

Full Transcript of PBS News Hour segment: How award-winning poet Nikky Finney is bringing new life to her community (Feb 15, 2023)

Nikky Finney is a National Book Award-winning poet, professor and advocate for social justice and cultural preservation.

Jeffrey Brown went to South Carolina to see how that mission has now taken on very personal meaning.

It's part of our arts and culture series, Canvas.

Nikky Finney, Poet, University of South Carolina:

Every artist that has walked in here has said, don't cubbyhole this. Keep it grand.

Jeffrey Brown:

Nikky Finney has big plans for this cavernous 1940s warehouse, once on to the Southern Electric Company. You can still see the painted parking space lines for the industrial trucks.

Nikky Finney:

I think we might keep those, just because we're going to keep some of the history of the old building.

Jeffrey Brown:

Well, the history is important.

Nikky Finney:

It's very important.

Jeffrey Brown:

So this is one of the rooms you will be using?

Nikky Finney:

Yes, this is one of the rooms.

This piece right here is a depiction of a slave ship.

Jeffrey Brown:

Past and future are fused in a new art center in a once-vibrant Black community of Columbia, South Carolina.

Nikky Finney:

This brought tears to my eyes.

Jeffrey Brown:

A place for exhibitions, performances, art classes, residencies for local artists who often can't afford the rent for studio space.

Nikky Finney:

A hub, a place where people come in to find each other, a place where people get inspired.

They sit in that long house — that's what I call it — that long house next door and they listen to something that they hadn't heard before, some music, something that goes back into their human body, their system that feeds them.

Jeffrey Brown:

The South Carolina-born-and-raised writer is author of five books of poetry that weave the personal and political, including "Head Off & Split," winner of the 2011 National Book Award, and from 2020 "Love Child's Hotbed of Occasional Poetry."

A professor with an endowed chair at the University of South Carolina since 2013, she previously taught for 20 years at the University of Kentucky.

Nikky Finney:

We hope to generate so much energy and excitement about the center.

Jeffrey Brown:

Now she's dedicated herself to the new center, and, on a recent weekend, she opened its doors to the public for a pop-up artist market.

Nikky Finney:

We're going to have a stage. Half of it will be outside. Half of it will be inside. We will have things out under the moonlight.

Jeffrey Brown:

Also to celebrate the center's namesake, a man who himself made history, her father, Ernest A. Finney, Jr., who died in 2017.

Nikky Finney:

But my father thought the law, in his words, he would say, "The law works, girl."

Jeffrey Brown:

Ernest Finney was a renowned lawyer who defended more than 6,000 civil rights demonstrators in the 1960s, then achieved a long string of firsts, including first African-American to serve as a circuit judge in the state and later first Black chief justice of the South Carolina Supreme Court since Reconstruction, a life that deeply inspired his daughter.

Nikky Finney:

We're joined at the hip. And I'm like, what can I do to help him? I love poetry. I love writing. I love to express myself in that way.

So I began to be heavily influenced by my father's sense of justice in the world.

Jeffrey Brown:

And what did that mean for you, for you as a poet?

Nikky Finney:

That meant that I needed to be careful and be precise and be intentional about what I wrote about, because my voice was a powerful one.

I know you never had it made, but here you are making it.

Jeffrey Brown:

She honored her father's journey and achievements in a poem she wrote and read when he became chief justice in 1994.

Nikky Finney:

*A regular little fellow
whose mother never got to bathe or watch him grow
or even gaze him from the farmhouse window
where he loved to sit on a summertime box
of Virginia cured daydreams
umbrellaed by the big oak tree
and in between chores
and stare away at the longest dirt road
the only way in or out
to Grandpop's farm*

I had never seen my father cry before that moment. And I think he understood the power of words and the power of poetry in that moment of documenting this incredible historical moment for the state of South Carolina.

Frances Davenport Finney, Mother of Nikky Finney:

When we went to places, you would want to know, where's the bookstore? Where is the bookstore?

Jeffrey Brown:

Her mother, Frances, proudly displays memorabilia and photos of the life she and her husband forged in their 62 years together.

The setting for the new Ernest A. Finney, Jr., Cultural Arts Center is important for Finney. Business owners like Kevin Gray of Railroad BBQ are working to bring things back. And the neighborhood is home to two historically Black colleges side by side, Allen University and Benedict College.

But businesses like the renowned Carver Theatre, built in 1942 as one of only two movie theaters exclusively for African-American patrons, are now defunct.

Putting the cultural center here in this neighborhood is essential.

Nikky Finney:

Yes. It's essential. It's a place to be. It's a place where things are happening. It's a place where people are discussing things and having new ideas that then go out into different areas of the community. It's — it's like a womb space.

(LAUGHTER)

Nikky Finney:

Oh, yes, your heart beats.

Jeffrey Brown:

History and social justice also come together in a new outlet for Finney's art, a collaboration with the famed Kronos Quartet, now being performed around the country.

"At War With Ourselves: 400 Years of You" is an evening-length work for string quartet and chorus, with music composed by Michael Abels and text by Finney.

Nikky Finney:

I go from the forced removal of Africans from Africa to this country to talking about some of the things that happened along the way.

But my focus in that point really is about the interior space of African-Americans.

*Your vermilion quiet,
your indigo jar of morning whispers,
the midnight calculations of your muzzle.*

The music balloons the words out into the audience in a different kind of way. It's almost like the light that bounces off of a reflection point in the room. And it's dispersed differently.

Jeffrey Brown:

Encouraging young artists, writing poetry, teaching her students, reminding all of the history around us.

Finney cites the legacy of her father throughout.

Nikky Finney:

Everybody's voice is a powerful one one-on-one. So, I — he taught me very early that that was my way, that could be my way to join this larger circle of citizens in this country stepping forward to say, here I am.

That's what he taught me.

Jeffrey Brown:

Renovations on the new art center will proceed, while programming and residencies get under way in full.

For the "PBS NewsHour," I'm Jeffrey Brown in Columbia, South Carolina