Ashley M. Jones is the Poet Laureate of Alabama (2022-2026). She is the first person of color and the youngest person to hold this position in its 93 year existence. She holds an MFA in Poetry from Florida International University, and she is the author of Magic City Gospel (Hub City Press 2017), dark/thing (Pleiades Press 2019), and REPARATIONS NOW! (Hub City Press 2021). She is the co-editor of WHAT THINGS COST: An Anthology for the People (University Press of Kentucky, 2023).

Her poetry has earned several awards, including the Rona Jaffe Foundation Writers Book Award, the Silver Medal in the Independent Publishers Book Awards, the Lena-Miles Wever Todd Prize for Poetry, a Literature Fellowship from the Alabama State Council on the Arts, the Lucille Clifton Poetry Prize, and the Lucille Clifton Legacy Award. She was a finalist for the Ruth Lily Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Fellowship in 2020, and her collection, REPARATIONS NOW! was on the longlist for the 2022 PEN/Voelcker Award for Poetry. Jones has been featured on news outlets including Good Morning America, ABC News, and the BBC. Her poems and essays appear in or are forthcoming at CNN, POETRY, The Oxford American, Origins Journal, The Quarry by Split This Rock, Obsidian, and many others.

She co-directs PEN Birmingham, and she is the founding director of the Magic City Poetry Festival. She is the Associate Director of the University Honors Program at UAB, and she is part of the Core Faculty of the Converse University Low Residency MFA Program. She recently served as a guest editor for Poetry Magazine. In 2022, she received a Poet Laureate Fellowship from the Academy of American Poets.
LUNCH PANELISTS

**Beth Shelburne**

Beth Shelburne is an award-winning journalist, investigative reporter, and writer from Birmingham. She has a BA in Mass Communications and Journalism from Auburn University, and she earned an MA in creative writing from UAB in 2018. Beth spent 20 years working as a TV news anchor and reporter, most recently at WBRC in Birmingham. In 2023, an 8-part investigative podcast called Earwitness that Beth created, reported, wrote, produced, and narrated was released on all major podcast platforms. The series follows Beth’s 2-year investigation into the death row conviction of Toforest Johnson, who many people believe is innocent. Earwitness was named a top true crime podcast of 2023 by critics at Crime Writers On and Paste Magazine.

**Laura Secord**

Laura Secord is a poet, storyteller, teaching artist. Her novel-in-poems, *An Art, A Craft, A Mystery* was awarded the 2024 Authors Award for Poetry by Alabama Library Association, and was chosen as the best Indie Historical Fiction of 2022 by Kirkus Reviews. She’s worked as a printer, union organizer, health care activist, teacher, sex-educator and nurse practitioner in community health and HIV care. She serves as Director of Community Engagement for The Magic City Poetry Festival. She worked alongside other local poets to create a tribute to Jefferson County lynching victim, Elizabeth Lawrence for The Black Cherry Tree Project. She maintains a lifetime commitment to sharing unvoiced stories. She lives in a purple house and walks with a leaping dog.

**Javacia Harris Bowser**

Javacia Harris Bowser is an award-winning freelance journalist and the author of the essay collection *Find Your Way Back: How to Write Your Way Through Anything*. She is also the founder of See Jane Write, a website, community, and coaching service for women who write and create that she founded in 2011. Javacia was included in Southern Living magazine’s list of Innovators Changing the South, alongside household names like Dolly Parton and Reese Witherspoon, and was a recipient of the 2022 Alabama State Council on the Arts Fellowship. As a freelance journalist, she has written for several local, regional and national media outlets including ELLE magazine, Shondaland.com, BET.com, Good Grit magazine, and The Birmingham Times. In 2020, her column for Birmingham magazine was awarded Best Magazine Column by the Alabama Press Association. Javacia is a proud graduate of the journalism programs at the University of Alabama and the University of California at Berkeley. When she isn’t writing, you can find Javacia working out, eating tacos, listening to Beyoncé or spending time with her husband Edward.
BREAKOUT SESSION SPEAKERS

**Katy Smith**

Katy Smith serves as the Director of Student Leadership Development and Civic Engagement at Birmingham-Southern College. In this role, she coordinates the Bonner Leader Program and works with students to help them find their place in the world through personal discernment, service experiences, career exploration, and relationship development. Katy is a graduate of BSC and UAB, and she lives in in Birmingham with her family and a one-eyed cat named Squirrel.

**Mark Middleton**

Mark Middleton is a junior theatre and English double major at Birmingham-Southern College from Auburn, AL. After graduating from BSC, he plans to attend graduate school to obtain his master’s in education. He is currently in his second year of being a fellow for the creative writing nonprofit Desert Island Supply Company (DISCO). He also serves as a Bonner Leader, president of his Fraternity, a Community Coordinator for Residence Life, and an Honor Council Representative.

**Nicole Villavicencio-Garduño**

Nicole Villavicencio-Garduño is a senior computer science major at Birmingham-Southern College from Jasper, AL. As a Bonner Leader, she leads a group of BSC students who serve weekly dinners at First Light Women’s Shelter. She also serves as president of service organization We the Neighbors, executive director of BSC’s culture and diversity organization C3; and as a first-year residence hall community coordinator.

**Lindsey Hitchcock**

Lindsey Hitchcock is a senior Religion major at Birmingham-Southern College, where she is earning a Distinction in Poverty Studies. Originally from Huntsville, in high school she was a volunteer and intern at Merrimack Hall, a nonprofit arts center for children and adults with disabilities. Her desire to continue finding ways to work with nonprofits during college led her to become a Bonner Leader at BSC. Through the Bonner program, she has served as a U-8 coach for NorthStar Soccer Ministries and worked with West End Community Church. She has also held many other leadership roles at BSC, including Lead Orientation Staff, a member of the Religious Life leadership team, and president of her sorority, the BSC Honor Council, and Omicron Delta Kappa honor society. She will be entering medical school at UAB in the fall.
Glenny Brock attended Birmingham City Schools, then graduated from John Carroll Catholic High School in 1995. She earned a bachelor's degree in English from Birmingham-Southern College (BSC) in 1999 and worked as a journalist for more than a decade, serving as editor-in-chief of Birmingham Weekly and the founding editor of Weld for Birmingham. Her reporting has appeared in Architectural Record, The New York Times and other publications. She completed an MFA in creative writing at Spalding University in Louisville, KY, and now teaches writing at BSC. In 2018, in partnership with her friend Mia Watkins, she founded Dead Mother's Day Brunch. The former outreach coordinator for the Lyric and Alabama Theatre, she is now working on the renovation of the historic Lincoln Theatre in Bessemer, AL.

Dr. Briana Morton

Dr. Briana Morton is the Vice President of Educational Services at Alabama Public Television. Overseeing the largest department at APT, Morton is a known educational leader, with expertise in developing programming focused on student achievement, teacher development, and parental support. In her previous service as the Executive Director for College Admissions Made Possible, Morton created the Alabama Virtual Institute, an interactive, STEM-based learning experience for underserved students in afterschool programs across the state. Currently, Morton serves as a Governor Appointee for the Alabama Social Studies Course of Study Committee and is a board member for the Alabama Literacy Alliance, Alabama School of Mathematics and Science Foundation, and Ingram State Technical College Advisory Board.