

Generational Wisdom Passed | New Haven Independent



Allan Appel Photo

Budding playwright and accomplished director meet.

Jade King Carroll was about 14 when she was lucky enough to meet the centenarian Delany sisters, Sadie and Bessie, on the set at the McCarter Theater in Princeton, where her dad often contributed original music to the productions.

That's where the outspoken Delanys' lives — growing up with a father who was a freed slave and making their own pioneering achievements — were being fashioned into a Broadway-bound play entitled [*Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years*](#).

King, Remsen, and about 25 others met at a “community conversation” inspired by themes in the upcoming Long Wharf production of *Having Our Say*. The conversation was convened Wednesday evening at the Ives Main Branch Library.



Greene, left, read Sadie, three years older than the more wild Bessie, played by Staton.

The event was part of an ongoing partnership between Long Wharf and the New Haven Free Public Library that brings actors, directors, or others associated with each of the theater's offerings to programs at all the city's branches.

Remsen listened carefully to the recollections of King's young enchantment with the theater and the Delanys, for King has grown up to be an up-and-coming young director who is helping the Long Wharf production.

The two-person play, adapted by Emily Mann from a book about the Delanys, opens Feb. 17 and runs through March 13.

The premise of the play is that the two old ladies invite you into their home, cook a meal for you — which they will do on the stage of the theater — and in the process tell you about their childhood, life in the Jim Crow era in the south, and then their last chapter living in Harlem through the Civil Rights Era.

They don't like to be called "black" because they are, well, brown. They are also uncomfortable with "African-American."

The play features a cornucopia of busted stereotypes. A delicious sample was offered by two community actors, Aleta Staton and Ann Greene, who read a small section of the play's second act to kick off the conversation.

This is how the Delanys — who are opposite personalities but know each other so well they finish sentences together — discovered that Jim Crow laws had entered their lives when they were little girls:

SADIE: When we got to Pullen Park, we found changes there too. The spring where you got water now had a big wooden sign across the middle.

BESSIE: On one side, the word "white" was painted.

SADIE: And on the other, the word “colored.” What in the world was all this about?

BESSIE: We may have been little children, but, honey, we got the message loud and clear.

SADIE: (Laughing) But when nobody was looking, Bessie took the tin dipper and leaned over and scooped some water from the other side and said, “I’m goin’ get me some *white* water!”

BESSIE: It tasted just the same.

Elizabeth Nearing, the Long Wharf’s community engagement manager, said she chose such selections from the play because “you get to know the humor of them [the sisters] while dealing with serious material.”

Remsen, who is home-schooled, sat beside her dad and listened intently to the director’s own recollections. “I was there from the initial days of the play’s creation, with [Emily Mann](#),” who became Carroll’s theater mentor, King said.



She said the genius of the play is that it touches on sensitive issues that you could get away only through the mouths of funny, accomplished, centenarian sisters.

Carroll herself identified with one of the play’s takes on history: namely, that a great forward movement through the mid-1960s Civil Rights movement eventually stalled. At least that’s what the sisters say in the play.

“At 102 and 104 they were so honest, alive, survivors. It’s also a celebration, [and also] an easy jumping off point for a conversation we need to have,” King said.



"Community conversation" was followed by community hug.

Remsen came away with a lot to ponder. Which is what a community conversation is all about.

The schedule for the upcoming library programs based on Having Our Say: Saturday, Feb. 13, from 2:00 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. at the Fair Haven Library; Saturday, Feb. 20, from 2:00 p.m. to 3:30p.m. at the Mitchell Library; Tuesday, Feb. 23, from 6:00 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. at the Wilson Library; and Saturday, Feb. 27, from 2:00 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. at the Stetson Library.