

RESIDENT FEATURE

KENISHA TUCKER: HELPING BRING MADISON'S HIDDEN FIGURES TO LIGHT

By Rachel Barry

Photos contributed by Hidden Figures of Madison

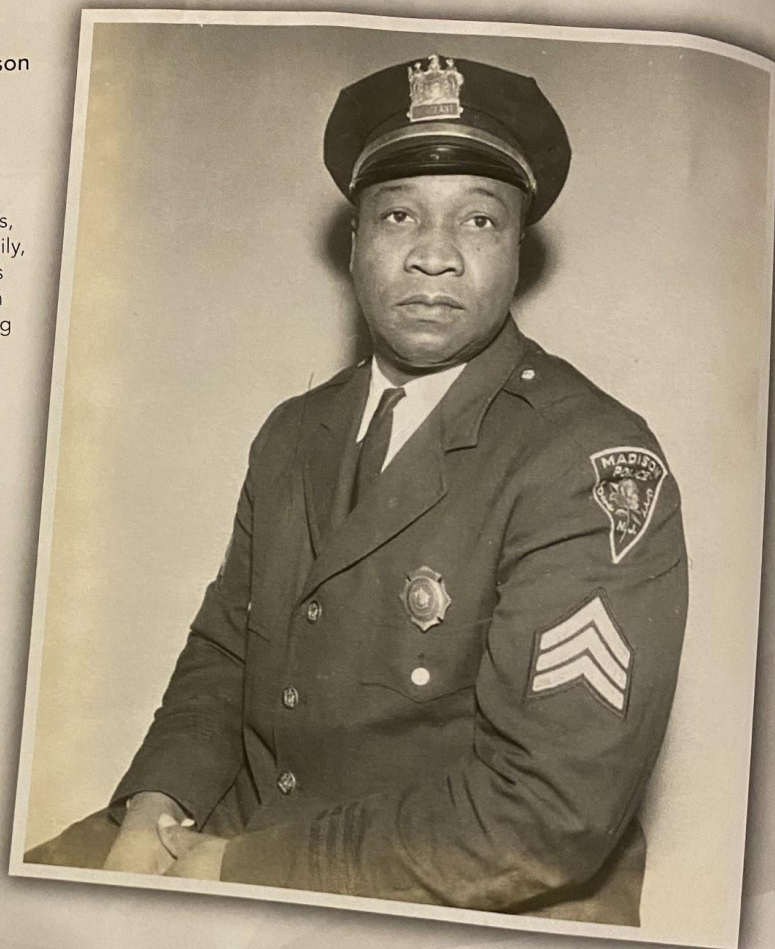
Take a walk down Madison's downtown and you'll see bold banners celebrating community members from the past and present day. People Bill Hagens, Bill Primus, and Aubrey Robinson Sr., the Johnson family, the Sallies/Evans family, and many more. The banners are part of the Hidden Figures of Madison project, an ongoing effort to showcase the historical and ongoing contributions of Madison's Black residents.

Madison resident Kenisha Tucker conceived of the project last year after attending the Madison Community Conversation meetings, organized by Mayor Conley and Councilperson Deb Coen, and talking with her sister, Sharela Coon-Bonfield, about the state injustices stemming from inequality. She started thinking about the gaps in our town's history, and the stories that had never been told or have been forgotten. After making some key connections at Drew University and talking to former Madison resident, Wendy Jo Johnson, Tucker started collecting stories. Says Tucker, "I was able to find out about so many individuals and stories that are noteworthy and of historical importance. Since my sister and I are both educators, the project organically led us to use our talents and resources to develop a mini-curriculum for grades k-2, 3-5, and 6-12 that offered lessons in art, language arts, and music. We were graciously allowed to present to the district's teachers and are so grateful that they understood the importance of the project and bought into our vision."

That work blossomed into a project for the whole community with the town-wide banners and other impactful programming. "It's remarkable how fast the project came together," says Tucker. In winter 2020, Tucker and Danielle Nebres, a Madison resident, started digging into the research. While that work continued, Tucker and her sister started developing a curriculum that teachers could easily integrate into their plans—while keeping in mind the challenges of hybrid learning. And to get the word out in the community, Deb Starker (Director of The Museum of Early Trades & Crafts), and Councilperson Coen shared the projects with local businesses and organizations like the DDC, MACA, and the Madison Area Chamber of Commerce.

All that interest and community enthusiasm blossomed this summer when the banners went up around town. Designed by local graphic designer, Kris Pfeiffer, the banners told the stories of individuals and families who made their mark on Madison and beyond.

While it's hard for Tucker to single out one favorite story, several of them were especially exciting. Says Tucker, "For



Officer Bill Hagens is just one of the many Madison community members featured in the Hidden Figures project. Mr. Hagens was the 21st police officer and first Black officer and Sergeant of the Madison Police Department. He broke this color barrier in 1946 a year before Jackie Robinson broke the barrier in Major League Baseball. Officer Hagens was also a WWII Veteran of the Army and received a purple heart for his service.

example, many people know about Don Newcombe and his contribution to MLB (he was the 3rd Black pitcher to join the league), but I was amazed to find out that he is not inducted into the MLB Hall of Fame!" Tucker also found it fascinating that Dr. George Kelsey, MLK Jr.'s mentor and a professor at Drew University, raised his family in Madison. "For all of us who worked on the project, every story we uncovered was fascinating—each contribution had an impact on the next generation of the community," adds Tucker. For full details on all the stories, visit <https://www.hiddenfiguresmadison.org/>, where you can see photos and read more about some of the families that shaped our town.

Another extraordinary figure for Tucker? Her sister. "Sharela is

eight years younger than me, and I've been like a second mom to her. Working with her on such a meaningful project and learning new skills and perspectives from her was amazing. I have always been proud of her, and my level of admiration for her has only grown."

Looking ahead, Tucker is excited to keep the momentum of Hidden Figures of Madison alive through continued research and community work. She says, "We really have barely scratched the surface. I am interested in marrying the two stories of the Italian immigrants who are at the foundation of Madison's beginnings, with the Latino and other immigrant populations that continue to grow and contribute to our town. My family is a first-generation immigrant family who has benefitted and has contributed to Madison. I would love for students and their families, and the community to learn more about those stories. I hope that sharing the stories of underrepresented people through the continuing work of the Hidden Figures of Madison, NJ project will create spaces where people can continue to learn about families, people, and stories that they might not otherwise be inclined to. I hope that in doing so, our community will continuously tap into our God-given instinct to love and make human connections." ♦

Do you know a neighbor who has a story to share?
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The Hidden Figures of Madison banners.

We would like to thank Salerno Duane Inc. in Summit for bringing you this month's cover story.