Black & Female: What is the Reality?
Black Women’s Voices, Experiences, and Leadership

On February 3-8, 2013, nineteen Black women from throughout the country gathered at Esalen Institute in Big Sur, CA for the inaugural circle visioning and planning for the first 18-month training series of the Black & Female Leadership Institute (beginning in February 2016). Here is a glance of our group, and in the pages that follow are our voices, experiences, and leadership in the Be Present movement.

Lillie P. Allen, Social Justice, Atlanta, GA
Maria Arias, Family Law, Brooklyn, NY
Terry Boykins, Youth Leadership & Community Organizing, Jacksonville, FL
April Diggs, Holistic Hair Cultivation, Atlanta, GA
Pam Dunn, Youth Leadership & Education, Oakland, CA
Sharon Gary-Smith, Philanthropy, Portland OR
Cora Johnson, Community Organizing & Advocacy, Soperton, GA
Wanda Paschall Jones, Education & Graphic Design, Newark, NJ
Jacqueline Lee, Social Justice & Poetry, Oakland, CA
Sheila E. Mitchell, Restorative Justice, Santa Clara, CA
Marsha Needham, Massage Therapy, Yoga & Wellness Coaching, Atlanta, GA
Cynthia Renfro, Philanthropy, Seattle, WA
LaVerne Robinson, Community Organizing, Atlanta, GA
Tamacia Leeks-King (Sadler), Ministry & Community Organizing, Atlanta, GA
Rita Shimmin, Faith-Based Social Services & Training, Oakland, CA
Nasrah Smith, Midwifery & Community Organizing, Atlanta, GA
Carletta Joy Walker, Dharma Practice, Writing, Education & Healing Arts, Harlem, NY
Felicia Ward, Writing, Oakland, CA
Monica Watts, Childbirth, Massage Therapy & Health Education, Oakland, CA
Lillie Pearl Allen

My community activism emerged over 35 years ago from my history and experiences. I was searching for the answers to questions like: "How do I thrive in a culture that makes assumptions about who I am based on my race, my gender, my class?" I realized that my own personal well being was tied to living beyond (not in opposition to) the oppression that all of us experience in this society. I wanted other people to live in that way, too.

I wanted relationships with other Black people that were not based on our hurt, but celebrated all of who we are. And I wanted to build partnerships with white people that weren’t based on distrust or guilt, but emerged from conscious understanding.

Nearly 30 years ago, I developed the Be Present Empowerment Model®. I introduced the Model in 1983 in the "Black and Female: What is the Reality?" workshop held at the First National Conference on Black Women's Health Issues at Spelman College in Atlanta. Over 1,000 Black women attended. We shared out loud what we had never had a place to talk about before: what it was like to be Black and female in this country.

In 1992, I founded Be Present, Inc. When I say, "I am the founder", I mean I found other people dedicated to and actively working to create a fair and just world for all people. I like working with people who are committed to building authentic relationships and sharing our collective knowledge in order to accelerate the shift for social justice. Be Present is dedicated to building sustainable leadership for social justice. I know that sustainable change is possible. We have practiced it for over 30 years.

We at Be Present believe that fun, creativeness and satisfaction inspire the fundamental leadership qualities of effectiveness, collaboration and sustainability. To exemplify these values, Be Present created the position of Creatrix of Play, a position I have proudly held since January 1, 2009. My role is to continue sharing the knowledge and experience I have gained about how to personally and institutionally put into practice the leadership core competencies of creativity and play.

I live in Atlanta, GA with my partner of 30+ years, three grown children, 15 grandchildren and 3 great-grandchildren.
I was introduced to the Be Present Empowerment Model in 1984 by Carletta Joy Walker. I participated in my first: "Black and Female: What is the Reality?" One-Day retreat in September 1987.

I am currently a Family Court Judge in Queens County, New York City and previously taught and practiced in the field of Battered Women’s Rights for 20 years, as a faculty member at the City University of New York School of Law, Clinical Law program.

In my work and personal life I use all that I have learned through the BPEM. I have learned to be open and receptive to diverse communities, opinions, and approaches. I am able to be in stressful, conflictive, confrontational, and adversarial situations and maintain my objectivity and clarity. I listen deeply with an open heart and hear beyond distress and anger of words that may be said for the deeper longing and desires of human beings. I experience a sense of connectedness and oneness with all beings with whom I interact.

This informs my decision making as a judge. I think well of all of the various parties before me and seek solutions that address the needs of all involved. The personal and professional skills to approach situations in this manner I learned through the Be Present Empowerment Model.
Terry L. Boykins

I was born March 28, 1955 in Jacksonville, FL. I am the oldest child of seven children born to Rosa and James Boykins and the second oldest child of eight children born to James Boykins.

