



# PRESS RELEASE

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## THE FLAG IS DRENCHED WITH MY ANCESTORS' BLOOD

**By Felicia Simmons and Rev. Elorm Ocansey**

ASBURY PARK, N.J. — Some of our ancestors came to America by plane, carrying passports and seeking opportunity. Others came in the bellies of slave ships, shackled in chains, stripped of their names, and forced to build a country that denied their humanity. Both journeys are part of the Black experience in America, but they are not the same history. Pretending otherwise does a disservice to those who lived it.

As Governor Mikie Sherrill considers her next lieutenant governor, we find ourselves confronting a deeply personal question: When we demand Black representation, whose history are we asking our government to recognize?

The New Jersey Globe recently reported that Assemblyman Chigozie Onyema, the son of Nigerian immigrants, is among five potential candidates. His consideration raises a larger concern: America too often assumes that sharing the same skin color means sharing the same history, struggles, and political interests. We know firsthand that this is not true.

One of us, Felicia Simmons, is a multigenerational Indigenous American Descendant of Slavery (ADOS), with family roots in Greensboro, North Carolina. The other, Rev. Elorm Ocansey, is a first-generation Ghanaian American whose ancestral heritage reaches into the old civilizations of West Africa and the Ewe people's historic liberation from the tyrannical King Agorkoli.

For Felicia, America's history is one of stolen land, stolen labor, and stolen identity. Her ancestors endured slavery, segregation, and generations of discrimination in the country they helped build. Her ancestral lands were taken, and their sovereignty violated long before the United States existed.



For Elorm, America is the country his family chose as home, bringing with them a Ghanaian identity rooted in African resistance and self-determination. Our different histories have never weakened our friendship or our shared commitment to justice. Rather, they have taught us that respecting another person's inheritance does not require claiming it as our own.

That is why we support the [ADOS Advocacy Foundation](#) and its demand to disaggregate Black racial and ethnic data. As the foundation argued in its 2024 statement challenging the [Office of Management and Budget](#), descendants of American slavery have a distinct historical claim against the government that enslaved their ancestors, denied them the wealth they created, and perpetuated their economic disadvantage long after emancipation. That history deserves recognition beyond the broad label of Black.

Christian Scripture reminds us through the story of Jacob and Esau that a birthright carries the weight of generations. We see a similar danger when government treats every Black American history as interchangeable. In the name of racial unity, the particular inheritance of those whose ancestors endured American slavery risks becoming invisible.

Yet recognizing our differences does not mean abandoning solidarity. In 1957, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. [traveled to Ghana](#) to celebrate independence under Dr. Kwame Nkrumah. Dr. King recognized that Ghana's struggle against colonialism and Black America's struggle against segregation were connected. But neither man needed to claim the other's ancestry to champion the other's freedom. We see that same principle reflected in our partnership: Solidarity does not require sameness, and unity should never demand historical erasure.

Indeed, the American civil rights movement helped create the political climate that produced the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, opening doors for generations of immigrants from Africa and elsewhere. The sacrifices of Indigenous American Descendants of Slavery helped expand freedoms that others would subsequently enjoy. That contribution deserves acknowledgment.

Which brings us back to Assemblyman Onyema. We do not know his position on lineage-specific reparations or federal recognition of Indigenous ADOS communities.



His Nigerian ancestry does not determine those commitments, but neither should his Black identity alone be considered sufficient evidence that he represents the distinct historical interests of Indigenous American Descendants of Slavery.

Governor Sherrill owes New Jersey a more meaningful conversation about representation than simply finding another Black male face to replace Dr. Dale Caldwell. Every prospective appointee should be asked: Do they support Indigenous ADOS recognition? What is their record on historical justice? And what will they do for communities still suffering the consequences of generations of dispossession?

Our work in Whitesboro and Asbury Park has shown us what happens when history is forgotten. Families lose land, communities lose wealth, and the descendants of those who built these neighborhoods become strangers in their ancestral homes.

We are two Black Americans, one rooted in Greensboro and the other in Ghana. We do not share the same ancestry, but we share a commitment to preserving history and securing justice. Our concern is not whether Black immigrants belong in American political leadership. They absolutely do. Our concern is that political leaders too often mistake shared skin color for shared historical experience, then call that representation.

Black is a race. Indigenous American Descendants of Slavery are a distinct historical lineage; people with their own histories, identities, and sovereign rights. Justice requires acknowledging these differences, not erasing them. New Jersey must reckon with whose land was taken, whose labor built this nation, whose identities were erased, and whose descendants continue to bear the consequences. For without historical truth, representation becomes symbolism, and justice remains an unfulfilled promise.

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**Felicia Simmons is a lifelong resident of Asbury Park, New Jersey, and was twice elected to the Asbury Park Board of Education. She's a mother, recording artist, published poet, former TEDX speaker, and dedicated community leader in New Jersey.**

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