

Carol Smallwood

Interview of Roland Barksdale-Hall



Roland Barksdale-Hall is an award winning essayist; community activist; co-founder, past president of Jah Kente International Inc., Washington, DC which includes African artifacts, youth exchange, roots program, youth theater program for DC high risk youth; founder, first president of the Pittsburgh Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society (AAHGS); Black Caucus of the American Library Association (BCALA) former executive board member; former managing editor of QBR the Black Book Review, AAHGS Journal, BCALA News; author of leadership, children's character development, history books; member of Pennsylvania's Mercer County Mentoring Board. He launched street storytelling theater, book festivals and life empowerment workshop for at-risk communities.

Smallwood: What is your educational background and work experience?

Barksdale-Hall: I am a working scholar historian and librarian. I acquired academic degrees, Bachelor of Science in biology and master of library science, both from the University of Pittsburgh, to advance my interest in research. I would describe myself as a lifelong learner, who benefitted from a mix of both traditional and non-traditional educational treks, graduated Army Basic Training, Fort Dix, New Jersey, and Signal Training School, Telecommunications Teletype Operator, Fort Gordon, Georgia. There I met people from diverse backgrounds, gained organizational along with time management skills and most importantly recognized persistence pays off.

Most recently, I have served as a resident coordinator and library director at a public housing site. I gained valuable perspective on social networks when I graduated Leadership Shenango, a local program of the chamber of commerce. Other rich experiences include African American Special Collections Librarian at the Homewood Librarian, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, administration in academic libraries, Peabody Special Collection Librarian, Hampton University, professor at various colleges and Clarion University Library School.

Smallwood: What were some of your experiences in the nation's capital?

Barksdale-Hall: Upon college graduation my wife Drusilla and I moved to Washington, DC, where I worked at research institutions, NASA Headquarters Scientific Technical and Information Facility, Johns Hopkins University and Howard University. I brought to DC a solid academic background, Bachelor of Science in biology and master of library science, both from the University of Pittsburgh, to advance my interest in research.

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During my time in the Metropolitan DC area I worked as a research librarian, studied publishing at George Washington University, Washington, DC, participated in discussions leading to formation of JAH Kente International and became the youngest board member of the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society. I found the Washington Metropolitan Area alive with stimulating cultural environs, where I flourished. I attended Federal Poets meetings at the library and performed poetry at various venues.

Smallwood: When did you become interested in researching and publishing local African American history? Please share some of your own important family history:

Barksdale-Hall: We later returned to Pennsylvania, raised a family. I picked up two additional graduate degrees: one in history and another in leadership— at Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, organized the Pittsburgh Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society.

As head librarian at Penn State Shenango, I launched a local community based African-American history project, advocated for the library as a cultural center, presented at the National Conference of African American librarians in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I published *People in Search of Opportunity the African American Experience*. I received the 2018 American Society of Freedmen Descendants gold medal for his research on Wilson Steverson, Confederate body servant Pennsylvania resident and oldest surviving ex-slave. My great-grandfather Wilson, who I inherited the gift of storytelling, lived an amazing life. He was an entrepreneur, still working in his 80s and lived to be 109 years old. I have essay, "The Black Family," "Entrepreneurs," and "Slave Status and Inheritance" in *The Encyclopedia of African American History 1619-1895: From the Colonial Period to the Age of Frederick Douglass*, edited by Paul Finkelman (Oxford University Press: 2006). The "Black Family" essay provides a case study based upon my extensive genealogical research on my Steverson ancestry from slavery to freedom. I have an award-winning genealogical guide, *The African-American Family's Guide to Tracing Our Roots: Healing, Understanding and Restoring Our Families* (Amber Books, 2005), which incorporates some of my research methodology.

Smallwood: What did you write that received the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission Black History Essay Award?

What are some others?

Barksdale-Hall: My research, "The Twin City Elks Lodge: An African American Community Agent," written during graduate studies in history at Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, challenged an erroneous position. Some scholars argued that unlike the Polish and Italian immigrant communities the African Americans had no unifying organizations in their community. My award-winning essay received the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission Black History Essay Award was published in *Pennsylvania Folklife Magazine*. I credit a combination of the University of Pittsburgh School of Information Sciences for strong research skills and Duquesne University History Department for academic grounding in history.

I have received the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society

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History Award, James Dent Walker Award, Black Caucus of the American Library Association Leadership Award. I recently received the Caught in the Act Award for community Thanksgiving event.

Smallwood: What are some of your most favorite research projects that you have worked on?

Barksdale-Hall: Storytelling reaches across intergenerational, ethnic and international borders. My research and writing the children character development book, *Lion Pride*, which weaves together two African folktales, provides a delightful romp. I appeared on WKBNTV-27 Youngstown, Ohio, First News Interview along with illustrator Bill Murray about children's picture book. Secondly, my research on African American inventors combined my passion for history and interest in science and technology. Research on African American inventors needs to be placed in a historical context. In my essay, "Inventions and patents," published in *African American Leadership: A Reference Guide* (Mission Belo Media: 2015) I discuss African American inventors, the significance of research on African American inventors in light of prevailing racist views. In particular, slaveholders erroneously attempted to use African Americans' intelligence as a justification for slavery. I visited libraries and archives, scoured census records, newspapers and patent records.

Smallwood: What discoveries have you made?