I met Lillie Allen and Kate Lillis and was introduced to what was called then the “process” in 1984, now known as the Be Present Empowerment Model. At the time I was a clothes designer and seamstress earning income sporadically. I had very few words and no voice. After spending an evening with Lillie and Kate, I started to feel safe enough to talk about my life -- the things that were really happening and going on for me -- and expressing my feelings. I felt different. I heard my words flow out and my voice emerge. I felt myself feel safe enough to talk and I knew instantly I wanted to continue to learn and practice how to do this, as well as be in the room with other Black women and girls to support them in the same “process” of telling their stories. I decided to move to Atlanta to continue this work with the National Black Women’s Health Project as an outreach worker in Carver Homes with the homeless and at Morehouse. Because teens were at core of my heart, I decided to move and work with the teen program at Center for Black Women’s Wellness. I was also a facilitator and a self-help group participant.

As one of the Black Women who was a self help group facilitator trained by Lillie, I participated in the first Sisters & Allies 18 month training in 1988.

In 1992, I sat with other women to co-found Be Present, Inc. and had the distinguished honor of becoming the first Co-Chair of the Be Present Inc., board along with a Jewish woman by the name of Noa Mohlabane. I served on the board until I decided to move back to Jacksonville, Florida and expand my business.

Recently, I have had two aneurisms and a stroke, and survived both. I know my spiritual belief, my choice to live, and the Be Present Empowerment Model helped me to live through these experiences.

For this I am grateful and thankful to be living to this day!
April Elaina Diggs

Greetings, this is April Elaina Diggs. I first was introduced to Be Present about five years ago. I am a natural hair cultivator and loctician. I have also studied in the areas of reflexology, reiki, sound healing, and aromatherapy. As a holistic hair cultivator, my intentions are to educate our people and facilitate healing in a gentle and nurturing way, and renew self-love and self-acceptance in a unique way that is designed to remedy our hair and scalps as the unique people that we are. One of my visions in this lifetime is to implement a holistic and spiritual practice in cultivating natural hair that can be passed on to future generations so that we can access our power back using the crown as the median. Also, I envision in this lifetime starting a natural hair revolution to raise the consciousness of our people about the importance of embracing ourselves in our natural state. The revolution will be all Black women will go natural. We will march in the streets. We will create our own beauty supplies, and come together as a race to put that money back into building our communities and healing ourselves. I am so honored to be a part of this gathering to initiate some shifts through the DIVINE FEMININE.
My name is Pam Dunn. How can I even begin to talk about what Be Present has been in my life?

When I first began this work I wasn't exactly clear what my own thinking was. Maybe a lot of people talk about that, maybe a lot of women are unclear about how powerful their own voice is, but for me... I didn't know what I really thought until I heard somebody else say what they thought and I could decide if I agreed or not. That was in 1994 when I attended my first Sisters and Allies retreat, having been invited initially by Felicia Ward and encouraged (relentlessly) by Noa Mohlabane.

In this place I have found love... I have found fear... I have found myself.

I stepped into an organization called Challenge Day that has provided an opportunity for me to incorporate theater with what I believe is important; an opportunity to talk to young people. I have done this work for 10 years, and in that time I know that my work with Be Present has changed not only how I am in the organization, but the way the program is delivered in United States and subsequently in Europe.

I am currently putting my energy into an organization referred to as Mindful Schools, that will use "mindfulness" as a way to work with young people to help them understand what it means to be present in every moment. I have been invited into that community, not because of my own personal meditation or mindfulness work, but because of who I am and what I bring from what I have learned from Be Present into every room, retreat, and classroom I encounter.
I began my more deliberate and thoughtful walk with Black women when I arrived in Atlanta in 1983 to attend the first National Black Women’s Health Conference at Spelman College. I journeyed from Seattle, WA, where I directed a community-based health center, bringing four staff members on what was our first journey together into the Deep South. I also came to the conference very fearful and wary of Black women, and the South, where I felt that my different experiences and upbringing might not be well received. I came with little experience within groups of my people, had seldom worked with Black women in my career, and had very little positive information about the South. Black & Female startled me, engaged me and forced me to delve deeply within myself while looking out at all of my sisters, trying to find the real me that was hidden among the layers of a public being. That inward and outward look started me on a road to my own wellness; and has proven frightening and exciting.

As the Executive Director of McKenzie River Gathering (MRG) Foundation, I head up Oregon’s 36-year social justice foundation. We have given out $13 million dollars to build the justice movement in communities throughout the state where activists lead grassroots, community-based groups working to achieve racial, social, economic and environmental justice for all Oregonians, and sustain a movement that raises the quality of life for everyone within our state. My work is to increase MRG’s presence, and build and solidify relationships. I identify and promote groups led by people of color, apply a racial justice and multigenerational lens to organizing and fundraising; and advocate for organizing across issues, and greater traditional funder engagement in supporting the building of a social justice movement that creates a more accessible, healthy and prosperous Oregon for all.

I am also the first African American Oregonian to head up a major foundation in my state, the first woman of color to head up the 36-year MRG Foundation, and one of only two Black women leading foundations in seven states in the West; a point I carry with me daily, and a shameful and often tiring reality.

