



## August Wilson House, Duquesne University, Nancy Beard Foundation Team Up to Support Emerging Artists through August Wilson Fellowship

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### Abstract

August Wilson House, Pittsburgh's Duquesne University and the Nancy Beard Foundation have partnered with to create a fellowship aimed at supporting scholars and artists of color, in an attempt to bring August Wilson's creative legacy "full circle."

### Keywords

*Duquesne University, August Wilson House, August Wilson Fellowship, Nancy Beard Foundation*

In early 2018, a \$100,000 fellowship program was established between The August Wilson House and Duquesne University. The program will allow scholars and artists of color to engage in literary, cultural, and artistic expression that will both advance their own work and serve the interests of the university and the community, according to a Duquesne University press release. The fellowship is fully supported by a grant from the Nancy Jones Beard Foundation.

Beginning in fall 2018, the three-year grant allows two Duquesne University students per academic year to live as "scholars-in-residence" in a Duquesne University apartment, while developing their art, participating in research using university resources, developing presentations, teaching, and participating in educational events both on and off campus. All work created by students will be featured in Wilson's Hill District childhood home at 1727 Bedford Avenue.



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The program furthers Duquesne's partnership with The August Wilson House, in efforts to support education in the humanities. "This gift helps bring August Wilson's legacy full circle by honoring his extraordinary career while encouraging the work of great artists and scholars of the future," said Duquesne University President, Ken Gormley. "It allows the University to strengthen its engagement with the Hill District and its commitment to advancing the arts and culture in Western Pennsylvania."

The intention is that the home, which is currently being restored, serve as a community arts center and eventually house fellowship recipients. According to the August Wilson House website, the restoration project aims to celebrate the personal memory and community history of August and The Hill, celebrating Wilson's legacy by "advancing the art and culture of the African diaspora and impacting the cultural landscape." The two-room home, restored to its 1950s look, will become an "intimate interpretive site," with various rooms housing digital and audio displays and artifacts about Wilson's life and plays.

A series of small artist studios and community gathering spaces is also planned. Outside space will be used for annual productions of the American Century Cycle plays, perhaps "growing into a biennial August Wilson Festival."

Through the August Wilson Visiting Fellowships, both local and national artists and scholars will be provided immersive work, research, and community exchange opportunities in return for partnering with Hill District organizations and Pittsburgh arts groups and universities. Ultimately, the Wilson House will be a catalyst in the Hill's re-emergence, linking with other Hill institutions (some being restored themselves) into a network of revival.

According to Sairah Aslam, a staff writer for *The Duquesne Duke*, the fellowship was created to help relieve some of the uncertainties associated with artistic endeavors by providing a platform through which underrepresented artists can showcase their work to the Duquesne community, the Hill District, the City of Pittsburgh and beyond. The partnership works to connect the work of emerging artists to the legacy left by Wilson. "As a young artist, he [August] didn't receive the support he deserved," said Paul A. Ellis, Jr., executive director and general counsel of the August Wilson House, and Wilson's nephew. "This program will allow fellows to work in the same community as August [did] and draw inspiration from it to create immersive and enduring work."

The first fellow, Natasha Trethewey, was announced in September 26, 2018. Trethewey is a poet and Pulitzer Prize recipient, has served twice as the Poet Laureate of the United States, and is currently a Board of Trustees Professor of English at Northwestern University, according to a Duquesne University press release. As Poet Laureate, Trethewey



Natasha Trethewey

held an official position, was expected to present one major poetic work, and to appear at certain national ceremonies. This announcement was a part of a ground-blessing ceremony at which Duquesne University President, Ken Gormley, joined actor/director Denzel Washington and area dignitaries at the August Wilson House. The event celebrated the completion of the first phase of fundraising toward restoration of the house. As of now, the founders of the fellowship plan to sustain the program for the first few years as is. They will eventually look towards expanding it both by the number of fellows and the type of work they do, according to Aslam.

According to Duquesne University media relations manager, Ken Walters, university Honors College students have held an active role in the refurbishment of the 1727 Bedford home since a strategic plan was developed in 2011. This has included developing effective programs, one of them being their annual block party in The Hill District, which usually happens on or around Wilson's birthday, April 27. By hosting the annual block party, organizers hope to bring the community together. Students also work in collaboration with the Daisy Wilson Artist Community, Inc., which was named after the playwright's mother, who created a home for her family in The Hill. There, August grew up inquisitive, loyal and an incessant reader, eventually becoming a Black Nationalist, then poet and playwright.

Professionally, Wilson won two "Best Drama" Pulitzer Prizes for his plays about the African-American experience in each decade of the 20th Century. Nine of his plays were set in Pittsburgh, with the exception of *Ma Rainey*. "This work changes our students' lives by encouraging them to look outward—the community is their classroom," said Kathleen Roberts, professor of communication and rhetorical studies and director of the Honors College at Duquesne University. "Students can develop a reverence for Wilson's work and also learn how their skills have a use beyond the profession they choose."

Additionally, students' skills benefited The August Wilson House outside of refurbishment, as they worked to create the organization's website and Facebook pages, planning events, engaging with other community groups, and developing sponsorship opportunities. According to the Honors College website, participating students analyze the needs of a community near Duquesne University; select and carry out a project that will meet an important community need and contribute to their own academic growth; reflect on their experience and examine their work in light of what others have written about civic engagement and service-learning; and document their project, studies, and reflections to assist others who are interested in forging links between universities and communities. Each semester, Duquesne students engage in a social justice seminar wherein they work together to improve or call attention to the social problems of the Hill District.

According to the Daisy Wilson Artist Community website, the partnership aims to offer educational and service opportunities for Duquesne students and staff in The Hill District, promote the arts both at Duquesne University and in The Hill, preserve and advance the artistic legacy of August Wilson, and help The Hill community flourish.

The 2012 Honor Seminar students sought to outline a plan for the Signature Partnership of the Duquesne University Honors College and The Daisy Wilson Artist Community over a five-year period from 2012-17. The plan addresses three main goals: the reintroduction and promotion of the arts will revitalize the culture of Pittsburgh's Hill District, preservation of the August Wilson Boyhood Home to help preserve August Wilson's legacy and philosophy, and academic and service opportunities to strengthen connections between Duquesne University and the Hill District.

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## Author Bio

Ms. Laura Quain is a 2019 graduate of Duquesne University's Corporate Communication and Integrated Marketing Communication Program. Prior to that, she attended Kutztown University where she completed a degree in English/Professional Writing and wrote for the school newspaper.



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