Barksdale-Hall: I received the University of Pittsburgh Blue and Gold Award from the African American Alumni for my research on William Hunter Dammond, who was inventor of a signaling system for trains and the first African American graduate of the University of Pittsburgh, corrected the official University record. The process took almost fifteen years of painstaking research. I researched and wrote an entry on Dammond as well as Andrew Jackson Beard, African American inventor of a railroad coupler, for the National African American Biography, a joint project of the Hutchins Center for African & African American Research at Harvard University and Oxford University Press. My essay on esteemed Birmingham inventor and former slave, "Andrew Jackson Beard" is in *The African American National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2008). A signed entry on "William Hunter Dammond" appears in *African American National Biography*, edited by Ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr., edited by and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham. Oxford African American Studies Center, (2014);

Smallwood: What are some of magazines and the encyclopedias your work appears?

Barksdale-Hall: Magazines include *QBR: The Black Book Review*, *Sisters Magazine*, *Crisis Magazine*, *BCALA News*, *the Journal of the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society*, *Journal of Pan African Studies*, *Information Equality Africa*, *Information, Society and Justice*, *Urban Librarian Journal*, *Pennsylvania Folklife*, *Against the Grain*, *Federal Poet*, *Warpland: A Journal of Black Literature and Ideas*, and *Amistad*.

I wrote about Chicago poet "Sterling Plumpp" for *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Multiethnic American Literature*, edited by Emmanuel S. Nelson (Greenwood Press, 2005). My essay, "Juneteenth" appears in *Africa and the Americas: Culture, Politics, and History* (ABC-CLIO, 2008). Scholarly essays "Black Cartoonists" and "Daisy Lampkin" are in *The Encyclopedia of Afri-*

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can-American History Reference 1896 to the Present, edited by Paul Finkelman (Oxford University Press, 2009). Daisy Lampkin was a national civil rights leader in Pittsburgh.

Smallwood:

https://www.amazon.com/Roland-C.-Barksdale-Hall/e/B001K8V4AG%3Fref=dbs_a_mng_rwt_scns_share includes some of your early life and your books. Which book took the most work to complete?

Barksdale-Hall: My book *Farrell* surpassed my wildest imaginations and received praise. The story struck a chord with readers though it was a lot of work. These days I am blessed to have a following of readers. I am contacted by publishers about writing a book. That was the case with my book, *Farrell*. Arcadian Publishing was seeking an author to write a book about the diverse populations in western Pennsylvania. Miss Margaret, the local public librarian, recommended me to research and write the book, based upon the success of my earlier work, *African Americans in Mercer County*. I had to research and write a book about the diverse peopling of Farrell. I had not only to find images of people in traditional ethnic costumes before coming to the community but tell an inclusive story. I am grateful to God, Arcadia Publishing and scores of readers.

Smallwood: What anthologies have you also contributed to?

Barksdale-Hall: Wow! There has been one every year or at least it seems. Recent anthologies include *Where Are All the Librarians of Color? The Experiences of People of Color in Academia* (Library Juice Press, 2015); *Genealogy and the Librarian: Perspectives on Research, Instruction, Outreach and Management* (McFarland, 2018); *Library Partnerships with Writers and Poets: Case Studies* (McFarland, 2017); *The Library's Role in Promoting Financial Literacy* (Rowman Littlefield, 2016); *Cornbread, Fish and Collard Greens: Prayers, Poems and Affirmations for People Living with HIV/AIDS* (AuthorHouse, 2013).

Smallwood: What are you engaged now in research and writing?

Barksdale-Hall: My parents met in Harlem, lived there and I spent many a summer there. I found inspiration in the life of Langston Hughes and always had a burning desire to be a Harlem Renaissance man. In this pursuit I participated in booklovers event at the Schomburg Library as part of the Harlem Book Fair and am engaged in researching and writing for the *Harlem Renaissance: An Encyclopedia of Arts, Culture and History*. My research topics for the *Harlem Renaissance* include Karamu House and its interracial theater in Cleveland, *Pittsburgh Courier*, a historic national African American newspaper with one of the largest circulations at one time and the magazine *The Messenger*. The projects are endless. There is a chapter about collaboration for an anthology, *Libraries and Nonprofits: Collaboration for the Public Good* (Library Juice Press). I have a chapter "Creating Outside Learning for the Underserved: Outreach to Middle Schoolers, High Schoolers and Public Housing Residents," in an rather important anthology about the future of librarianship. I share empowering stories of my work with high risk groups in *Hope and a Future: Perspectives on the Impact that Librarians Have on Our World*. I have a request letter from a publisher about a forthcoming book, *Mercer County Journeys*. I am working on concept idea for a young adult book. My joy abounds

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Smallwood: Please share some links readers may learn more about you:

Barksdale-Hall: www.jahkente.org

https://www.sharonherald.com/news/barksdale-hall-preserves-shares-the-stories-of-county-s-african/article_9ea3ae20-7704-55ba-b0a0-2e8f2c932776.html

<https://crln.acrl.org/index.php/crlnews/article/view/24134/31924>

<https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg/vol16/iss1/>

https://www.amazon.com/Roland-C.-Barksdale-Hall/e/B001K8V4AG%3Fref=db_s_a_mng_rwt_scns_share

<https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/pafolklifemag/142/>

https://www.alliednews.com/news/local_news/marker-notes-settlement-of-freed-slaves/article_c6949984-43b6-53d2-aa2c-9e2e57ebc667.html

https://www.phfa.org/forms/best_practices/residents/caught-in-the-act-jun-oct.pdf

Carol Smallwood, MLS, MA, Marquis Lifetime Achievement Award recipient, is a literary reader, judge, interviewer; her latest collection is *Chronicles in Passing*