My earlier career experiences include social justice advocacy and community organizing in the Pacific Northwest and Northern Rockies, including my home state (Oregon, as well as Washington state); I also served as a foundation program officer and was responsible for assessment of funding opportunities in Washington state, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Utah and Nevada.
As a result of my attendance at the inaugural Black Women’s Health Project (NBWHP) national conference, and subsequent hire as the first national self-help programs director of the NBWHP (1984-1990), I experienced early on and firsthand the power of Black & Female. For me, Black & Female was the introduction to personal, physical and spiritual healing necessary for so many Black women, who had lots of experience doing community work, being organizers, but seldom had that work invited us to do it from a place that included ourselves.

That's what made Black & Female the glue that the Black Women's Health Project needed and used to bring together Black women for health, for change in their families, their communities. It made the work matter because it respected us, our lives, as the starting place for any lasting change.
Mrs. Cora Lee Johnson

I didn’t have any education, wasn’t talking to anybody, and I cried every time somebody said something to me. In 1983, I went to the Rural Black Women’s Training and met Lillie Allen who wouldn’t let me put anybody in my talking but me. She made me accept who I was, and this helped me get out of my shell that I was in. After the training with the rural Black women, I started realizing I could do anything that I wanted to do. I gained confidence in myself and I was given a Doctorate of Motherwit Award at the training.

Mrs. Cora Lee Johnson, a native of Treutlen County and lifelong resident of the State of Georgia, has spent the better part of her adult life as a dedicated Christian, advocating for the rights and the better quality of life for poor people, in particular, an advocate for poverty-stricken women and children in the Deep South and across the world.

Mrs. Cora’s community work in housing, healthcare, and nutrition spans over twenty-six years. Among her many roles, she is founder and director of the Treutlen County Sewing Center, providing training for low-income women to acquire and develop skills for jobs in local clothing factories, build affordable housing, develop micro enterprises, and provide green job training for low-income residents. She has been as board member of Georgia Clients Council, Inc., the oldest statewide non-profit grassroots organization serving primarily rural communities on issues impacting poverty, and a member of Southern Partners Fund since 1998.

She is featured in several books honoring women in American and world history, including “I Dream a World: Portraits of Black Women Who Changed America,” (1989, Brian Lanker), and “Women of Courage: Inspiring Stories from the Women Who Lived Them,” (1999, Katherine Martin). Mrs. Cora travels around the country to other communities inspiring others to work to improve their lives. She is also the recipient of numerous community service awards.
It was the most empowering experience, I've ever encountered and I would never be the same again.
Wanda Paschall Jones

As an African American Women in the 1980’s, I was not ready for the life changing experience I was about to encounter with the Be Present, Inc. organization. My name is Wanda Paschall Jones from Newark, New Jersey. I am a former board member of Be Present, and sponsor of S.E.T. (Sisters Empowering Themselves) for two Black & Female: ™ What is the Reality? Workshops.

I have been married for twenty-nine years with two children and three grandchildren. I’m a substitute teacher for Newark Public Schools and Vocational Schools. I am also a Graphic Designer and part-time bartender (Bar Star) for The American Legions Veterans Canteen.

I was introduced to the Black & Female: ™ What is the Reality? process in 1989 through my Godmother Juliar Collins. Juliar was a member and former board member of the National Black Women’s Health Project. Juliar was my camp counselor when I was nine years old and stayed in contact with me ever since. I asked her to be my godmother because I felt God put her in my life, not just for a season, but for a reason. Juliar always had my back emotionally, financially, and spiritually. God knows what and whom we need.

In January of 1989, I lost my only brother and best friend to heroine. My brother was five years older than me and five years prior to losing him, I lost my mother to colon cancer. From 1983 to 1989, I was extremely unhappy and shut down. I was not open to expressing how I was truly feeling. I hated my job and didn’t want to be married any more with children. I was still being raised and living with my grandmother in my mother’s house. I was completely unhappy with my life and how it was turning out. The only person I could confide in was my aunt (Her name is Juliar Oliver). She always made me feel safe.

After my brother’s funeral, my godmother told me she wanted me to go with her to Atlanta for the weekend to a retreat. Juliar took me on a road trip down to the Mountain in Dahlonega, GA. We needed to catch up, talk and spend time together. You see, she had given me my first car. I would go anywhere with her and to be able to talk for hours, was natural.

I never really felt I had true friendships with women during my young adult stage. I had eight play brothers and brothers were my best friends. I found women caddy, jealous, not trust worthy, etc. I couldn’t call women my best friends because they would always disappoint me. I did not even have a close relationship with my sisters growing up. Black and Female: ™ What’s The Reality? was definitely something new - a welcomed change.

The weekend finally came. We arrived in the Dahlonega Mountains where Black people didn’t live. The highlight for me was I met so many women from all shapes, sizes, and forms of life. From all over the world there were different faces, even a South African sistah. The welcome committee gave us hugs, which at the time I didn’t understand. I thought, “Why are these women hugging me and don’t know me?” Lillie shared her story Friday night. It was an awesome experience. Wow! I was hooked.

