

# CULTURAL ICONS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE



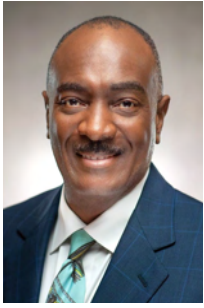
The Iconic Impact Initiative by Bridge Philanthropic Consulting, LLC

# CICELY TYSON

*Image from Getty Images / Stephen Lovekin*

By Tashion Macon, Ph.D., Jennifer Jiles, and Dwayne Ashley  
Special Introduction by Reginald Van Lee, Noted Philanthropist and Chair, BPC Advisory Board

# Introduction



The line to pay respects at Ms. Cicely Tyson's public viewing outside Abyssinian Baptist Church was blocks long. She grew up just a short distance away in East Harlem, the youngest of three children of poor immigrants from the island of Nevis in the West Indies.

So many in her section of Manhattan lived and died in anonymity. But Ms. Tyson broke through the anonymity. She rose up to become a fearless, groundbreaking actress, fighting through deep-seated systemic racism to emerge as Hollywood royalty. And throughout her 60-year career, she never forgot from whence she came, relentlessly serving as a role model and inspiration. When she died in January at age 96, the size of the crowd that came out reflected those truths and how much she meant to Harlem and the entire African American community.

"Her delight in life was not in being Cicely Tyson, the person of stage and screen and who had more awards than you can count," her longtime friend Minyon Moore, a political adviser to the Clintons and Vice President Kamala Harris, told *People* magazine. "She worked with all the major civil rights leaders fighting for change in this country. She had a platform that she combined with her activism and her philanthropic work to advance causes for Black women, children and humanity."

Ms. Tyson's lifetime commitment to uplifting Blacks is unsurpassed—and the reason this installment of Bridge Philanthropic Consultants' Iconic Impact series is marking Women's History Month by celebrating her life and contributions.

When her career began in the 1940s, there was no civil rights movement. Blacks fought overseas with the U.S. Armed Forces to help liberate the world from the threats of Germany and Japan, and then returned home to the realities of segregation. In the entertainment industry, Butterfly McQueen did earn an Oscar for her 1939 role in *Gone with the Wind*, but for the role of a trusted slave who stood by Scarlett O'Hara's side through the destruction of the Civil War.

Ms. Tyson, brought up to treasure education and the church, lit the fuse for the change in circumstances for Blacks in the industry with a steely resolve. She became the first Black actor with a starring role in the mid-'60s drama "East Side/West Side," enduring waves of hate meant to intimidate her for wearing her hair in a natural hairstyle. She would go on to turn down any role that showed Blacks without the dignity they deserved regardless of how it might impact her professionally.

In the 1970s she reached the pinnacle of her career. She was nominated for an Oscar for her 1972 role in "Sounder" as the wife of a sharecropper who survived despite every challenge life threw at her. Two years later, her performance in "The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman" was breathtaking, depicting a 110-year-old looking back on a life that began in slavery and reached into the civil rights movement. Its crowning moment was her one and only moment of protest—drinking from a Whites-only fountain.

How Ms. Tyson lived her life was philanthropy in its purest form, with each professional step calibrated to show African Americans, and especially Black women, they could rise above the barriers of a White-dominated society. She gave financially too, but shunned attention for those gestures, which included the cause of liberating South African Blacks from the oppression of apartheid.

Her actions in the hours after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination were the epitome of her grace and philanthropic soul. When her friend Arthur Mitchell suggested they find a productive, meaningful way forward from tragedy by creating what became the Dance Theater of Harlem, she responded yes and never looked back.

Even in her later years, when the school district of East Orange, New Jersey, from out of the blue wanted to name a school of the performing and fine arts after her, she agreed, but on one condition. She had to play an active role in the school. And she did, devoting her time and energy despite her advanced age, bringing other stars to the school to talk and inspire the next generation.

Her fierce determination opened the doors for today's Black performers. And even though systemic racism, as shown most clearly in the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, still remains, its grip is much weakened thanks to Ms. Cicely Tyson.

**Reginald Van Lee**

Chief Transformation Officer, The Carlyle Group



Image from columbian.com

Ms. Cicely Tyson had no connection to East Orange, New Jersey, a town of 64,000 outside of Newark, when the school board moved to change the name of a junior high school after her. All she knew is that the school board revered her achievements and wanted students to have a role model to aspire to be when they walked through the doors of the Cicely Tyson Community School of Performing and Fine Arts.

