

Photo:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1vaHADBm9UkZ5EGRfSLBdKwin7o_m1j2S/view?usp=share_link

Caption: Dr. Johnnetta Betsch Cole received the 2021 National Humanities Medal at The White House on March 21. (Micha Green/ The Washington Informer)

Photo 2:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1xT0gHI8D2QW2TGx883ukSnlsB5s0Zq-W/view?usp=share_link

Caption 2: Gladys Knight received a 2021 National Medal of Art at the White House on March 21. (Courtesy Photo)

MetaDescription: As they prepared to get National Medals in Arts and Humanities Gladys Knight and Dr. Johnnetta Betsch Cole dished on the importance of empowering women.

HED: Gladys Knight, Johnnetta Betsch Cole Talk Presidential National Medals
By Micha Green
WI Contributing Writer

Grammy Hall of Famer Gladys Knight and barrier-breaking educator and leader Dr. Jonnnetta Betsch Cole are among the powerful lineup of artists and do-gooders President Joe Biden honored on March 21 with 2021 National Medals. As the legendary singer and former college president prepared to receive a National Medal of Arts and National Humanities Medal, they shared a clear message this Women's History Month: work to empower other Black women.

"It's amazing," Knight told the Informer about the honor. "It gives us the courage and energy to move on up and to know that there are other things that you can do where others can benefit as well."

Donning a flared black suit outside of the White House press briefing room, Cole shared that Black women must stand in their power and continue to fight for equal justice for all people during the month of March and beyond.

"[We] need to own [that]...we are in Women's History and Herstory Month," Cole said. "We as Black women, as Francis Beal said many years ago, we carry a 'double jeopardy,' victimized by our race, victimized by our gender. And many of us have so many multiple identities around our sexual orientation, around our ability and disability, around our religion, around our age, and yet Black women— we have never ceased to be in this struggle. And I think when Ella Baker used these words, of course she thought about all her people, but I believe she had a particular thought about Black women, when she said, 'we, who believe in freedom, cannot rest,' until it comes."

Despite having received several awards in their time, Knight and Cole discussed what this presidential recognition means not only for them, but other Black women as well.

Describing the wonderful feelings that come with such an honor, Knight, who received a Kennedy Center Honor in December 2022, explained that her hard work in music has not only been to entertain the masses, but set an example.

“I just always want to do my part,” explained Knight, who has also championed philanthropic causes such as research for AIDS.

As the former president of Spelman and Bennett Colleges, two historically Black institutions for women, Cole has a long history of building up others and igniting passion in education and justice, however she didn’t think it would get noticed by the President of the United States (POTUS).

“It is humbling and it is magical. I have been very fortunate to be in the White House and to witness the bestowing of medals to heroes and sheroes in the arts and humanities in my country. I never thought that I would be here as a recipient in the humanities,” she said.

Having been the director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African Art as well as instrumental in philanthropic efforts in equity and education, Cole is both a champion of the arts and humanities. She was honored POTUS recognized her many efforts over the years and, at 86, joked that perhaps the president thought it was her time.

“I think the president and his folk said ‘Enough already. Just give her the medal,’” she said laughing.

Educator and artist Hilary Daniel, who is starring as Dottie in [DC Black Broadway’s upcoming production of “The Giz.”](#) said Cole and Knight were perfect people for the president to recognize.

“I can’t think of any two stronger pillars of African-American womanism more deserving of an award of this magnitude. Dr. Cole’s work with preserving African American culture through arts and other philanthropic endeavors, and Ms. Knight’s commitment to fighting childhood diabetes and AIDS make them all the more inspirational.”

In addition to Knight, National Medal of Art recipients included: Judith Francisca Baca, Fred Eychaner, Jose Feliciano, Mindy Kaling, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Antonio Marotrell-Cardona, Joan Shigekawa, Bruce Springsteen, Vera Wang, The Billie Holiday Theatre, The International Association of Blacks in Dance. The other National Humanities Medal awardees were: Richard Blanco, Walter Isaacson, Earl Lewis, Henrietta Mann, Ann Patchett, Bryan Stevenson, Amy Tan, Tara Westlover, Colson Whitehead and Native America Calling.

Considering being honored among such a dynamite group of people and organizations the two significance of the moment was not lost on these two celebrated Black women– who are for many, sheroes in their own rights.

“I am humbled and I am so grateful,” Cole said.

“I don’t take anything for granted,” Knight declared.