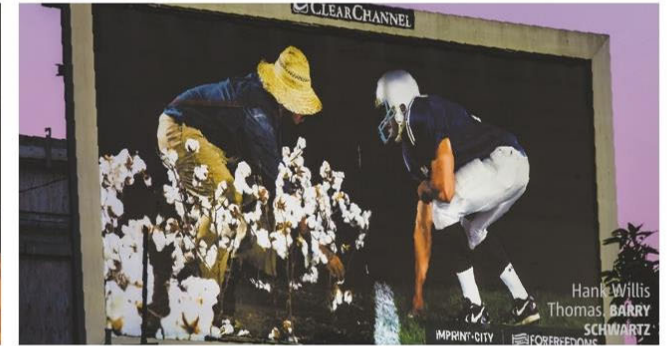


Davon Russell.
PROVIDEDRoxane Gay.
GETTY IMAGESHank Willis Thomas.
BARRY SCHWARTZ
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New Yorkers making black history now

Meet the change-makers working to build a better city through art and advocacy.

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Each February brings a chance to reflect on the often neglected contributions of Black Americans during Black History Month. This year, instead of looking back, we wanted to shout out the African-American men and women of New York City making Black history right now.

Hank Willis Thomas

Since co-founding the artist-activist group For Freedoms in 2016, Hank Willis Thomas helped launch the country's largest collaborative art project spanning all 50 states in the lead-up to the 2018 midterm elections.

Inspired by Norman Rockwell's World War II-era paintings of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Four Freedoms, For Freedoms continues to stage exhibitions, installations and public programs that use art to question who is welcome and valued in America today — things that Thomas has been

asking his entire career. His photographs hang in the collections of the Guggenheim and the Museum of Modern Art, much of them challenging how Black bodies have been commodified by advertisers.

New Yorkers will next be able to see his work beginning Feb. 8 at the International Center of Photography's group exhibit "For Freedoms: Where Do We Go From Here?"

Davon Russell

From ensuring high-quality child care to programs for K-12 students and affordable incubator

space for entrepreneurs, the South Bronx community has had the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation (WHEDco) at their back since 1992. The nonprofit agency is now led by Davon Russell, who was promoted to president in September 2017 after more than 20 years with the agency, beginning as a part-time schoolteacher.

"Davon has always looked out for the kids who participate in the program by maintaining a relationship with them, offering them advice as they get older and start to look for careers, and by making himself available to

speak to," says 24-year-old Daniel Ynfante, who met Russell when he was just 10 years old at a WHEDco after-school program. "He offered much guidance to both me and my younger brother. Almost 14 years later, Davon is still part of my life, inspiring me."

Roxane Gay

When it comes to doing things "correctly," whether it's gender, feminism or racial identity, Roxane Gay plays by nobody's rules but her own. "I'm truly energized and inspired by author and social commentator Roxane Gay," says Suzanne

Rust, senior curatorial producer at The Moth, the nonprofit building a more inclusive world one storytelling event at a time. Gay will be the honoree at this year's Moth Ball gala on June 4.

"Simply put, Roxane is a natural storyteller, and she does something that we love at The Moth — she 'tells on herself.' Like when she shares that she is doing 'feminism wrong' because of some of her questionable musical choices. It shows her humanity and makes it easier for us to show ours."

Meet more influential Black New Yorkers at metro.us.