In 1991, Sisters Empowering Themselves (S.E.T.) was formed that included the late Beloved Fabu Vanessa Thomas of Patterson, NJ via Atlanta, Detective Diane Brown of Brooklyn, NY, Carletta J. Walker of Manhattan, NY, Juliar Morgan of Wilmington Delaware, and I. We took one year to prepare for and hold a Black & Female: What is the Reality? Retreat in New Jersey. It was a lot of hard work. We met once a month, talking every week, sometimes every night. We looked at retreat sites, promoted the event through radio and newspaper, and coordinated
transportation and mailings. We talked to Lillie at least once a week for a year. We also contacted allies from California and New York to help us pull these retreats off. Our first retreat involved women from Delaware, NY and NJ. On October 25-27, 1991, 175 Black women gathered at the famous Peg-Leg Bates Country Club and Resort in Kerhonkson. There were two buses. The following year was our second retreat held at Camp Green Acres in Dover Plains, New York.

In 1992, after our second New York Retreat, Be Present had a seat available on their board of directors. S.E.T. nominated me to sit on the board. I accepted the honor. Looking back over my life, I was glad I made the decision to be a part of such a powerful piece of work. Still today, when speaking with some of the women I introduced to this work, they are so grateful and appreciative they had the opportunity to experience Black & Female: ™ It’s definitely a life changer. It has certainly changed the way I talk, walk, interact, and sit among Black women. It was sheer genius on Lillie’s part to bring this work to all women and men.
Jacqueline Lenay Lee

My name is Jacqueline Lenay Lee and I was born in Los Angeles, CA in 1953 to a single mother. I was raised from a Southern point of view. I lived with my mother until I was 14 and then I came to the Bay Area where I was raised by Niko K. Wells.

When came I was barely reading and writing, but she was very strict and made me read for 2 hours a day until I caught up. When I finished high school I was on college level with English and reading.

I graduated from Oakland High in 1982 and gave birth to my daughter that year in November. I started raising my daughter and worked as a CNA and Home Care Provider to support her for 16 years. When 2 of my clients passed away and I decided to stop doing home care.

My daughter graduated from high school when she was 17 in 2000 and went to Utah for a year and so then I had more time to do my healing journey with intense counseling around my difficult childhood, and Rosen body work and movement classes to get back into my body. Marion Rosen did body work on me and before she passed I got to do body work on her – and that was so thrilling – and was a great help around my healing around touch.

Four years ago a good friend of mine passed away – she went to the hospital on my birthday October 9, and I did not come out of the hospital until October 13. I was there when she transitioned and it broke my heart. I stayed away from healing work for a while and got into a relationship that wasn’t the best for me, because of my grief and need for contact. Now I have stepped back into my healing. And developed a support system with people who are like-minded – and learned to rely on my friends.

I started to do non-violent communication in 2010 and began using that as a tool. I went into a jail to do Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) work and that was really sad – seeing so many young men of color getting life in prison for non-violent crimes instead of living their life and going to college or dancing at a party. That was too sad for me – so I had to stop doing that work.

I went to my first Black and Female gathering and started being in Be Present in 2010. It was good being surrounded by African American women.

I have done a lot of social justice work, I am on NIA’s Board of Directors which has really helped me to stay connected with African American Women and have done volunteer work at the Women’s Cancer Resource Center. I started being more open with people, (even people who knew me for 20 years felt like they didn’t really know me because I was such a private person). I had a major crush on some-one who turned me down so I had to deal with rejection, but we worked through it and we are friends – which is big for me – to talk things through and express myself.

My daughter is 30 years old and my relationship with her as a woman is different now – letting go of being controlling – She is the joy of my life. I wish I had the tools I have now when I was younger for being with her. It would have made a difference.

I have hidden disabilities, and I am hard working. I started doing poetry events as part of my healing process. This is my fourth year doing that and I started keeping a journal.
Sheila E. Mitchell

Over 20 years ago I attended a Be Present workshop at the Friends Meeting House in Decatur, GA. I learned about the event at the only lesbian bookstore in Atlanta - Charis. I was at a point in my life looking for me. I remember arriving at the Friends Meeting House and Sistahs Terry and LaVerne were at the front door welcoming women to come in. I went in, but did not plan to stay after the morning session. I was quite overwhelmed with the possibility of seeing me. I was looking for an exit. But long and behold Sistah Terry was at the front door again, and in her deep voice asked me, “Where are you going?” I told her I needed to get something from my car, but really I was planning my departure. But that didn’t happen, and I stayed 12 years discovering me.

Today I am finally living life to the fullest and striving for balance in my personal, physical, work and spiritual worlds. The “in-betweens” is another story.

I began my career in criminal justice after a successful stint with AT&T. I was selected by the Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) as the first Deputy Commissioner of Quality Assurance. Prior to this appointment, DJJ had no inner departmental quality assurance and investigative systems and was facing critical conditions of confinement issues. My team and I created and implemented a quality assurance system that not only received national acclaim from the Department of Justice, but also helped to make the lives of Georgia’s incarcerated youth better.

