

# CAROLINA LIVING

## INSIDE CHARLOTTE ARTS



TRACY WATTS

Poet and storyteller Hannah Hasan is at the helm of "I Am Queen Charlotte," a multi-platform celebration of Black women and their contributions to the Charlotte community, running March 6-12.

## Storyteller launches celebration of Black women in Charlotte

BY LIZ ROTHBAUS BERTRAND  
Arts correspondent

Recently, poet and storyteller Hannah Hasan walked onto the stage of one of Charlotte's largest theaters, looked out at the 2,100 empty seats and wept.

It wasn't her first time in Belk Theater. She had been there before to see shows. But now she was doing a walk-through in preparation for a new project — the biggest undertaking of her career to date — and emotions took over.

"I've worked really hard my entire career to lift and share and give light and honor to stories of people who I see every day that deserve that honor," Hasan said. "And oftentimes, that's in small churches and community centers, and on black box stages and things of that nature. It's with very little funding and resources..."

For years Hasan has been using poetry and storytelling to explore identity, unearth and preserve the stories of marginalized communities, and build connections. She's a sought-after speaker, workshop leader and event organizer.

Now she's at the helm of "I Am Queen Charlotte," a multi-platform celebration of Black



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Hannah Hasan hopes the "I Am Queen Charlotte" events enable the community to "bear witness to some truths that are beautiful and joyful and maybe a little bit painful..."

women and their contributions to the Charlotte community, running March 6-12. The project includes a documentary-style book and a week of arts and educational events.

The events bring together major cultural institutions, small arts groups, individual artists, and corporate and educational partners to honor the lives of Black women in the community.

"I think about some of the storytellers or the folks whose stories that we're telling who have especially given so much to our arts community, to never



DANA ENDSLEY

Hannah Hasan hugs Ohavia Phillips, one of the 50 Black women she interviewed for "I Am Queen Charlotte," during a photo shoot for the book. Phillips will also host a hip-hop and R&B concert, Queens of the City, March 11 at Knight Theater.

have performed on a stage like that," Hasan said. "It is breathtaking..."

### FROM BOOK TO WEEKLONG EVENT

The project took root last fall

as an idea for a coffee table book to celebrate the lives and contributions of Black women to the Charlotte community.

Hasan teamed up with photographer Scott Gardner, founder and creative lead at AboutfaceCLT, a nonprofit organization that uses public art to build a more compassionate city. Together they interviewed and photographed 50 women, including elected officials, business women, Charlotte natives, first generation Americans and even a 10-year-old girl.

Hasan and Gardner realized the concept was bigger than a book project, so they started looking for partners to develop the week-long celebration.

Hasan has adapted several of the stories for the stage. They will be presented by local performers as part of a big kick-off event March 6 at Belk Theater. The Charlotte Symphony will be there too and the entire event will be directed by Broadway director Benjamin Endsley Klein.

Other organizations, including UNC Charlotte, will host events throughout the week, culminating in a musical event, "Queens of the City," at Knight Theater on March 11 at 7:30 p.m. The kick-off event and "Queens of the City" will be ticketed, while many of the weekday events will be free and offered virtually.

An accompanying curriculum is being developed for the public by educational consultant Ja-neen Bryant of Facilitate Movement.

Blumenthal Performing Arts and Lending Tree are presenting sponsors. Other partners include Charlotte is Creative, Levine Museum of the New South and the Arts and Science Council.

Hasan hopes the week enables the community to "bear witness to some truths that are beautiful and joyful and maybe a little bit painful... that capture the essence of what Charlotte is and what she can become."

### FINDING HER VOICE

Hasan first started writing and performing poetry as a student at North Carolina A&T State University in Greensboro. Initially, her art explored her identity as a Black, Muslim woman from the South.

She grew up in Statesville, the fifth of six children. Her parents were very community-oriented: her father, a successful businessman, also served as the Imam for their mosque. Her mother directed a domestic violence shelter for women and children.

Her childhood was beautiful in many ways, but also, at times, isolating, Hasan said.

"I never got to hide or shrink away from my identity," she said. "And I don't know... that I wanted to but there were moments when I was very aware — and a lot of them — of just being different."

That inspired her to become the role model she would have wanted growing up.

In her early 20s, as she devel-

SEE HASAN, 4C





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## HASAN

oped her voice as a storyteller and a social justice advocate, she remembers trying to think of a Black, Muslim woman in pop culture or entertainment with whom she could identify.

"I couldn't point to anyone and see myself," Hasan said. "...A big part of the personal reason that I continue to dress modestly and wear my hair wrapped and all those other things is because of what it represents, and what it might mean for another little girl who grew up in a Statesville, like me... I am very aware of my identity."

For Hasan, it's deeper than race or religion alone.

"I'm a dark-skinned Black woman," she said. "I am a Black woman who occupies a bigger body. There is something that

when you're in a room with me, you know that you're in a room with me... But I don't want to shy away from that, right?"

"Because that inspires me to be something, hopefully, if it's for just one other person, who says, 'I can see myself there.'"

### WHAT MAKES FOR A GOOD STORY

When Hasan interviews someone or teaches a storytelling workshop, she is always looking for the layers underneath that convey something essential about a person or a place.

Some of her recent projects focused on neighborhoods going through displacement. For these, she interviewed residents in Enderly Park on Charlotte's West Side and Optimist Park, near uptown.

She wrote their stories,

and then she and other storytellers presented them at community events. Hasan's aim was not to preach why gentrification is bad. Rather, it was to ensure these stories don't also become "displaced" in the midst of change.

"The stories are phenomenal," she said, rich in details about the people and the history of these neighborhoods. By sharing them, she hopes they help inspire communities.

"There's something in the work that is like this complicated dance for me because I know that just because we do this event doesn't mean that Miss Sarah's not going to lose her home," Hasan said. "But I also know that Miss Sarah, maybe for the first time in her life, has experienced someone saying, 'Your story matters... and we're going to bear witness to it together as a community...'"

### THE WAY FORWARD

Hasan believes the widespread community support for "I Am Queen Charlotte" is unprecedented.

She said that support challenges white-run funders and organizations to rethink their role in community-building efforts in areas that are different from their own — by supporting projects that not only uplift communities that exist within the margins but also help people who are of the majority begin to see themselves in those stories.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

For details on events for "I Am Queen Charlotte," and the related upcoming book, go to [iamqueencharlotte.org](http://iamqueencharlotte.org). You can also follow Hannah Hasan on Instagram and Twitter.