She accepted the offer on one condition: that she could participate in school decisions, meetings, graduations, and other events. She did just that, conducting “master classes” where she held school assemblies and invited special guests such as Maya Angelou, Tyler Perry, Mary Alice, Rosa Parks, Wynton Marsalis, Derrick Luke and Judith Madison.

Then, in 2009, when a ceremony was held for the opening of a new \$143 million, state-of-the-art facility to replace the original building, it was as if the city were coronating royalty. Hollywood stars from across the country descended on East Orange to honor one of entertainment’s legends. Oprah Winfrey, actress Angela Bassett, and

gospel singer BeBe Winans were among the stars who came to shower Ms. Tyson with much-deserved praise at the facility for prekindergarten through 12th grade students.

**“We get them when they’re children,” Ms. Tyson said. “We have them through middle school and high school. That pleases me because we get the opportunity to reach them early. We want them to understand that without education, there is no life.”**



It was a moment that symbolized everything for which the stage, screen and television actress stood. Ms. Tyson, who passed away in January 2021 at age 96, was a philanthropist cut from a unique mold. Her life was a master class of its own—in civil rights, when those battles were at their peak and in uplifting the Black community. “[When] I was on the stage, every play I did had to do with the civil rights movement,” Ms. Tyson said. “Every single piece addressed it.” She took roles that represented strong, resilient African American individuals, serving as an example of what they could become.



For these reasons we celebrate Ms. Tyson’s life in Bridge Philanthropic Consultants’ latest installment of its Iconic Impact Series.

She won three Emmy awards, and at the age of 88, became the oldest winner of a Tony for her Broadway role in a revival of Horton Foote’s “The Trip Is Bountiful,” which came after a 30-year absence from the live stage. Only once in her sparkling career, in 1972 for the movie “Sounder,” was Ms. Tyson nominated for an Academy Award. Finally, at 93, she received an honorary Oscar. She was inducted into the American Theater Hall of Fame in 2018 and the Television Hall of Fame in 2020. She appeared in 29 films, at least 68 TV series, miniseries and episodes, and 15 productions on and off Broadway.



“She’s our Meryl Streep,” Vanessa Williams, who starred in “The Trip is Bountiful” with Ms. Tyson and Cuba Gooding Jr., told *Essence* in 2013. “She was the person you wanted to be like in terms of an actress, in terms of the roles she got and how serious she took her craft. She still is.”

*Images from Getty Images*

Perhaps more important were the numerous NAACP Image Awards (she won eight and was nominated 15 times) as well as the organization's highest honor, and the prestigious Spingarn Medal in 2010. Most prestigious of all was the awarding of the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2016.

**“In her long and extraordinary career, Cicely Tyson has not only succeeded as an actor,” said then-President Barack Obama, clearly awed to be standing beside her at the awards ceremony. **“She has shaped the whole course of history.”** In her long and extraordinary career, Cicely Tyson has not only succeeded as an actor. Cicely was never the likeliest of Hollywood stars. The daughters of immigrants from the West Indies, she was raised by a hardworking and religious mother who cleaned houses and forbade her children to attend the movies.”**



Image from Getty Images

**“But once she got her education and broke into the business,” he continued, **“Cicely made a conscious decision not just to say lines, but to speak out. ‘I would not accept roles,’ she said, ‘unless they projected us, particularly women, in a realistic light and dealt with us as human beings.’”****

Other honors came from the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame, the Congress of Racial Equality, and the National Council of Negro Women. She was named a Kennedy Center honoree in 2015.

Never was her dedication to her people, particularly her native Harlem, more evident than in 1968 after the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. As she told the New York Times in recalling the moment, African American ballet star Arthur Mitchell summoned her to his apartment at 2 a.m. They were heartbroken, but while others wondered what to do without their beloved leader, Mitchell had an idea. He was going to launch a dance school right there in Harlem. Ms. Tyson agreed to help without hesitation.

However, they realized that Black dancers had an even more urgent need. They needed work. Thus was born the Dance Theater of Harlem, demonstrating African Americans could excel at anything they chose—including ballet.