In 2004, I was appointed to serve as the Chief Probation Officer for the County of Santa Clara. More recently, I have been working on implementing a major public safety realignment endeavor to improve outcomes and recidivism for Santa Clara County, California adult probationers and parolees. I am a community advocate and previously have had the good fortune to serve as the Board Chair for Be Present, Inc., a national organization dedicated to building sustainable leadership for social justice. In 2011, I was recognized as one of the 100 Women of Influence in Silicon Valley by the San Jose Business Journal. I am an American Leadership Forum Senior Fellow and hold a master’s degree in Conflict Resolution from Antioch University McGregor. In April 2013, I will receive the 2013 NAACP Cesar Chavez Social Justice award for my community service.

One of my favorite quotes: “Be Present is life changing. Every day I am faced with finding better ways to serve my community and the young people and adults involved in the criminal justice system. The BPEM has given me the confidence to fully actualize my leadership abilities and to solidly embrace the goodness of humanity while making crucial decisions. I would not be serving in this role had it not been for Be Present.”
Marsha Needham

When Be Present began 30 years ago I was a 22 year old recent graduate following the flow of my life as a journalist. I was full of excitement and fear but always knowing (so it seems now) that I could trust the struggle and course of my days.

I was just beginning to identify and untangle ties to suffering that were mine to dissolve while learning which belonged to others...not my work.

A “delicious” disturbance of moving from innocence to experience.

During those years I was drawn more to that which always soothed me-feeling well in my body through motion or stillness.

A passion for feeling good; healthy and well and supporting others who ask for the same is what I am called to do.

My work as a journalist-helping to tell the stories of others led to work in HR, as an advocate for employees, led to work as a massage therapist, yoga teacher and health coach...all “work” that has required hearing the story of the soul through the body and supporting as directed.

The Be Present Leadership Movement continues to inspire my desire to listen differently-to allow the space for others to be...which keeps me free. I am able to hear in ways that I think facilitate a distinctive “healing” for those I work with.

I feel grounded, light and complete because I’ve sat inside the support of the people and energy that are part of Black and Female: What is the Reality? Leadership Movement. And, I am forever grateful.
Cynthia Renfro

I was born in Dallas, TX in the late 1960’s. I was two weeks late and had to be induced. My mom said I was very busy in the womb -- always seemed like I was running. It still strikes me as strange that I was so reluctant to make an exit, especially since I have spent my life in perpetual motion.

I love to travel and experience life in different places. I have been all over the world; and lived in Portland, OR; Dallas, TX; Los Angeles, CA; Ann Arbor, MI; Flagstaff, AZ; Washington, DC; Atlanta, GA; and New York City, NY. Currently I live in Seattle and am married to the incredible woman with whom I have shared my life for the past eight years. The best thing in my life is knowing we will grow old and more in love together.

I first met Lillie Allen when I was living in Atlanta in 1998. I was working for a private family foundation there and encountered Lillie at a local community meeting. She was very friendly, but intense, and invited me to participate in meetings of Black women. Black & Female continues to inspire me to stay grounded and stay in the work of social change and social justice. I have worked in philanthropy for 15 years with a personal priority on building community-based social justice movement in the South and Southeastern part of the US. I look forward to continuing to build on that work, to continuing to move resources to folks working in the South to make change.

My current work is taking a break from philanthropy, focusing on friends and family, and reminding myself who I am. I recently left Marguerite Casey Foundation, where I was on staff for over nine years, the last three and a half as director of programs and evaluation. The discordance, the disconnect between who I am -- my values and my relationships -- and my work had become too disorienting.
As a single parent, it was huge for me to leave my three daughters and one grandchild for a weekend. But I knew something fundamentally had altered me and I had to do something. Two significant life experiences caused my heart to hurt and fill with disappointment and rage to the point of despair. Consequently, I shut down emotionally and lost my voice. I became a grandmother at the age of 33, my oldest daughter repeating the teenage pregnant cycle, and I had walked off my job because of racism in the workplace. Thank God I had a cousin who noticed something had happened to me and I was acting different and invited me to go to a retreat in the Bay Area with all Black Women. Even though I had emotionally shut down, a little voice inside of me said “go.”

May of 1986, in walks LaVerne to a room of all Black Women, my first Black and Female: “What’s the Reality?” Retreat. I did not know what to think and I certainly did not trust myself or this room of Black Women. The session began and Lillie Allen asked the question: What is your life really (which to me meant, what is real) like as a Black Woman? Oh my God, it was the first time someone actually cared to ask how I really was doing and the question went straight to my heart and spirit. The next thing I know I was wailing, crying, and hollering along with a room of Black women, some releasing the pain we had carried, some jumping in joy and excitement, some rocking, and some holding each other. I walked out of that weekend a transformed woman. My mind was clearer and my voice emerged. I began to talk and my words became fluent, and my heart felt much lighter because the rage, disappointment and anger lifted, releasing the despair.

