

# 'Traveling While Black: Community Conversations' takes a look at racism in America

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*Courtesy Of Zoellner Arts Center /*

Zoellner Arts Center hosted an opening reception for the virtual reality experience "Traveling While Black" on Jan. 27, 2023. Executive Director Mark Wilson speaks with those in attendance.

BETHLEHEM, Pa. — It's no ordinary diner.

Grab a headset and take a seat at one of the booths inside the Zoellner Arts Center, where you'll find yourself transported inside an iconic restaurant in Washington D.C.

- **A series of community conversations also are being held across the Lehigh Valley**
- **The documentary that accompanies the program was directed by Academy Award winner Roger Ross Williams, who grew up in Easton**

"Traveling While Black," an installation that opened last month and runs through April 2, looks at racism toward Black Americans over the past seven decades.

The 2019 virtual-reality documentary was directed by Oscar-winner and Lehigh Valley native Roger Ross Williams.

## **A hands-on narrative**

Using Oculus headsets, the film virtually transports attendees into Ben's Chili Bowl, a Black-owned restaurant that was one of the thousands of establishments listed in a guide for Black travelers called the "Negro Motorist Green Book."

From the vantage point of a booth or a seat at the counter — viewers listen to life-like narratives from Ben's Chili Bowl owner Virginia Ali, native Washingtonian Sandra Butler-Truesdale, civil rights activist Courtland Cox and Samaria Rice, whose son Tamir Rice was shot and killed by a white police officer in Cleveland in 2014.

In the film, Butler-Truesdale, who grew up in a segregated part of D.C., recalls her experiences with train travel in the 1950s.

As a young girl, Butler-Truesdale was forced to move to the back of the train once it crossed from D.C. into Virginia. She was also not allowed to eat or use the bathroom while on board.

"I see people treat their dogs better now – right now, they treat their dogs better than they treated us as Black Americans," she recounts in the film.



*Courtesy Of Zoellner Arts Center /*

The Virtual Reality Experience: *Traveling While Black* takes place through April 2 at the Zoellner Arts Center at Lehigh University.

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Zoellner Executive Director Mark Wilson first saw the documentary at an exhibit in Virginia.

As a Black man, he said, he felt personally connected to the movie, which reminded him of his own experience growing up in different parts of America.

"I was born in Chicago, lived in a suburb of New Jersey, and I graduated from high school in a rural area in Iowa," Wilson said.

"Growing up in those places helped me understand different types of people. Before I was 7, I never saw a white person until I left Chicago. Then I saw people of all (colors) in New Jersey when I was a kid. Then, I was the first Black person in my school in Iowa."

## **Community conversations about race**

The roughly 20-minute virtual film is part of "Traveling While Black: Community Conversations" — a series of free lectures and events taking place at different spots in the Lehigh Valley during Black History Month.

The schedule is as follows:

On Wednesday, Feb. 15, a conversation about race and higher education will be held at Lehigh University with students Risa Nkululeko, Justin Burrell and Margaret Robinnette.

On Wednesday, Feb. 22, author and playwright Calvin Alexander Ramsey, Anthony Smith Jr. (visual and mixed-media artist), Deirdre Van Walters (President of Basement Poetry) and Michael Freeman (abstract artist) will lead a discussion on race and the arts at Muhlenberg College.

On Wednesday, March 1, local leaders will discuss their experiences as Black Americans at Greater Shiloh Church in Easton. The lecture will be led by Tafeni L. English-Relf (Director of Southern Poverty Law Center, Alabama), Esther M. Lee (President, Bethlehem NAACP), the Rev. Dr. Gregory Edwards (Resurrected Life Church) and moderated by Holona Ochs, a Lehigh University associate professor of political science.

On Wednesday, March 8, Monica Brooks (PPL), Natasha Ljuiljic (Air Products), Derrick

- a discussion about race and corporate America at Northampton Community College.
- On Wednesday, March 29, Lee Butz will lead a talk about standing up against racism at the Resurrected Life Community Church in Allentown, along with Marci Ronald-Lesko (United Way), Michael J. Seiden, Megan Briggs (Lehigh Valley Community Foundation) and Annie Balles, a Lehigh University student.
  - On Friday, March 31, the series will close with a reception at Zoellner's Black Box Theater with the cast and director of "Traveling While Black."
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Mark Wilson, Zoellner Executive Director

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Wilson said events like those being presented over the next several weeks are vital to understanding racial inequality.

"That is so important nowadays. It seems there's more things trying to pull people apart, not bring people together," he said.

"These kinds of experiences can help people have conversations with folks they may have never sat down with before. It's important to have an understanding of what happened in the past – and what's happening now."

For tickets to "Traveling While Black: Community Conversations," visit the [Zoellner Arts Center website](#).