



Celebrating Food, Art & Culture



Survivor reinvents herself and inspires others

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Alma Thomas: Visionary artist of color and light
'Afro-Indigenous' – and fiercely proud of it

Survivor reinvents herself and inspires others

Fitness expert and coach [Jesi Stracham](#) has completed 15 [Tough Mudder](#) events - extreme obstacle courses - since 2017. She starts her day at 5 a.m. with meditation, reading and a cold shower. By the time she heads to bed at 10 p.m., she's spoken with clients, worked out and spent time on her nonprofit.

Her family relocated from Canton, Ohio, to Iron Station, North Carolina (an hour northwest of Charlotte), in 2008 so Stracham could continue racing four-wheelers off road. In 2015, when Stracham was 22 years old, she was paralyzed after a motorcycle accident. Since then, she's used a wheelchair to get around.

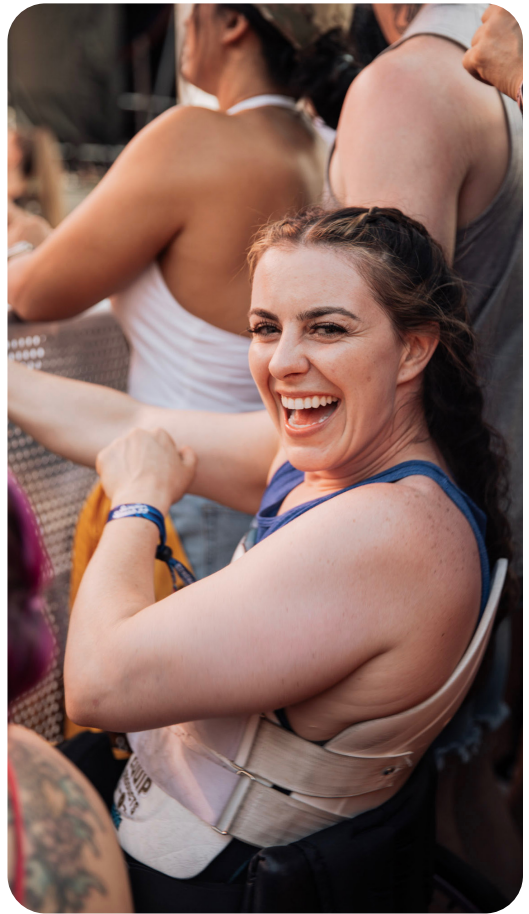
"(The accident) changed the trajectory of my life," she says. "Before I was paralyzed, I wasn't a good person. I was selfish. I didn't think about anyone else but myself. I feel very fortunate to have purpose, and I get to have a second chance at life. I redefined who I am as a human."

Stracham co-founded [Wheel With Me Foundation](#) in 2016. Its mission is "focused on a growing community of men and women who are wheelchair users. Our mission is to bridge the gap between inpatient rehabilitation and independent living through activism."

"I wanted to help wheelchair users gain independence," Stracham says. "It's something that's overlooked. The statistics are really sad. Over [50% of the spinal cord injury population](#) rely solely on government assistance for their independence. At year 40 of injury, only [30% of the population](#) are working. Which means that this population is living in poverty."

Wheel With Me Foundation is building a transitional community - wheelchair users who are still learning to be independent - to provide opportunities for self-sufficiency by connecting them with others in the wheelchair community. Stracham's seen how wheelchair users become healthier, form friendships and develop independent skills when they're given the tools to do so.

"We're transitioning them to an independent community," she says, "so they are contributing members of society. Where they are able to buy a home, have a family and feel self-worth. Our goal is



"I feel very fortunate to have purpose," says wheelchair user, fitness expert and coach Jesi Stracham, "and I get to have a second chance at life." Photo by 1stPhorm.

Wheelchair etiquette

Jesi Stracham, co-founder of Wheel With Me Foundation, suggests these guidelines when interacting with a wheelchair user:

- Ask the wheelchair user before touching, pushing or moving the chair.
- Avoid asking someone why they use a wheelchair to get around.
- If you have something to give the wheelchair user, ask where to place it.
- Refrain from making comments about the wheelchair.
- Remember a wheelchair is an extension of someone's body. Consider how you approach a wheelchair user with this in mind.