The Black and Female Retreat weekend inspired me to always want to “live” in the present moment, not survive, and become an activist and community organizer. I committed from then on to make sure I would always be a part of providing an opportunity for my family, grandchildren and all people to experience what I had experienced that weekend. This space has provided me with an opportunity to know myself outside many places of distress, open my sight to see the endless possibilities of opportunities, and know that life dreams are possible.

And I did exactly that. I became an activist and community organizer, organizing Black Women in Sacramento, California for four years. In 1991, I decided I wanted to continue my activism and organizing and be a part of bringing the “process”, now called the Be Present Empowerment Model, to the wider world, so I moved to Atlanta, Georgia. I sat with a diverse group of women to help co-found Be Present, Inc. and I have been inside the building of the Be Present, Inc. movement/community for the last 21 years. I am now presently part-time staff for Be Present, Inc. A Dream World Come True!
Tamacia Leeks-King (Sadler)

I was born in Carver Homes (1955) and grew up in the Pittsburgh community of Atlanta, GA before moving to the Adamsville area. I attended Atlanta Area Technical College and Bryman Medical College Dekalb Technical College. I am mother of four children and 13 and one-half grandchildren from ages four to 21.

Active in many churches since 1971, I was ordained in 2007. My civic involvement began as Parent Student Teachers’ Association President at Kennedy Middle School. I volunteered for Teens on the Move and Friends of Able Mabel Thomas. As an Equal Opportunity Authority volunteer, I was chairperson of CAC and hired as a public information assistant and later worked with Fulton Atlanta County Action Authority (FACAA) where I was mentored by the late Rose Menifee holding many positions. These included: Public Information Officer, Senior Companion Program Manager, Social Services Counselor, Leadership Development Specialist for Youth Build, positions in Life skills and job readiness, and a presenter. I also have a Train-the-Trainer certification. Additionally, I have managed apartments for Brencor and H.J. Russell, and I am currently pursuing my dream of managing a Christian apartment complex. I have developed a range of programs including Spiritual Ammunition for Delivered Addicts, Positive Leadership Exposure Development, and Positive Mental Attitude Mental Toughness. I have coordinated many programs including VBS, Youth Initiatives, Pittsburgh Fruits of the Spirit, Summer Camp, MOT Children’s Church, GVCBC Active Teens, and FACAA Positive Posse.

Presently, I create workshops for residents needing coaching or life link sessions. I offer supportive services to families in the Pittsburgh Community. I am an Acorn activist and presently serve with T.I.R.E.D (Tire Initiative to Remove and Eliminate Dumping), Occupy Atlanta, Pittsburgh Ministerial Alliance, Pittsburgh Master Plan and Newsletter, as well as the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Community Building Program.

My first encounter with Be Present was an exciting surprise - an answer to many prayers - and a breath of fresh air. I felt a connection to a family united in spirit and in truth. I felt I was in a place and a space of safety and understanding. Each attendee was attentive and equally concerned about the most important person in the room...me.

The most rewarding thing was to be among girlfriends, when I have never had a girlfriend. Each of them with their own personality but one spirit present with me. Sharing my experiences and
expressing myself was mostly done without words. I felt like the lost female who was sought for many times, but found at the moment I walked through the door. I felt welcomed, celebrated and most importantly, comfortable in my own skin with my own issues. Without words, I was free to share my anger, my joy and my need of not just being tolerated. “What a liberation,” I thought to myself on several occasions. Ironically, my last disrespectful encounter was by a woman named Ginger when I was in the North Georgia Mountains deep in the woods. Now, when I think of Ginger Wood, my memories are worth more than gold because the home was located on Ginger Wood Drive in Stone Mountain. I don’t believe in coincidence, so I believe all of that was in the making to change a negative experience into a positive one. Attracting relief to any situation cause all things in the universe to line up because I am no longer under the Law, but of Grace. It is sufficient in all things, and Grace is what I needed to cover that ungodly experience.

I felt so good and so free when I returned home and without a word to anyone I was lead spiritually to do something I have never done; write a poem to look at the words my heart felt encounter. The eagle has landed. She is home to roost (stay). Bring out your crying towel, tissue won’t last. (Smile)
Rita Shimmin

