

Historic Clemmons Farm Becomes a Multicultural Center

by Cynthia Close

The bright but still cold March sun spilled across an impressive array of African art and artifacts, calling attention to the majestic settee and matching chairs fit for African royalty. Sitting in the middle of this eclectically designed living room, in a building called the Bog House, one of several structures at the Clemmons Family Farm, was 94-year-old Lydia Clemmons.

Lydia and her husband, Dr. Jackson Clemmons, have owned the 148-acre farm in Charlotte, Vermont, since 1962. The Clemmons Family Farm is one of only 19 African American-owned farms of the nearly 7,000 farms in Vermont, according to the 2012 agricultural census.

The Clemmons originally came from Cleveland, Ohio. Jackson was offered a job as a pathologist at the University of Vermont Medical Center. He accepted the position, making him only the second African American doctor to work at the center. Lydia was a registered nurse and trained anesthesiologist. At that time the Clemmons had

perched on the edge of an open field, to discuss their collective vision for the project and to share their goals. Along with the elder and younger Lydias were Sarah Katz of Burlington City Arts, who is the project's fiscal sponsor; Champlain College associate dean of administration Rosalynne Whitaker-Heck, EdD, APR, who is director of communication for the project; and Charlotte resident and journalist Susan Crockenberg. Joining the discussion by phone was dancer-choreographer Christal Brown, founder of Inspirit, a dance company. Inspirit is an institutional partner along with Building Heritage, Champlain College, the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps, and Burlington City Arts.

The elder Lydia was the heart and soul of the conversation. She mesmerized the group with her gentle storytelling powers, recalling the family trajectory that brought her and her husband to Vermont in the early 1960s in the very white part of white America. It was a pleasant surprise hearing the elder Lydia tell about the warmth of their welcome by their new Vermont friends. Doors were always open in Vermont back then. Fresh flowers and baked goods would magically appear

generation ages out of the demanding 24/7 work of farming, the next generation will take over, but few children opt for carrying on the traditions hard-won by parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. In these times of massive, industrial-strength farms, run like corporations, all the available agricultural land is being swallowed up into some giant, generic manufacturing plant. All those warm and fuzzy memories represented by long forgotten Norman Rockwell paintings in *Look* magazine or on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* are now remnants of an American way of life that perhaps never really existed.

But the younger Lydia is bucking this trend. Recognizing the unique contribution her parents made not only to farming and local history but also to the existence of African culture in the whitest state in the union, she took it upon herself to transform the farm, with her parents blessing, into a nonprofit cultural center.

The Clemmons Family Farm is modeled to some extent after its neighbor, Shelburne Farms. It includes six historically significant structures: the Main House, a lovingly restored 1778 colonial home; the Big Barn, a dairy cow and horse barn; the Barn House; the Shed; and the Blacksmith Shop. Its sustainable farmland and surrounding forests, ponds, and streams were recently included as a site on the state of Vermont's African-American Heritage Trail, established in 2013.

Early in March 2018, the Vermont Advisory Council on Historic Preservation awarded the Clemmons Family Farm a \$15,000 matching grant to restore the Big Barn a massive two-story structure that housed dairy cows, sheep, horses, pigs, and poultry from the early 1800s up to the mid 1990s. It was also a place where the Clemmons family children as well as the local community loved to work and play. The Big Barn features a unique 13-foot-high historic wooden cistern,

(below) The Colonial or Main House, one of six historic buildings on the Clemmons Family Farm, was built in the late 1770s and underwent extensive restoration over the course of 10 years. In front of the house are two 200-year-old black locust trees. (below right) The two-level Big Barn, built in the 1800s, housed livestock (lower level) and hay (upper level) until the mid-1990s.



two young children and needed a place to live.

Although Dr. Clemmons spent his youth on a farm, he decided early on that farming would not be his chosen career, and he pursued medicine. In 1961, while preparing for the family's move to Vermont, he was told about a farm that had been for sale for sometime in a town called Charlotte. The name of the town intrigued him. He was impressed by the history of the property and the beautiful location, so in spite of the rundown condition of the farm, the family cobbled together all the resources they could to purchase the property. Over the course of five decades, the Clemmons gradually restored the farm into a landmark historic estate.

