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Media Contact: media@ajsmitherman.com

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In Honor of A.J. Smitherman's Birthday, Raven Majia Williams Launches the A.J. Smitherman Foundation, Advancing Black Wall Street 100

On December 27, 2025—the birthday of pioneering journalist, publisher, and Greenwood co-founder **A.J. Smitherman**—Raven Majia Williams announced the launch of **The A.J. Smitherman Foundation**, marking the latest milestone in **Black Wall Street 100**, a movement she founded more than a decade ago to excavate, preserve, and reclaim a legacy that was deliberately buried.

Long before renewed public attention focused on Black Wall Street, Williams was working to ensure that her great-grandfather's role as a founder of Greenwood—and as one of the most fearless truth-tellers of his era—was accurately documented, contextualized, and protected from erasure.

A.J. Smitherman was the founder and publisher of the *Tulsa Star*, one of the most influential Black newspapers of its era. Through his reporting, editorials, and his epic poem written in the aftermath of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, Smitherman served as a primary witness and documentarian of Greenwood's rise, destruction, and aftermath. His work remains among the most direct historical records of the period.

"My great-grandfather didn't interpret history—he recorded it," said Williams. "That gives our family not just a connection to the story, but a responsibility to ensure it's told with accuracy, context, and integrity."

Why Authorship Matters Now

In the current cultural climate—marked by renewed debates over book bans, historical erasure, and who controls narrative—questions of authorship and authority have become unavoidable.

Williams' work challenges the long-standing pattern of Black history being retold without those closest to it having agency in how it is framed.

"This isn't about ownership in a commercial sense alone," Williams said. "It's about moral authority—about honoring the people who bore witness, took risks, and left records so the truth could survive." That principle is the foundation of **Black Wall Street 100**, the movement Williams created to ensure that preservation includes voice, consent, and accountability.

A.J. Smitherman, publisher of the *Muskogee Star*, *Tulsa Star*, and *Empire Star*, was not only a central architect of Greenwood's intellectual and civic life, but also one of the earliest journalists to expose the **guardianship racket**—a system that legally stripped young Black and Native heirs of their oil wealth, often referred to as *Black Gold*. His reporting challenged the theft of land, resources, and voice at a time when doing so carried grave personal risk.

Released on his birthday, December 27, Smitherman's autobiography documents his formation of the Negro Guardianship League — an organized effort to expose and fight the racketeering system. The movement helped protect **millions in oil wealth** belonging to Black Freedmen, underscoring the real-world stakes of his journalism.

"My great-grandfather didn't just document history — he confronted power," said Williams. "And for decades, that part of the story was minimized, erased, or told without his voice."

A Story the Culture Is Finally Catching Up To

Recent cultural works — including the film *Sarah's Oil*, Executive Produced by Ciara and Russell Wilson, now bringing renewed attention to the guardianship system — have reignited public conversation around the very injustices Smitherman exposed more than a century ago. For Williams, the moment is not coincidence.

"We're watching the culture finally catch up to truths that were already known, documented, and suppressed," she said. "The question now is: who gets to tell the story — and who has the moral right to do so?"

That question sits at the heart of **Black Wall Street 100**, the movement Williams created to assert narrative authorship and moral authority over stories that have too often been extracted, repackaged, and monetized without consent.

As part of that work, Williams served as a producer on the two-part documentary *The Legacy of Black Wall Street*, released with **Oprah Winfrey Network** and **Discovery+**, which helped bring historically grounded perspectives on Greenwood and Black Wall Street to a global audience. The project further cemented her role as a steward of the story — not an outside commentator.

Williams is also a producer on *Blindspot: Tulsa Burning*, an **NAACP Award-winning** podcast released in partnership with **NPR**, **A&E**, and **History Channel**, examining how history, power, and narrative shape modern understanding.

From Excavation to Stewardship

The A.J. Smitherman Foundation formalizes work that has been unfolding for years — shifting from excavation to permanence.

The Foundation exists not simply to preserve history, but to **restore authorship** and protect the moral rights of descendants and communities whose stories have too often been told without them.

Its mission includes:

- Preserving and disseminating historically accurate narratives of Greenwood and Black Wall Street
- Educating the public on the guardianship system and the theft of Black and Native wealth
- Supporting culturally grounded storytelling, scholarship, and curriculum
- Advocating for the right of communities to tell their own stories

"This is not a launch," Williams said. "It's a marker. A signal that the work has reached a level of permanence it always deserved."

The Book and the Movement Forward

In conjunction with this announcement, Williams released her book *A.J. Smitherman, Black Gold, Black Wall Street and Black Power*, documenting A.J. Smitherman's life in Oklahoma, journalism, and resistance — drawn from his newspaper work and writings as a primary witness to Greenwood and the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. The release includes a Limited Legacy Edition hardcover.

The book serves as both historical record and cultural intervention — a continuation of **Black Wall Street 100** and its mission to ensure that stories rooted in lived experience are told with integrity, accuracy, and consent.

For years, the so called history of Black Wall Street has circulated widely and has been taught, adapted, dramatized, and monetized — often without the full context of those who documented it as it was unfolding. Williams' work centers on a critical distinction: **this story was not reconstructed generations later — it was documented in real time.**

Because Smitherman documented these events in real time — through journalism and poetry — his family occupies a unique position not as interpreters of history, but as stewards of the original record. The A.J. Smitherman Foundation will continue to expand educational initiatives, partnerships, and public programming throughout the coming year.

More information is available at [AJSmitherman.com](https://ajsmitherman.com).

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About The A.J. Smitherman Foundation

The A.J. Smitherman Foundation is an institution dedicated to preserving the legacy of A.J. Smitherman — founder of the *Tulsa Star*, Greenwood civic leader, and early documentarian and exposé of the guardianship system — while advancing accurate, community-rooted storytelling around Black Wall Street and African American economic history. The Foundation is an extension of **Black Wall Street 100**, a movement founded by Raven Majia Williams focused on education, preservation, and reclaiming narrative authority.