I joined the **Bay Area Black Women's Health Project** (BABWHP) in 1988 when I entered a support group with four other Black women. Our monthly meetings created closeness among us generated by truth telling of how life really was for each of us. Our life experiences were often linked to conditioning received from growing up Black in America. After a few months I attended my first 'Black and Female What is the Reality' weekend. At this weekend I was bathed in the experience of 40 other Black women. I became aware at a deeper level how I had been conditioned to be afraid of the beautiful aliveness and realness of Black people. My years of involvement with the Project and Black and Female retreats, and the loving models of healing by so many women, gave me a completely new reality to live into. As a woman whose ancestors came from Africa and the Philippines, I understood I had been duped about my Black people, all people, and about myself. I learned to love myself and my people. I could now model for my three children how to be their authentically unique selves and love it! In 2013, I will reach the age of 69, having survived colon cancer and growing up in America being poor, Black, mixed raced, and with a fluid gender identity and sexual orientation. Today I use what I learned during my years with the Project, and I offer the person I have become, in service to create environments like the loving, expansive, accepting environment I first experienced with the Project. I create these environments in my job as Co-Executive Director of **Glide Foundation**, a large faith based social service agency in San Francisco; and, with an organization I cofounded: **The Untraining**. I continue to work as a consultant, and teacher, for groups and organizations, helping people to discover how to work together in extraordinary ways to end our collusion with all forms of oppression and to end racism. I give love, appreciation and acknowledgment to Lillie Allen and Felicia Ward as my teachers in the work of the Bay Area Black Women's Health Project.
Greetings,

My ancestral line on both sides of my family are Native American, West Indian and African-American, kind of mixed all together. I am a traditional midwife of 30+ years assisting with delivering babies in homes with parents making informed decisions on how and where they wanted to birth their babies. I do remember 30 years ago attending my first Black and Female Conference at Spelman College in 1983. The plan was we would expect at least 100 or 150 Black woman the most. There were over 1,500 women from all over the world that came. I remember the one question Lillie asked and that was “What has it been like for you as a Black woman?” and the room literally broke out in wailing and hollering sounds. At that time there were no words to come before the pain of what it has been like for most of the Black women in the room that have held their voices in silence for so long. We were asked before hand to facilitate and watch the room to know who needed support once the question was asked. Being the numbers we expected were different than our actual attendance, we were all looking out for each other and we were all holding each other. I see many sisters now and remember seeing their faces for the very first time during our many Black & Female and Sisters & Allies Retreats in the mountains of Dahlonega, GA. During that then my primary time was assisting with births and having babies myself - it was all home-based activity. I never realized how my life early on affected how I always wanted to be alone most times until I opened up a couple of places of my own that affected how I was in my silence. I was in a self help group of five sisters and we called ourselves, *Wa da da tena* (Sisters Again). We were the first group to be charted as a self help group in Atlanta, GA. During that time, we called the Be Present Empowerment Model the process and self help. Now we look at the steps taken in the self help process and we call it the “Be Present Empowerment Model.” When I came in from New York in 2005 I intentionally reconnected with Be Present so I can be focused. I am so excited to be a part of our 30 year anniversary, honoring ourselves and our herstory. *Celebration time come on!*
Two activist friends returned from the 1983 Black Women’s Health Conference. They had attended the Black & Female: What is the Reality Workshop, facilitated by Lillie Allen. Feeling the spirit of Lillie, and her work, I began immediately organizing, with Gwen and Catherine and others, creating a space for B&F work in the New York area.

By 1983, I was aware of the deep hearing abilities awake in me, enabling me to be catalysis for healing. I needed to be fit to embody this gift. Spiritually I was learning the "rules" governing relationship of spirit to flesh – material being. Physically, my journey was to be "fit" to house spirit awareness through balanced eating, energy centers/chakra alignment, physical activity. Intellectually, I had to become aware of "monkey mind" in my wild, brilliant flights. Emotionally, I needed voice and space for the screaming, crying pain searching for how to exist/coexists with horror, while also finding opening for joy, delight and ease; walk through fear, learn trust, yes and open.

Now moments find me living life aware/awake, practicing the model as my diamond tool cutting through delusion/self-centered illusion – this my Dharma walk. The BPEM, as taught/practiced by Lillie Pearl Allen and the Be Present community, inspired me- spirit-being to settle into the flesh of earth-being. The tools, practice and practice place of the BPI community have created substance that I apply in my Dharma practice, PeaceJoy, writing/artistic, communication, education, healing arts work, & also as co-chair of the Be Present collaboratively led board.
Felicia Janet Ward

