

MEDIA CONTACT

Rockell Churby Llanos
rchurbyllanos@karamuhouse.org
216.965.3761



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THE GEORGE GUND FOUNDATION AWARDS \$1.7 MILLION TO KARAMU HOUSE AS LEAD GIFT FOR ITS NEW THRIVABILITY CAMPAIGN, “KARAMU RISING”

Cleveland’s George Gund Foundation gifts \$1.7 million as the leadership gift to support Karamu House, America’s oldest Black producing theatre, and its new ‘thrivability’ campaign, Karamu Rising

(*Cleveland, Ohio*) — Karamu House, America’s oldest Black producing theatre, announces a leadership gift of \$1.7 million from The George Gund Foundation to the institution’s first-ever ‘thrivability’ campaign, Karamu Rising.

“Thrivability is defined as the act of thriving or prospering, and it goes beyond simply surviving,” says Tony F. Sias, President and CEO of Karamu House. “During the Great Depression, Karamu embarked on its first-ever capital campaign. Then, shortly after my arrival to the institution in 2015, we launched our first-ever sustainability campaign. Now, we are extremely grateful for this leadership gift from The George Gund Foundation, so that we can continue to strengthen this vitally important ‘thrivability’ campaign for the future of Karamu House.”

“The Gund Foundation is thrilled to support Karamu’s campaign because we cannot imagine Cleveland thriving without Karamu thriving,” said David Abbott, the foundation’s president. “So much of America’s Black history is embodied by and celebrated by Karamu. We want to help assure that the evolving story of Black America always has a vibrant home for expression right here in Cleveland.”

The goal of the Karamu Rising campaign is to not only fully fund the master plan of Karamu House’s renovations and revitalization of its 76-year-old campus, but to also establish an endowment to support the ongoing programs and operations of this historic Greater Cleveland institution.

The Karamu Rising campaign was first launched at a hybrid (both live and virtual) benefit, “Still Rising,” in early June 2021, which raised nearly \$100,000. Bank of America also recently contributed \$1.0 million to the campaign through its community anchor grants program. The total campaign dollar goal has not yet been announced.

The institution’s turnaround in the last five years has been what *American Theatre* magazine calls, “one of the most overlooked success stories in [American theatre]: how a century-old theatre of color, once in a state of crisis, has been revitalized and rejuvenated.” Karamu has already completed two phases of capital renovations and will be breaking ground on its third phase in spring 2022 to fully complete the renovation of its theatre wing (including a fully redesigned streetscape and ADA enhancements throughout the building). A master plan also includes the renovation of its administration building, arts education and training center, and construction of a technical theatre training and workforce development center.

However, facility renovations only capture a small portion of the revitalization efforts that Karamu House has had underway. Under the guidance of its new mission statement (“to produce professional theatre, provide arts education, and present community programs for all people while honoring the Black experience”), the institution has reinvigorated its commitment to, and execution of, professional theatre—and is opening its live, 2021-22 mainstage theatre season in October 2021 with August Wilson’s *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*.

In the last five years, Karamu House also recommitted itself to arts education programs for both youth and lifelong learners. Its semester-based Arts Academy provides arts education instruction across a spectrum of arts disciplines, including vocal performance, drama, and dance, among others. As a part of its century-old history of being a socially- and culturally-responsive institution, Karamu House also now utilizes arts education, with originally produced artistic works, to enhance and deepen anti-racism and -bias programming.

Community programming also remains an important aspect of the Karamu House mission. As “a place of joyful gathering,” Karamu House has largely centered its community programming around the celebration of Black culture. However, Karamu House has also expanded programming to specifically respond to the #BlackLivesMatter movement—the current-day civil rights movement that is beginning to address and dismantle the 400-year-old disparities in healthcare, education, criminal justice, and wealth for African Americans. Programming includes issue-based panels with community leaders, community conversation/discussion groups, and collaborative programming with health and human services agencies, among others.

Since its founding in 1915, Karamu House has been a place for people from all races, ethnicities and socio-economic statuses to come together, to create art, to experience art, and to learn about themselves and the community. In 1951, *Life Magazine* said, “Only place of its kind in the world, Cleveland’s Karamu House stands as a milestone in the progress of U.S. race relations.” Nearly 70 years later, Cleveland’s *The Plain Dealer* said that “this once-prestigious arts center [Karamu House] is now returning to its rightful place on the national stage.” Today, the historic Karamu House is one of the country’s leading performing arts organizations that both celebrates Black culture and addresses social justice for Black America.

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About Karamu House

Recognized as the oldest African American performing arts institute in the nation, Karamu House is listed on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places and featured in the Smithsonian’s African American Museum. Legendary artists including Langston Hughes, Ruby Dee, Robert Guillaume, Ron O’Neal, Bill Cobbs, James Pickens, Jr., Debra Byrd, Vanessa Bell Calloway and Imani Hakim have been associated with the 106-year-old “place of joyful gathering” (the meaning of “Karamu” in Swahili.)

Today, Karamu is a beating heart for the entire community, regardless of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identification, or age. Core programs include socially relevant and professional quality theatre; arts education programming for all ages; and community programming, such as comedy, live jazz, and spoken word performances, that invites participation and engagement, reflection, and a re-commitment to cultural values. For more information, visit karamuhouse.org.

About the George Gund Foundation

The George Gund Foundation was established in 1952 by George Gund, former chairman of the Cleveland Trust Company. The Foundation funds programs that enhance our understanding of the physical and social environment in which we live and increase our ability to cope with its changing requirements. Grants are

made three times a year in the areas of climate and environmental justice, creative culture and arts, public education, thriving families and social justice, and vibrant neighborhoods and inclusive economy. Foundation commitments to date have totaled over \$816 million. For more information, visit gundfoundation.org.