A Sense of Place

The Clemmons Family Farm is the birthplace of A Sense of Place project. Spearheaded by Lydia's daughter and namesake, Lydia Clemmons, the project's executive director, the project's goal is to turn the farm from a private enterprise to an internationally recognized African American heritage and multicultural center. The project recently received a prestigious \$350,000 grant from ArtPlace America's National Creative Placemaking Fund. A Sense of Place was one of 23 projects that were selected after a very rigorous review of 987 applications.

The project's management team had gathered that March afternoon at the 1990s Bog House,

on their dining room table brought by congenial neighbors to this new African American family in their midst. Gradually, Jack and Lydia Clemmons restored the property. It became not only a working farm, but also a welcoming refuge for the Clemmons family's ever-widening circle of friends, artists, musicians, writers, and academics, many from Africa who felt the emotional power imparted by being on land owned by African Americans.

Political and economic power is often conferred via land ownership. Black Americans have long been disenfranchised by their limited access to owning and controlling land. Facts and data enhance the magnitude of the Clemmons' family accomplishment. Vermont boasts over a million acres of farmland, but only 740 of those acres are controlled by African Americans. Nationwide the results are even more dismal; less than half of 1 percent (.04 percent) of farms in the United States are African American owned. Farmers, whether black or white, rarely retire. The hope is when one



photo: Lynn Monty

(above) Prince Awhaitey, co-owner of his family's African market, Mawuhi African Market in Burlington, prepares traditional meals from nutritious ingredients. He will serve as a guest culinary artist to develop and implement Ghanaian-American healthy cuisine and culinary arts programs on the farm.

(left) Cod feijoada (right, next page) jollef rice and chicken.



which will be included in the preservative plans. Under the Sense of Place project, some of the Big Barn's interior spaces will be redesigned to accommodate African American and African diaspora visual and performing arts programs for the local community. Brown is most excited about utilizing the space for contemporary dance performances.

HIV/AIDS, maternal and reproductive health, child survival, and primary school education, administered through various agencies, such as USAID, UNICEF, UNAIDS, the Centers for Disease Control, and many other governments and international programs. With this impressive academic and professional background, one might expect to meet an imposing perhaps distant personality. Quite the opposite

and kept the business in operation until the early 2000s. Many of the remaining beautiful objects, paintings, furniture, and musical instruments from her import business are now being used to decorate and furnish the farm's historic buildings, as the Clemmons Family Farm becomes open to the public under its newly envisioned nonprofit form.

Other Vermont women who are

Management team for A Sense of Place project:

(back row from left to right): Susan Crockenberg, Marissa Coleman, Jack Clemmons, Christal Brown (middle row from left to right): Lydia Clemmons (daughter), Lydia Clemmons (mother), Roz Whitaker-Heck (front row from left to right): Candace Taylor, Peggy Briggs photo: Jan Doerler



African Connection

The Clemmons family connection to Africa, its people and culture, is not theoretical or simply a fact of history. It is tied to their travel, living, and work experiences across that vast continent. The younger Lydia was the first to turn her eyes toward Africa. Although her parents expected their intelligent, academically inclined eldest daughter to follow in their footsteps and attend med school, she decided to join the Peace Corps and headed out to remote villages in what was then Zaïre (now called the Democratic Republic of Congo). They may have hoped she would get the wanderlust out of her system, but that initial foray morphed into a more than 35-year career working to improve the lives of African people in more than 20 countries through education and other means of support.

Lydia has earned a doctor of philosophy degree in medical anthropology from the University of Pennsylvania, a master's in public health from the University of Michigan, and a bachelor's in human biology from Stanford. She has applied her management expertise to programs for nutrition, agriculture,

is true. Her modesty, enthusiasm, energy, and warmth welcome all to join in their growing community of cultural activists and supporters.