Influencer promotes body positivity – inside and out



"A lot of people say, 'When you look good, you feel good,' but I say, 'You feel good, you look better,'" says Alicia M. Williams. Photos by Jason M. Williams

Alicia Williams grew up in a large family in Virginia Beach, Virginia. From an early age, she recognized how her community of older Black women influenced her through the life lessons they shared. "All the older women in my life could be doing my hair, cooking, getting dressed or getting me dressed for church," Williams says, "but while they were doing that, they were dropping gems."

In 2021, Williams launched an account on Instagram and posted her first video about fashion on her YouTube channel. The title is a play on the words paid and slay. It forwards Williams' message to slay from the inside out. "On social media and in real life, people are so concerned with outward appearances that they forget to slay on the inside as well," she says. "A lot of people say, 'When you look good, you feel good,' but I say, 'You feel good, you look better.'"

Williams credits her father, artist Vincent Coston, for her interest in fashion. As a kid, she drew, sang and wrote. "I think my fashion sense and my love of style comes from the art I watched my father create," she says. "When I put clothing together, it's like I have a palette, and I am putting together a piece of art."

In her posts, Williams draws from a 10-year career working in the human services field with people with disabilities, 20 years as a freelance copywriter and her current role as a technical writer for a government agency.

From the basement of her Woodbridge, Virginia, home, Williams posted two times a week to Instagram. In most reels, Williams chose an outfit to wear while she talked about a life lesson about body positivity, mindset, personal dreams and self-confidence. "I was able to reach people all over the world who are all struggling to be better," she says. "The fact that I could touch so many people with so many backgrounds really inspired me. It was an opportune time to positively influence somebody."

A clever reel Williams produced on Instagram in April 2023, "[4 Ugly Things Women Over 40 Should Not Wear, Part 1](#)," increased her followers from 3,700 to 100,000 in less than three months. The reel was viewed more than 16 million times. It highlights how assumptions and insecurities can hold you back from being successful. Although 96% of her followers are women, they range from early teens to 80s. "It's interesting how they all have different struggles because of generational differences," she says, "but they relate to the topics I discuss."

In January 2024, Williams shifted her business model to a [website](#) and YouTube, providing longer videos for her viewers. "I would like to build an authentic relationship with my audience and believe it will take more than 90 seconds to connect with the people behind the profiles."

She's strategic about her messaging and wants to influence people to be better. "It's a very powerful thing to know you have that impact, specifically with your words," she says. "I have to be responsible with that power."

This year, Williams and her husband Jason Williams will launch, "Couple with a Clue," a podcast about relationships. They've been together 20 years and have much to offer about topics relating to couples. "We intend to expand the brand in the same way I've expanded Slaid in Full," she says. "(We want to) offer products, services and experiences for couples who wish to slay together so they can stay together."



Visionary artist of color and light

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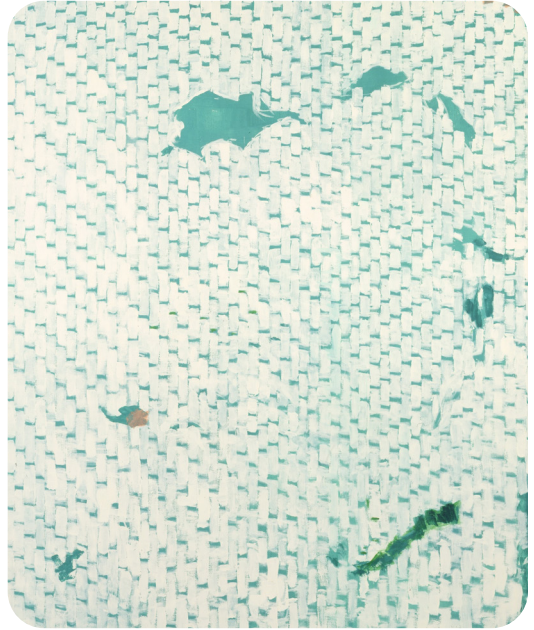
Alma Thomas' innovative use of color, dynamic compositions and unwavering dedication to her artistic vision presents a unique opportunity for young women to see the importance of following one's ambitions without reservations.

