just wasn't what I wanted to wear during webinars" she was facilitating, she said.

"For a couple of weeks in the beginning, Amazon was only delivering 'essential' items," Kerr said. "And it was freaking me out. Because don't they know my hair is essential? Though I did get toilet paper then — for \$30. Ridiculous, ridiculous."