My soul is a witness. Can't nobody say, I'm not blessed. I was born inside the body of a black woman same century as Lillie Pearl Allen. In 1953, I had a safe working class neighborhood in San Francisco to grow up in. My mother promised, 'You will go places I've never been. See things I've never seen. Nothing will stop you.' In 1971, I entered college. By the end of my freshman year, I couldn't climb out of bed. Food and sex used for comfort. I wandered in the desert of "free love" until I turned thirty. In 1983, Alice Walker won the Pulitzer prize. A prize my African American fourth grade teacher predicted I'd win some day. Me? I was empty inside. I moved into an ashram. I chanted and prayed. I took the legendary EST training and met Luz Alvarez Martinez. An unasked prayer had been answered. Luz shared a flyer announcing THE FIRST NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON BLACK WOMEN'S HEALTH, SPELLMAN COLLEGE. June 1983, I arrived in Atlanta, Georgia, along side two thousand black women. I'd dressed in white for my journey. I hugged every sister in sight. I stumbled into the Black & Female workshop drunk on love for my people. There stands Ms. Lillie Pearl Allen dressed in a sky blue suit. White Blouse with bow. Stockings, and what? Bare Feet! Dark skinned woman, too! She's speaking in a soft southern cadence! My northern born self looked around to see if? But no, there's not one person snickering behind cupped hands. We're all sitting in hushed reverence, waiting. Then Lillie said, "It's time to tell our stories. It's time to stop merely surviving and live." Women stepped forward to speak their truth. For the first time in my life, I truly listened. Tears of compassion blurred my vision. Then Lillie's nine year old daughter, Shaun, shared a story. Without warning the little girl began to weep. Lillie wrapped her daughter in a close embrace. Hugged that child gently and said, 'It's okay to cry.' I'd never heard, such. Never seen, the like. A black mother comforting her own child! I bowed down and wept. The room exploded. Wonder, shock, awe, grief—and yes joy—loud as thunder—from five hundred women. Their sounds carried me beyond that room. I found myself inside the belly of a wooden ship headed for America with its human cargo. I heard our cries in Wolof. Fulani. Ashanti. We were in the belly of the beast with no way to understand each other! A towering babble of different languages. In the next breath, I'd returned to that crowded room. Five hundred black women roaring at the heavens. We'd witnessed love being passed from mother to daughter. We were loosening centuries of pain, all at once, together! God of mercy. It dawned on me that these sounds are why we'd survived. Making these sounds is how we'd survived. When our chained bodies feared what the physical self knew had to be coming we knew to holler. Death and destruction. Generations that would only know misery. Holler. But we weren't steeped in shame back then. Shame hadn't chained us yet. Standing there in our midst, ringed by our grievous history, Lillie Allen stood in some new light. She helped us remember what we'd forgotten. Breathe, and cry your hearts sorrow. Rest a moment in the cradle of some safe arms, and then go on and truly live. LILLIE PEARL ALLEN. American citizen of African descent born into a family of migrant farm workers in Florida. This woman changed my life. That day in June, I believe she changed the course of our nation's history. I believe Lillie changed the trajectory of the whole entire world. That day in Atlanta the universe shifted. The heavens opened when Lillie Allen inspired hundreds-and-hundreds of black women to spread the good news. No more masks, she said. No more just getting by. No more having to sleep away, sex away, food away, drug away—your stored pain. The ancestors want us to live not merely survive. I left Atlanta on a mission. I helped found THE BAY AREA BLACK WOMEN'S HEALTH PROJECT with Sholie Malawa, Tandy Isles, and Zakiya Somburu. From 1983-1995 we did important work for our people. I won a prestigious writing award, and a fellowship from Stanford University. I fell in love twice with good women. I'll be sixty years old in March. Let my soul be a witness, I'm living my promise.
Hi, I'm Monica Watts and this is a little about how I got started in this work. I started off in social change work called Unlearning Oppression. I was part of young people groups such as: EYES (Empowered Youth Educating Society), TODOS, EFC (Encampment For Citizenship), Bay Area Battered Women’s Alternative, and The Bay Area Black Women’s Health Project. As a young person organizing, the question was posed, “What keeps people apart?” We looked at things like gender, power, race, class and ageism, as things that kept us apart. While in The Black Women’s Health Project, we looked at why are Black women are dying at higher rates from cancer and aids. Also, we noticed the infant mortality rates were higher for this group of people. At the bottom of all the statistics, problems and concerns, was the truth of how Black women saw our emotional well-being, meaning that we rated ourselves worse than hospitalized mentally challenged people. Because in 1983 when a group of hospitalized mentally challenged people were asked how they felt about their emotional well-being, the results for the hospitalized mentally challenged people were higher than the results of a group of mentally healthy Black Women, and these results remain true today. Those results, which held a simple truth, changed my life forever, in such a way that I changed the focus of my life’s work. So at the age of 22, I decided I would go to school to become a massage therapist. I immediately enrolled in the National Holistic Institute, in Emeryville, CA. While enrolled in school, I continued to work in and around my home community, marrying the business of massage therapy to the art of holistic healthcare and the social change movement, utilizing my new found understanding of the mind, body, and spirit. I have been going strong in this field of work over the last 15 years. I make sure to continue to educate myself in the field of massage therapy and holistic health, so much so that in 2003 I began training to become a doula, and have been practicing as a doula for the past nine years. I am one of the five founding mothers of “Sistahs of the Good Birth,” which is a collective of black holistic healthcare providers that focuses on the prenatal care of Black women. I have also taken two midwifery training courses, the first being at Holistic College of Herbal Medicine, under the guidance of Susan Claypool in 2004, and the second being at the Heart and Hands, under the guidance of Elizabeth Davis in 2009. I also did nine months of apprenticeship as a massage therapist doula and midwifery student. In short, my practice is dedicated to promoting a well-rounded health for my clients.

*Multip Moma’s Family.* I am a mother of six, doula, massage therapist, and health educator.