Born Sept. 22, 1891, in Columbus, Georgia, Thomas emerged as a trailblazer during a time when the art world was predominantly dominated by white male artists. Thomas' remarkable talent, coupled with her fearless exploration of abstract art, propelled her into the spotlight, making her a pioneering force in the realm of American modernism.

Thomas' early life was marked by a profound love for art and an innate curiosity about the world around her. Her parents encouraged Thomas' artistic impulses by encouraging her to create sculptures from the clay in their backyard and to enroll her in violin lessons.

Her family decided to move for the better educational and economic opportunities afforded to Black people in Washington, D.C. She attended Howard University in the nation's capital, where she initially studied home economics before switching her major to fine arts. Under the guidance of influential artists and educators, including James V. Herring, Thomas honed her skills and developed a unique artistic voice. She graduated from the university's fine art department in 1924, the first person to receive a bachelor's degree in studio art from Howard University.

Scholar and artist Keith Morrison argues that Thomas likely also became the first Black woman in the country to earn this degree. In the 1960s, Thomas retired after her 35-year tenure as an art teacher at Shaw Junior High in Washington D.C., and began to gain recognition for her vibrant and expressive abstract paintings. Although she never ceased her art education and expanding her creative practice, her work became more influenced by the fleeting nature of the environment, reflecting her fascination with the colors, patterns, and rhythms found in flowers, foliage, and celestial bodies. Thomas had a profound understanding of the emotional power of color, and her paintings often featured bold, vivid hues meticulously arranged in intricate patterns.



"Snow Reflections on Pond" by Alma Thomas

For example, her painting "The Eclipse" utilizes her signature blocks of exuberant color to evoke the experience of witnessing the astronomical event.

Thomas' later works, created in the 1970s, were marked by a departure from her earlier compositions. She began to explore larger, more expansive canvases, allowing her creativity to flow freely. These paintings, often referred to as her "space paintings," were inspired by the Apollo moon landings and the boundless expanse of the universe. These works reflected her enduring curiosity about the world and her belief in the limitless possibilities of artistic expression.

This period also led Thomas to explore her sense of spirituality and optimism in her work. In her painting, "Snow Reflections on Pond," she interrupts sways of turquoise paint with sheer blocks of white capturing the essence of joy, hope and the beauty of life. The gem-toned hue peeks through the metaphorical snow to represent promise in the face of adversity and the brutal cold of D.C. winters. This uplifting quality

endearing her to audiences, making her art not only visually captivating but also emotionally resonant.

Thomas' breakthrough moment came in 1972 when, at the age of 81, she became the first Black woman to have a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. This milestone catapulted her into the national spotlight, bringing her work to a broader audience and cementing her legacy as a groundbreaking artist. The attention also brought Thomas criticism from other Black artists who thought that abstractionism failed to serve the urgent needs of the Black Power Movement in comparison to representational art. Nonetheless, the retrospective was a renowned success with another exhibition mounted that year at D.C.'s Corcoran Gallery of Art.

Through compositions such as 1978's "Untitled (Music Series)," the audience sees Thomas masterfully push herself to continue experimenting with motion and rhythm. The artist draws viewers into a mesmerizing visual experience by restricting her color palette to red and white and focuses on the swirling shapes of white that suggest musicality.

Beyond her artistic achievements, Thomas faced the challenges of racial and gender discrimination with resilience and determination, refusing to be confined by societal expectations. Thomas' success was a testament to her talent, tenacity and unwavering belief in the power of art to transcend boundaries and foster understanding.

To celebrate Thomas' work and legacy, the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM) recently curated an exhibition of her work titled "Composing Color: Paintings by Alma Thomas." This retrospective of Thomas' later work highlights her bold use of color, innovative compositions and unwavering dedication to her craft.

"Thomas was such an important figure in Washington, D.C., for so long - there are still many people in the city who knew her and have vivid memories to share. It's been remarkable talking to people who have shared their encounters with her and learning from her," comments Melissa Ho, the SAAM curator of 20th-century art. The selection of paintings brilliantly evokes a dazzling interplay of the pattern and vibrant color characteristic of her practice.

Ho goes on to say, "Visiting this show is a chance to bask in the beauty of her paintings, and to experience Thomas' profound connection to the natural environment around her and her love of life itself." On view until June 2, 2024, the exhibition is a must-see for those interested in learning more about this amazingly talented artist.