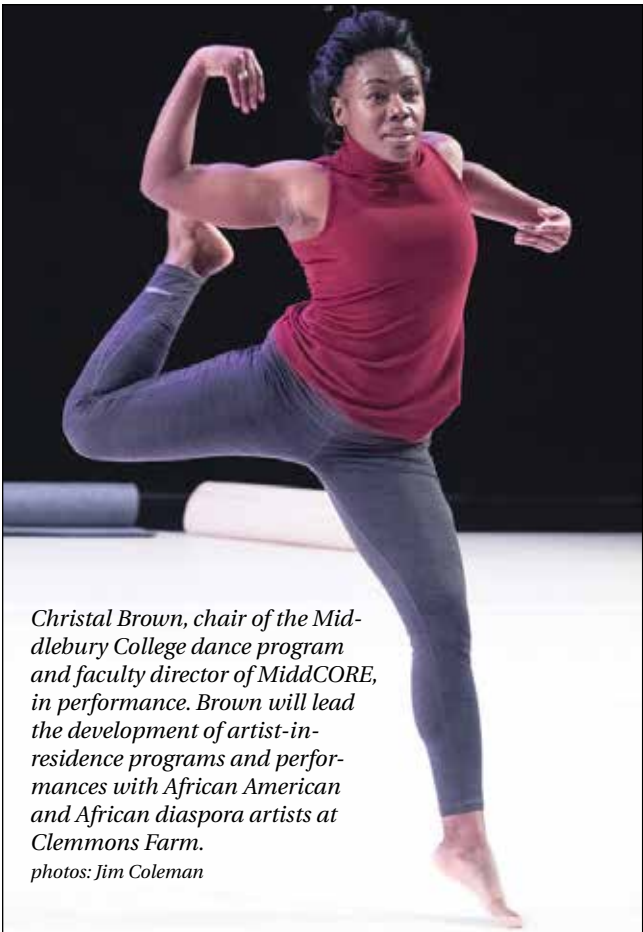
Once Lydia's parents accepted her chosen work in Africa, they, then in their 70s, decided to take their backpacks and explore Africa for themselves. They made connections with many artisans, and upon return to their Vermont home, the elder Lydia decided to open a business importing and selling museum-quality African art in the historic Blacksmith Shop that her husband had restored on their Charlotte farm. Authentica African Art Imports became the first African art mail-order import business in the United States. Authentica was the go-to source for textiles and clothes for local African American and African diaspora cultural events organized by students at UVM, Middlebury College, and other Vermont colleges and public schools. The elder Lydia also took African art to new audiences. Supported by grants from the Vermont Council of the Arts, she went on tour, bringing African culture into grade school and high school classrooms across the state

joining in this effort include Peggy Briggs a journalist and video producer serving as the project's culinary heritage and arts adviser. Briggs is currently completing her master's degree in food studies at New York University. There are plans for an African diaspora culinary heritage program on the farm. Marissa Coleman is the monitoring and reporting consultant for the project based on her work as a clinical psychologist. Zymora Davinchi, an 18-year-old Hazen Union High School senior, will be the culture and youth adviser, an acknowledgment of the importance of the project's educational goals.

The informative Clemmons Family Farm website (www.clemmonsfamily-farm.org) sums it up best: "Our mission is to be 'more than a farm' by offering curated opportunities for visitors to celebrate the history, culture, arts and sciences of the African-American and African diaspora in a magical setting. We actively promote the celebration of heritage as a continuum in which we learn from our past, shape our present, and invest in our future."

We can all look forward in the coming weeks and months to additional guided tours of the property and historic buildings; educational talks and demonstrations; cooking lessons and pop-up meals; music, dance, and theater performances; art exhibits and cultural events; multicultural community gatherings; outreach to local primary schools; and sharing Clemmons family stories and storytelling that trace more than 150 years of African American history.

Cynthia Close is a contributing editor for Documentary Magazine, art editor for the literary journal Mud Season Review, and an adviser to the Vermont International Film Festival. She lives in Burlington, Vermont. □



Christal Brown, chair of the Middlebury College dance program and faculty director of MidCORE, in performance. Brown will lead the development of artist-in-residence programs and performances with African American and African diaspora artists at Clemmons Farm. photos: Jim Coleman



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