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### **The Givens Foundation launches Givens Black Books: Community Reading Campaign**

Twin Cities, MN. November, 2010. The Givens Foundation for African American Literature has launched Givens Black Books, a community reading campaign celebrating the work of acclaimed African American playwright and author, J. California Cooper. Givens Black Books will feature a series of public book group discussions, creative performances by local literary artists, artist residencies in area schools, and an after-school program at North High School in partnership with JAZZ88 KBEM, and will culminate with Ms. Cooper's visit to the Twin Cities in April 2011.

Minneapolis and St. Paul suffer from one of the largest achievement gaps in the country. For Minnesotans between the ages of 25 and 34, 18.6% of African and African Americans have less than a high school diploma, compared to 4.3% of their white counterparts. The goal of Givens Black Books is to increase access to and engagement in the literary arts in the Twin Cities African American community. Eartha Bell, Givens Black Books Coordinator, explains the selection of Cooper as this year's author, "J. California Cooper is a celebrated African American author with the storytelling abilities to reach and excite a diverse audience of readers." Givens Black Books literary arts education residencies will provide an opportunity for African American youth, many not reading at the appropriate grade level, to be exposed to Cooper's work in a meaningful way.

African Americans living on the North side of Minneapolis have been faced with an alarming series of school closings, the most recent proposed closing being North High School, which has been at the heart of North Minneapolis for more than a century. With a dwindling student population and an uncertain future, available program opportunities are lacking. As part of the community reading campaign, the Givens Foundation has partnered with JAZZ88 KBEM to provide students at North High School the opportunity to study African American literature, while also learning important broadcasting and production skills. Students will have access to production equipment to record their work and share it on-line and on-air with their community.

African Americans in Minnesota are also overrepresented in the state's correctional facilities, while being underrepresented at libraries. African American literature serves as a useful tool to counter this marginalization by allowing people to see themselves as the main character or hero of a story. Connie Meyer of the Adult Corrections Facility of Hennepin County, a partner in Givens Black Books, explains, "Collaborating with the Givens Foundation reinforces the programming provided by the Adult Corrections Facility and the Hennepin County Library. The collaboration ensures that the collection of resources available reflects the diversity of the population we serve."

The community is hungry for greater access to African American literature. Within 12 hours of publicizing the Givens Black Books book discussion at Pillsbury United Communities Oak Park Center, which is in the heart of Near North Minneapolis, Director Leslie Vinson received an outpouring of interest from the community, "The population we serve is 95% African American... Oak Park Center has recently identified our vision moving forward with a strong emphasis on African American culture, history and traditions. This partnership came at a perfect time." On November 22, Oak Park Center will kick-off a Givens Black Books book club with Cooper's novel, *Family*, led by locally and nationally acclaimed storyteller, Nothando Zulu.

For more information on Givens Black Books, including dates of upcoming public book discussions or to start your own discussion group, visit [www.givens.org](http://www.givens.org). Givens Black Books is made possible in part by a grant from the Minnesota State Arts Board, through an appropriation by the Minnesota State Legislature and a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Founded in 1972, the Givens Foundation for African American Literature's mission is to enrich cultural awareness and learning through programs that promote and celebrate black literature and writers.

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