"The Eclipse" by Alma Thomas



"Untitled (Music Series)" by Alma Thomas

'Afro-Indigenous' – and fiercely proud of it



"I'm always taking two or three things from different cultures and I'm putting them together to make one dish," says Chef Erica McCier. Photo courtesy of Old 96 District

Erica McCier, a native of Abbeville, South Carolina, challenged the notions people have about Black-owned restaurants in the South when she opened [Indigenous Underground](#) in historic downtown Abbeville. Some doubted she'd succeed with a menu featuring gator grits and soul rolls. Others were confused by the word "indigenous."

"It's the stereotype that if an African American woman owns a restaurant, it's got to be soul food," McCier says of the eatery she opened in July 2021. "As a woman of color, I am mixed with a little bit of everything."

McCier calls her cooking style Afro-Indigenous and cultural fusion. Her soul roll is filled with seasoned collard greens and black-eyed peas, wrapped in a spring roll, deep fried and accompanied by house-made chili sauce. "I'm always taking two or three things from different cultures and I'm putting them together to make one dish," McCier says. "It challenges me to be a bit more creative."

Opening the restaurant isn't the only time McCier has faced adversity. In 2008, after 10 years at Abbeville's middle school, she stopped teaching visual arts because she developed kidney disease. While sitting in the dialysis chair, waiting for a new kidney, McCier watched the Food Network. The channel piqued her interest in cooking.

McCier researched "culinary schools near me" and found Greenville Technical College in Greenville, South Carolina. She enrolled in classes to pass the time. "I was really bored," she says. "I did it for a hobby. I never had any intention of becoming a chef, but I fell in love with it."

McCier started her first catering business in 2012 while in culinary school and still on dialysis. By 2013, at the age of 40, she received a kidney transplant. She took a year off from school to recover from the surgery and returned to Virginia College in Greenville to finish her culinary arts degree in 2014.

In 2020, McCier started holding pop-up dinners at people's homes and a corner store for these dinners, but eventually decided to open [Indigenous Underground](#) for Sunday brunch, midday meal and dinner in the space. She now hosts these dinners three times a year for Valentine's Day, spring and fall. McCier serves a four- or five-course meal with live music.

"It was really an experience," McCier says. "These last three to four hours."

McCier was named one of three [South Carolina Chef Ambassadors](#) in 2023. She qualified for this title because her restaurant is designated a "fresh on the menu restaurant." This means at least 25% of fresh produce and meat comes from South Carolina-certified farmers. [Indigenous Underground's](#) menu is closer to 60% to 70% fresh produce and meat. McCier is determined to hold the title for life, advocating for farms to be certified and for the community to support them.

"We are the ones who promote these farmers," she says. "We encourage the community to shop with their certified farmers."

Grilled Peach Summer Succotash

Servings: 6-8

Ingredients

- 2 fresh firm peaches
- 1 red onion, diced
- 1 large bell pepper, diced
- 1 1/2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 2 teaspoons minced garlic
- 2 pounds fresh corn
- 12 ounces baby lima beans
- 1 yellow squash or zucchini, chopped
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 1 tablespoon fresh basil, chopped

Directions

Slice the fresh peaches into 1/4 inches and grill each slice on both sides. Once grilled, chop into medium-size dice. If a grill is not available, the peaches can be pan-seared to bring out the sweetness.

Sauté onion and bell pepper in butter until translucent. Add the garlic, corn, lima beans and squash. Cook for about 10 minutes, stirring frequently until the corn and lima beans are heated through.

Add salt and pepper to taste.

Remove from the heat and stir in the diced peaches and garnish with fresh basil.

Expert in 'reimagined comfort food' with Southern roots

Mimi Maumus, owner of home.made, a restaurant in Athens, Georgia, trained to be a chef under Chef Hugh Acheson at his flagship restaurant Five & Ten in Athens. She gained a deep appreciation for the technical aspects of cooking and repetitive work. It was never about shortcuts, she says. Starting out slow to get it right was encouraged.



"I cook from a place of love," says Georgia-based Chef Mimi Maumus. Photo courtesy of VisitAthensGA.com

"I've always learned best hands-on," Maumus says. "At that time, the kitchen staff there were very serious about learning. It was a really beautiful place to learn."

