

The Lemonade Man: A Children's Storybook About James Echols

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Auburn, Alabama, was shaped and influenced by the inspirational experiences of African Americans, yet these stories are not openly shared or available. The contribution of James Echols is one such story. Everyone in Auburn knows about Toomer's Drugs famous lemonade. However, few know an African American man was responsible for making the lemonade world famous. The objective of the project was to increase the accessibility of stories like Mr. Echols'. Change starts with our youth, so the project focused on authoring and publishing a children's book.

James Echols was known as "The Lemonade Man." He worked at Toomer's Drugs for over 40 years—beginning his employment as a delivery driver before Civil Rights and retiring in 1991. As a delivery driver, he refused to deliver to the back door of residences as was required of African Americans in the Jim Crow South. Eventually, he would work the counter at Toomer's Drugs, where he would serve fountain drinks and his famous lemonade and coffee. Mr. Echols squeezed up to 200 lemons a day, tinkering with each glass to make it "perfect" for each customer who purchased a cup.



Fig 1. James Echols behind the counter at Toomer's Drugs mixing his famous lemonade.

In 2001, the lemonade was listed as the first reason it was good to be an American by Esquire Magazine (Pierce, 2001).

The project continued the work of Kira Kingston and the research group rPAAST (Research to Preserve African American Stories and Traditions) under the mentorship of Human Sciences Lecturer Dr. Robert Bubb. Kingston interviewed James Echols and his children and wrote a manuscript for publication in an academic journal (Echols, 2018; Moore, 2018). The children's book project uses the manuscript as a starting point.

After receiving the summer research fellowship, we reached out to James Echols only to be met by one of his children, who informed us that Mr. Echols had passed away two days earlier. We were deeply saddened by the news and timing, but the children of Mr. Echols felt that a children's book about their father would be an excellent way to honor his legacy.



Fig. 2. James Echols's children pictured (L – R) seated: Mary L. Bryant, Barbara A Moore; standing/back: Janie Echols-Brown, Johnny Echols, Johnnie E. Dowdell.

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Kalandra Blake coordinated with the Echols family to write the manuscript for the children's book. After several revisions and edits, the manuscript was finalized in March of 2023. The finalized manuscript is 21 pages, including the cover and back page.

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[Illustration: Eden and Mr. Echols. A paper shows a recipe for a simple lemonade recipe: 1 cup lemon juice or 6 lemons, 6 cups water, and 1 cup sugar + love]

"Well, it's not exactly *my* lemonade now", admitted Mr. Echols, "I made it with lemon juice, sugar, water, and lots of love, but what is served now is not exactly my recipe."

"It was because of my special touch that Toomer's Lemonade became what everyone knows and loves today. It was said that my lemonade was the number one reason why it was good to be an American. I was even recognized by Senator Ted Little for my lemonade."

"That's amazing! I can only imagine how much hard work it took," Eden exclaimed.

Fig. 3. Page 7 of children's book manuscript.

Kalandra Blake and Aaliyah Lantigua coordinated efforts to identify an illustrator who used the manuscript to produce sample sketches. The Echols family reviewed four sets of sketches and selected Shonette Pierce as the illustrator. Coordination among us, the Echols family, and the illustrator is currently ongoing.

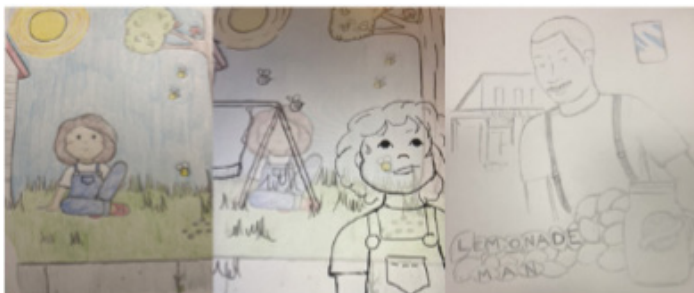


Fig. 4. Page sketches from Shonette Pierce.

The children's book will continue to develop over the summer 2023 semester. Once complete, several copies of the book are planned to be donated to local area libraries, schools, and community centers. The proceeds from sales of the book will go toward a memorial educational scholarship in honor of Mr. James Echols.

The James Echols Memorial Scholarship is awarded annually to a talented young adult in the local community who has similar interests in skilled trades as Mr. Echols. Skilled labor fields include carpentry, electrical, plumbing, truck driving, welding, cosmetology, nursing, the arts, and more. With a huge shortage in these types of jobs, the family thought this would be an awesome opportunity for a career that is both rewarding and pays well. In addition to the scholarship, the Echols Family Social Club offers mentorship and an extended family to the recipient.

Readers should contact the corresponding author of this Highlight at the email listed on the bottom of the first page if they are interested in making Donations for the Memorial Educational Scholarship.

Statement of Research Advisor

Kalandra Blake demonstrated initiative, leadership, and collaborative skills throughout the project. The publication of a children's book will not only honor the life and legacy of James Echols but will give credit and acknowledgment for his contribution to Auburn and the lore that surrounds Toomer's Corner and the famous lemonade sold at Toomer's Drugs. The book will also inspire and educate the next generation of children to the rich African American history that is seldom discussed outside of close community circles, but to which we all owe a great debt of gratitude.

- Robert Bubb, Department of Human Sciences, College of Human Sciences

References

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- [3] Pierce, C. P. (2001, December). 162 reasons it's good to be an American man. Esquire Magazine. Retrieved April 28, 2023, from <https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/politics/a29232/162-reasons-its-good-to-be-an-american-man/>.

Authors Biography



Kalandra Blake graduated with a B.S. degree in 2022 in Human Development and Family Science at Auburn University. She is the primary researcher and recipient of the Undergraduate Research Fellowship.



Aaliyah Lantgua is a senior undergraduate student pursuing a B.S. degree in Human Development and Family Science at Auburn University. She selected the illustrator and coordinated communication with the Echols family. She will finalize the details of the project.



Robert Bubb is a lecturer for the Human Development and Family Science Department at Auburn University.