

**'An Amazing Woman'****'A Really Great Testament To Partnership [At JMU]'****JMU To Honor Legacy Of Maya Angelou With Performance Event**

## SPOTLIGHT

Story by SHELBY MERTENS / DN-R

Joanne Veal Gabbin remembers cooking blueberry cobbler in Maya Angelou's kitchen at her home in Winston-Salem, N.C. For most people, it would feel like cooking for a queen, but for Gabbin, she was just cooking for a close friend.

Gabbin remembers, just a few years ago, Angelou, the beloved author and poet, sitting at the dining room table, giving out directions to those cooking in her kitchen, and Gabbin replied, "Maya I have this. I can make the best blueberry cobbler around." Angelou backed off. Gabbin said by that time, her health was declining. She was on oxygen. Her body was becoming frail.

"One thing I cannot forget was that she was not eating a lot, so she ate a little bit of the meat, a little bit of potatoes, didn't hardly touch the string beans, but when I gave her my blueberry cobbler, and I gave her a good-size portion, she ate every bit," Gabbin said.

To honor the legacy of Angelou, who died in 2014, Gabbin, the executive director of the Furious Flower Poetry Center at James Madison University, is partnering with the Forbes Center for Performing Arts to present a tribute to Angelou called "Throw Your Head Back & Sing."

"She was an amazing woman," Gabbin said. "So inspiring and funny and always remembering stories and talking about her family and her travels. She had this exuberance about her, and that's what we're trying to capture in this particular performance. She was multi-talented, she was a wonderful speaker, poet and memoirist, but she was also a great storyteller just in life."

The tribute will feature more than 20 poets and vocalists who will recite Angelou's most loved poems by combining spoken word and spirituals, an art form Angelou mastered in her career. "When she would tell a favorite story, all of the sudden she punctuated it with a song, and usually it was spiritual or maybe even a blues song, so that's what we're doing to honor her memory," Gabbin said. The event will also feature New Song, an a capella group, and special guests Rutha Mae Harris, Sonya Baker, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez and Darrell Rose. Many of the poets belong to the Wintergreen Women Writers Collective, of which Gabbin is a member.

Three JMU faculty members, including Gabbin, will participate in the tribute by reciting poems or singing. Sonya Baker, the associate dean of JMU's College of Visual and Performing Arts, will sing.

Gabbin said the audience can expect to hear a mixture of Angelou's most famous poems like "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," "Still I Rise," and "Phenomenal Woman," as well as some lesser known pieces.

The performance is split into four suites titled, "I've Got Shoes," which Gabbin said emphasizes traveling, "I've Got Wings," on the theme of freedom, "I've Got a Right to Sing the Blues," and "I've Got the Victory." The section names are representative of the themes shown in Angelou's work.

Gabbin first met Angelou in the '90s. She said the famous poet has been in the area at least three times: once in 1993 for a conference, **Bridgewater College** sometime later and Virginia Tech in October 2012, which was the last time Gabbin saw her. Gabbin shared the stage with Angelou and fellow poet Nikki Giovanni at Virginia Tech to perform a Toni Morrison tribute. The Furious Flower Poetry Center presented Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison with a lifetime achievement award at that event in 2012.

"We were all friends. I stayed at her house the last time in 2012 when we were planning this tribute to Toni Morrison," she said. "In the last three years before her death, I visited her home in Winston-Salem at least three times, and we became really good friends just before her death."

The nation collectively mourned Angelou's death in 2014.

"It was a sadness of course for hundreds of thousands of people, but especially for those who were close to her," Gabbin said. "She never stopped working to almost the

See **AMAZING**, Page **A8**

“

**When she would tell a favorite story, all of the sudden she punctuated it with a song, and usually it was spiritual or maybe even a blues song, so that's what we're doing to honor her memory.**

\_ Joanne Veal Gabbin, Furious Flower Poetry Center at JMU



**Throw Your Head Back & Sing, a tribute to Maya Angelou, will be held at James Madison University's Forbes Center for the Performing Arts on Sept. 29.**

Courtesy of James Madison University

---

**Amazing** FROM PAGE A7 very end." The tribute to Angelou, "Throw Your Head Back & Sing," will take place at the Forbes Center for the Performing Arts on Thursday, Sept. 29 at 7 p.m.

Regan Byrne, executive director of the Forbes Center, said the center is committed to forging partnerships and presenting a diverse set of performances.

"I think it's a really great testament to partnership across the university, and certainly Furious Flower Poetry Center is one of the most respected poetry centers in the United States, and we are so thrilled to be partnering with them on this event," Byrne said. "[Angelou's] work has been so widely regarded and to focus an event on her, using spoken word, spirituals and vocals of the talent that is going to be featured, is a good thing for our audiences, not only for our community audience but our students as well."

Admission is \$22 and \$12 for JMU students. For more information, call the box office at 540-568-7000.

Contact Shelby Mertens at 574-6274, @DNR\_smertens or [smertens@dnronline.com](mailto:smertens@dnronline.com)