For five years, Maumus juggled a personal chef business while working full-time at Five & Ten. In 2011, she opened [home.made](#) in a small space because it was all she could afford. She continued to work the 60-hour chef position, but by 2013, after eight years under Acheson, Maumus left her job at Five & Ten to devote her time to home.made.

Maumus refers to her cooking style as "reimagined comfort food." Everything is made from scratch, ingredients may be foraged and she's not afraid to add fish sauce. home.made's menus reflect her New Orleans' upbringing - Maumus' dad and grandmother both loved to cook. Dishes are also influenced by her more than 30 years in Georgia.

"A lot of my food style has been informed by my life," she explains. "It's southeastern. It's an appreciation for seasonality. I like to cook with kudzu or smilax, different things that thrive in this environment. I cook from a place of love and those are the nostalgic, deep, in-my-bones favorite foods."

Maumus likes to transform a traditional Southern dish, like the tomato pie, into a healthier version, one that will bring the memory of a family recipe to mind. "We won't lose the soul of the dish," Maumus says. "(I want to offer) a very thoughtful version for our customer's health. Food is to be enjoyed, but ultimately it is nourishment."

Swanee Bites

Ingredients

Corn Flour Cheese Straws (Gluten-Free)

- 10 ounces extra-sharp white cheddar, grated
- 1/4 pound butter, diced
- 1 1/3 cups corn flour
- 3/4 teaspoon baking powder
- Pinch of salt
- 1 teaspoon cayenne pepper (optional)

Pimento Cheese

- 3 ounces cream cheese, room temperature
- 1 tablespoon yellow onion, pureed
- 2 tablespoons pimento peppers or a roasted red pepper, diced
- Pinch of cayenne, optional or to taste
- 1/2 teaspoon paprika
- 1 pound extra-sharp white cheddar cheese, shredded
- 1 cup mayonnaise

For rolling

- 1 1/2 cups pecans, toasted and chopped

Directions

Preheat the oven to 300 F.

For the cheese straws, allow the cheese and butter to become room temperature. You can use a microwave to do this, but do not overheat and melt ingredients. If you do melt the butter and cheese, refrigerate until soft but no longer melted.

Sift the flour and baking powder. Add the salt and cayenne.

In a food processor with a blade attachment, blend the cheese and butter until uniform.

Remove the cheese and butter from the processor bowl and fold in the flour mixture until evenly blended.

With a pastry bag fitted with a 1/2-inch star tip, pipe the dough in 2 1/2-inch lines onto a parchment-lined baking sheet.

Refrigerate for 1 hour to overnight.

Bake in a 300 F oven for 10 minutes. Rotate and lower the oven to 200 F and cook until crisp.

Oven time will vary based on straw thickness - but anywhere from 20 to 40 minutes.

For the pimento cheese, blend the cream cheese with the onion, peppers, cayenne and paprika. Fold in the shredded cheese. Add the mayonnaise. Mix until combined.

Assembling: Sandwich 1 teaspoon of pimento cheese between 2 cheese straws. Roll each one in pecans to coat the sides and cover the cheese.

Survivor reinvents herself and inspires others

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Photo by Lexi Lovelace

to get wheelchair users to that point so they don't have to live in poverty forever."

Since 2021, the nonprofit has been hosting weeklong empowerment workshops four times a year. The free classes are virtual and cover topics such as advocacy, budgeting, employment, faith, fitness and travel. The next series begins in April 2024. Participants may sign up for the course to receive a Zoom link or watch past presentations on the [YouTube](#) channel.

"Members of the community volunteer an hour of their time," she says. "They share their tips or trade to help improve the success outcomes of wheelchair users."

In 2023, Stracham launched a for-profit business, [Wheel With Me Adapt Fit](#), an app with a monthly subscription for wheelchair users. The app offers classes and routines featuring meditations and exercises with weights and resistance bands. Wheelchair users may also access the free private Facebook group [Wheel With Me Adapt Fit](#). It offers two live workouts a week with information about nutrition and routines.

"Wheel With Me Adapt Fit is designed to support the longevity of wheelchair users independence," notes Stracham.