“They [Anderson and Ms. Tyson] believed that they were creating what Dr. King called the beloved community,” Robert Garland, the current director of the theater’s school, told the Times in an interview. “It’s not like she was just a bored person that just came to meetings. She helped create a place where the dream of the civil rights movement could come alive. That’s exactly what she did outside of her own work as a performer and an actress.”



Image from Getty Images



Image from sfgate.com

**“We Black actresses have played so many prostitutes and drug addicts and housemaids, always negative,” she told Parade magazine in 1972. “I won’t play that kind of characterless role anymore, even if I have to go back to starving.”**

Image from Getty Images



After starting out as a fashion model, she played some bit parts on film and on TV in the 1950s. Her career accelerated when she joined James Earl Jones and Louis Gossett Jr. in the original New York stage cast of “The Blacks” in 1961. It was the longest-running Off-Broadway Drama of the decade. She won a Vernon Rice Award for her role as Stephanie Virtue, a prostitute.

As her star power grew, she was willing to pick and choose her parts despite the risk of the offers drying up. Although Hollywood and blaxploitation filmmakers wanted her to play demeaning roles, she refused and kept her independence.

That was the year Ms. Tyson grew into iconic status. In the film “Sounder,” she played Rebecca,

the wife of a Louisiana sharecropper (Paul Winfield) who was sent to prison in 1933 for stealing food for his children. She cleaned houses and worked in the fields, doing whatever it took to survive, exuding dignity despite her toils and labor. Ms. Tyson was rewarded with an Academy Award nomination for Best Actress.

“The story in ‘Sounder’ is a part of our history, a testimony to the strength of humankind,” Ms. Tyson told the New York Times. “Our whole Black heritage is that of struggle, pride and dignity. The Black woman has never been shown on the screen this way before.”

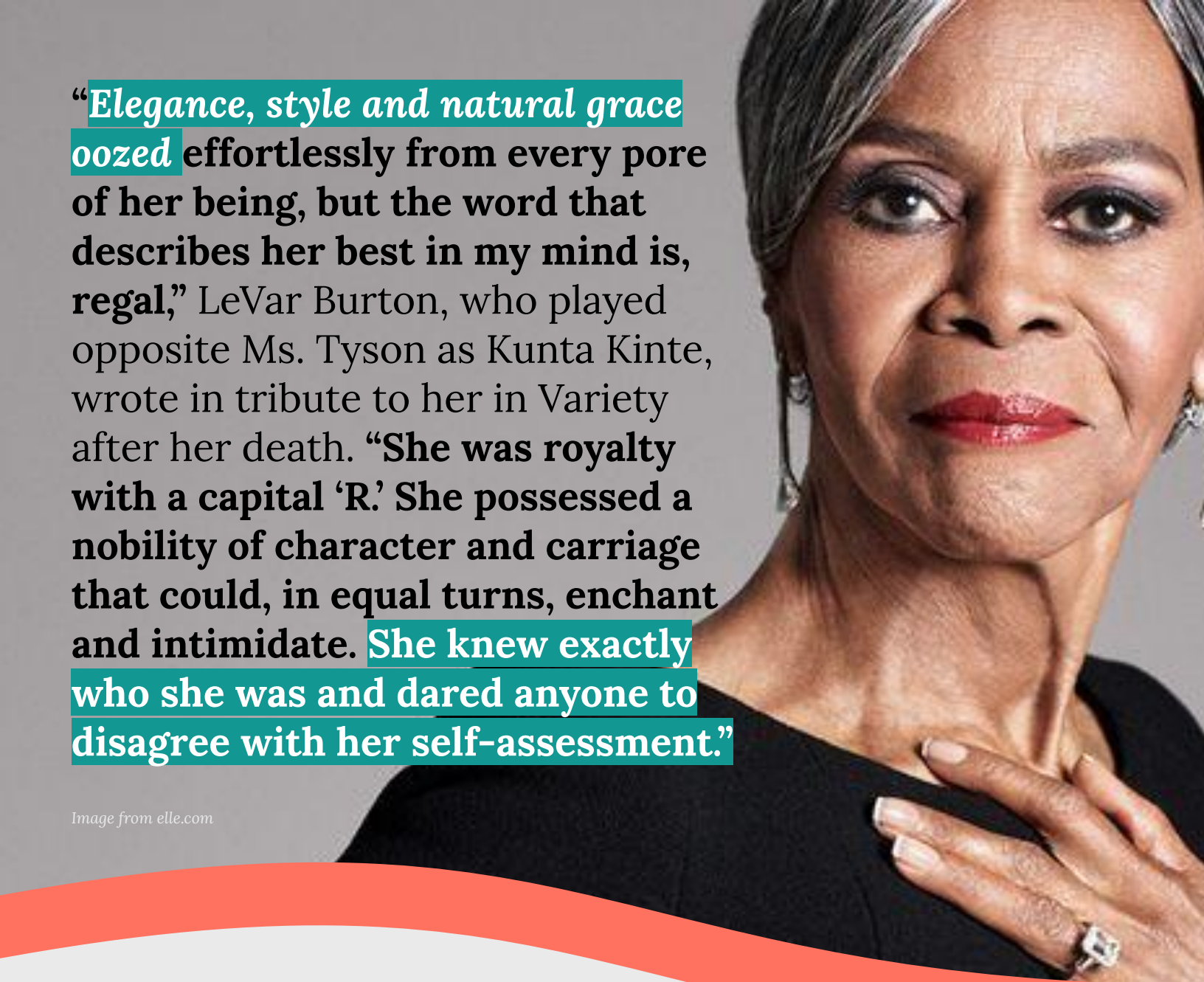
Two years later, she would play her other iconic role in a CBS made-for-TV film “The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman.” She played a character born into slavery before the Civil War who survives to see the civil rights movement of the 1960s, telling her story of enduring in the White-dominated South at age 110. The movie climaxes with her one moment of protest—drinking from a Whites-only fountain.

