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African American studies associate professor Joan Bryant (left) asks playwright Kyle Bass about his love of words during the "Your Story!" event on Tuesday. Photo: Maddy Jones

## Community members recount love tales for oral history initiative

By [Leanna Garfield](#)

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During the final event for the Black Syracuse Project's "Your Story!" series, members of the Syracuse community spoke about their experiences with love in its many forms.

On a rare sunny Tuesday in downtown Syracuse, a group of strangers gathered in an auditorium above Beauchamp Library to share love stories. A row of chairs faced an empty stage, their voices echoing off the hardwood floor. An initiative by the [Black Syracuse Project](#), "Your Story!" was a chance for community members to recall stories of past love, new love, lifelong love and even love of self.



Photo: Maddy Jones

Mark Muhammad explains his love story to associate professor of African American studies Joan Bryant.

“Love stories” was the final event in a four-part series. Past themes included migration stories, prison stories and education stories. After two interviews, the event opened to an open mic session.

For Kyle Bass, language has always been the love of his life. In an interview on Tuesday, he unraveled memories of childhood, when his love for words began in the sounds of others’ voices.

Raised in a large family of eight, the power of words registered in him from a very young age, he said. As a child, he would knock softly on his teenage twin sisters’ bedroom door at night. Lying on the carpet between them, he would listen to their stories about high school and boys.

“I would listen to the waves of their conversation flow back and forth,” he said. “And it wasn’t so much the content, but the music and the sound of the words they’d exchange. I heard the music of their words.”

The memory of these conversations developed his love for language, storytelling and emotion. His sisters’ conversations and the sounds of their interactions often lulled Bass to sleep.

At his parent’s dinner parties, Bass would even crouch under the kitchen table to listen to stories, he said.

“I was not so much a participant, but an observer,” he said. “I love to look at things closely and test and admire words.”

Bass said that he began to carry around a notebook, which he called his “Book of Sayings,” chronicling his observations and words he found interesting. He later used a bulky black typewriter, a gift from his mother, to write poems. He formed a relationship with the written word and developed a love for language that has lasted almost 50 years, he said.

At age 7, Bass developed a stutter and a mild case of dyslexia. He began to fumble with words and question his relationship with them.

“These things that I loved were out of reach--but of course, it only made me love them even more,” he said. But through perseverance and extra help from a third grade teacher during recess, Bass overcame his stutter.

“It only increased my desire to write and live in the world of words,” he said. “And that struggle only alloyed the love.”

Bass said he feels fulfilled through writing, and it has improved his connection with others.

“My relationship with people is richer because I have this unflagging relationship with something I’m passionate about,” he said. “If I’m not writing, I’m muting myself.”

Joan Bryant, coordinator of the Black Syracuse Project and an associate professor of African American studies at Syracuse University, said she believes oral history is a way to document and think about the past. Hearing peoples’ experiences aloud is powerful, she said.

“It’s a very intimate experience,” Bryant said.

She believes that there’s a rich history of experiences in Syracuse, with many different kinds of stories. Next semester, Bryant plans to host events both on campus and in the community.

Jeanelle Hope, a first year graduate student of Pan-African studies at SU and an intern for the Black Syracuse Project, said that the event connects the university with the community, in conjunction with the Chancellor Nancy Cantor’s efforts.

“The university is able to give back to the residents and give them a voice,” she said. “It reaffirms that their stories hold value and that they’re authentic sources of knowledge.”

Bass, now devoted to writing for theater, works as a full-time dramaturg at Syracuse Stage. His love for language persists.

“It’s not about fitting my writing into my life,” he said. “It’s about fitting my life into my writing.”