Ms. Tyson was able to play the roles of a sharecropper’s wife and a 110-year-old woman despite being one of the true beauties of the industry, with chiseled cheekbones and a flawless, glowing complexion. She appeared in *Vogue*, *Harper’s Bazaar* and other magazines in the 1940s and later was a fearless leader in the Black Is Beautiful movement, wearing her natural hair onscreen despite the industry’s condescending attitude toward African Americans’ natural look. Wearing a natural hairstyle for the TV show “East Side/West Side”—her role opposite George C. Scott was the first time an African American actor had a starring role in a major TV series—resulted in “bags and bags” of hate mail. But she forged on, undeterred. Wearing her trademark African turban and caftan, she graced the covers of *Ebony*, *Essence* and *Jet* magazines.

Each role continued to be a statement, including that of Kunta Kinte’s mother in Alex Haley’s “*Roots*.” Other roles included Coretta Scott King in the 1978 NBC miniseries “*King*,” Harriet Tubman, who led slaves to freedom as a “conductor” on the Underground Railroad in “*A Woman Called Moses*” (1978), and a Chicago teacher devoted to poor children in “*The Marva Collins Story* (1981). She won an Emmy for Best Supporting Actress for her 1994 role as Castalia in the miniseries “*Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All*.”







**“Elegance, style and natural grace oozed effortlessly from every pore of her being, but the word that describes her best in my mind is, regal,”** LeVar Burton, who played opposite Ms. Tyson as Kunta Kinte, wrote in tribute to her in *Variety* after her death. **“She was royalty with a capital ‘R.’ She possessed a nobility of character and carriage that could, in equal turns, enchant and intimidate. She knew exactly who she was and dared anyone to disagree with her self-assessment.”**

*Image from elle.com*

In her later years, she continued to play fierce roles, including in “How to Get Away with Murder” and “House of Cards.” And she became a champion of fellow Black directors, producers and actors including Tyler Perry, Shonda Rhimes, Ava Duvernay, Kimberly Elise and Viola Davis. And longtime friend Minyon Moore, a political adviser to the Clintons and Vice President Kamala Harris, said she was an unbending friend and ally, always working to ensure others went through the doors that she helped open.

“She gave them wings and they gave her wings,” Moore told *People* magazine. “They came into her life at a time when she needed them most. The unconditional love they showed her, was never lost on her.”

As for giving her time and dollars in more traditional ways, she made her efforts count. Two of the charitable causes she supported were to uplift South Africa—Artists for a New South Africa, which was founded to support the quest to end apartheid, and the Treatment Action Campaign, which sought to bring drugs for HIV/AIDS to the country’s population. The Clinton Global Initiative, which also stretches across borders, helping underprivileged people across the globe, was another cause she backed.

In addition, she supported the Midnight Mission, a comprehensive homeless shelter and homeless services provider in Los Angeles. Another charity that she backed was the Princess Grace Foundation-USA, a foundation named after Princess Grace of Monaco, which supports emerging performers through grants and scholarships.

However, what she will always be remembered for was her courage in creating opportunities



for fellow African Americans. The recent controversy about the absence of Blacks in the Hollywood Foreign Press Association, which votes on the Golden Globe award selections, would not have surprised her.

“We’re still talking about [diversity in Hollywood], and that’s a shame that we’re still talking about it,” said Ms. Tyson during a Today show appearance five years ago. “During my time, we picketed, we did everything to bring attention to that matter. And today in 2016, we are still doing the same thing. So where have we changed anything?”

In truth, Ms. Tyson gave herself a short shrift with that comment. Much change has occurred over the decades in large part due to her efforts. And for that, African Americans will forever be grateful.

*Images from Getty Images*

# Authors

## **Tashion Macon, Ph.D** *Partner, Culturalist*

With almost twenty years of exceptional achievements in both the for-purpose and for-profit realms, Tashion Macon is widely known as a leading marcom and traditional/transmedia expert with an unwavering emphasis on results. A true visionary, Tashion sees changes and trends in the market before anyone else, frequently finding extraordinary and lucrative opportunities by innately recognizing what can be different and better. After she predicts the future, she gets in front of it. A gifted and highly respected culturalist and strategist, she regularly originates marketing and communications strategies that dramatically influence new consumer realms. She helms pace-setting marketing initiatives that generate

multi-million-dollar profits and successfully managed and navigated \$400MM media budgets to drive double digit percentage boosts in ROI. With a rare meteoric mind and transformational ability to galvanize like-minded people, she collaborates with corporate and client leaders to mobilize cross-functional teams. She is regularly sought out as a subject matter expert in pop culture, global social enterprise, philanthropy, politics/policies and impact programming and crafts important conversations that become part of the social lexicon.

Tashion holds a Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology and a Master of Business Administration in Strategic Marketing. She has a number of professional affiliations and associations.

## **Jennifer Jiles** *Partner, Professor*

Jennifer Jiles is an award-winning strategic communicator, writer, magazine editor, producer, and college educator. She has held managerial or senior level positions across private industry, nonprofit organizations, higher education, and arts and entertainment. Her areas of expertise include strategic planning, campaigns, editorial, media, crises, and change management. Over the years, Jennifer has also built an appreciable track record in fundraising communications strategies. Most recently, she was a member of the Global

IT vice president's leadership team for Dell SecureWorks, a leading cyber intelligence company. Jennifer led the global corporate communication function for the company. She has worked with more than 25 organizations, including AT&T, UPS, Walmart, BET, and Jazz at Lincoln Center. Jennifer has been faculty at Georgia State University since 1999. She holds membership in the Technology Association of Georgia and the Public Relations Society of America.

## **Dwayne Ashley** *Founder and Chief Executive Officer*

Dwayne Ashley is renowned for his bold, strategic thinking and wise counsel in philanthropy. He is a successful entrepreneur. In the course of his career, he raised more than \$800 million. A fearless and authentic solicitor, he is committed to social justice and helping organizations of color maximize their fundraising success. He advises non-profit, philanthropists and influencers globally.

A powerhouse of energy and a passion for fundraising, Dwayne has managed capital and annual campaigns and spearheaded development for such notable organizations as the Jazz at Lincoln Center, Success for Kids, 100 Black Men of America, the Thurgood Marshall College Fund, the United

Negro College Fund, and the United Way of Texas Gulf Coast, among many others.

Dwayne is a thought-leader in the field and he has shared valuable concepts in numerous articles and in four books. They include *Eight Steps to Raising Money: Measuring Your Fundraising Impact*, *Word for Word Publishing*; *8 Winning Steps to Creating a Successful Special Event* with Carol Campbell, *Director of Events at Prairie View A&M University*; *I'll Find A Way or Make One: A Tribute to HBCUs* with noted journalist Juan Williams and *Dream Internships: It's Not Who You Know, But What You Know!* He is an alumnus of Wiley College and the University of Pennsylvania Fels School of Government.

## **Introduction by Reginald Van Lee**, *Chief Transformation Officer of The Carlyle Group*



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