

# NEWS RELEASE



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **WHYY, MCNEIL CENTER & NATIONAL CONSTITUTION CENTER HOST POIGNANT AMERICA 250TH COMMUNITY CONVERSATION FEATURING NATIONAL TEACHER OF THE YEAR LEON SMITH**

PHILADELPHIA, May 21, 2026 - **WHYY**, the **McNeil Center for Early American Studies** at the University of Pennsylvania and the **National Constitution Center** (NCC) explore the significance of America's 250th anniversary at a special community gathering on Wednesday, May 27 starting at 5:30 p.m. at the National Constitution Center, 525 Arch Street, Philadelphia, Pa. 19106.

The partner organizations are excited to welcome community members for a reception, tour of NCC exhibits, performances and a conversation on the significance of representation and America's founding from a youth perspective.

**Leon Smith**, the National Teacher of the Year and an Advanced Placement (AP) United States history and AP African American studies teacher at Haverford High School, is a featured panelist. He will be joined by Philadelphia natives **Maya Izzard** of CAPA High School; **Sophia Gala**, a history undergraduate student at Penn and participant in an accelerated graduate residency program; and **Tristan Worsham**, a Constitutional content fellow at the NCC. The discussion will be moderated by **Sarah Glover**, **WHYY Vice President of News & Civic Dialogue**.

"America's 250th Anniversary is not simply a moment to reflect on history, it is an opportunity to engage with one another about the ideals, contradictions and aspirations that continue to shape our nation," said WHYY President & CEO, **Bill Marrasso**. "We are proud to partner with the McNeil Center and the National Constitution Center to create spaces for thoughtful civic dialogue that elevate diverse perspectives, encourage lifelong learning and invite our communities, especially young people, into conversations about the future of American democracy."

The discussion and Q&A will focus on the contradictions of American democracy. The panel has been assembled to illuminate representation not only as a system of elections and institutions, but as a lived experience shaped by ethnicity, gender, class and access to power. Drawing on history and present-day experience, this conversation will center youth perspectives on the American dream and its ideals. There will be an audience participation segment.

"I spend most of my time thinking about the founding era of the United States," said **Emma Hart**, Richard S. Dunn Director of the McNeil Center for Early American Studies. "The 250th anniversary year of the Declaration of Independence is a moment when our interests at the Center converge with those of the nation at large. This event, and the others in the series, are a wonderful opportunity for us all to come together to discuss what the Declaration's values mean for the United States in 2026. It is a conversation that wouldn't happen without our partnership with WHYY and the NCC," she said.

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“America’s 250th Anniversary should be more than a commemoration of the past,” said **Vince Stango**, NCC Interim President & CEO. “It is an opportunity to engage honestly with our history, reflect on the meaning of our founding ideals, and ensure new generations see themselves as part of the continuing American story. We are honored to partner with WHYY and the McNeil Center to create space for thoughtful civic dialogue led by young people, educators, scholars and community voices at this important moment in our nation’s history.”

Performances will include a poetry reading by **Malaya Ulan**, the 2024-2025 Youth Poet Laureate of Philadelphia and 2025 Northeast Regional Youth Poet Laureate, songs by **Cheo Mangum**, an 11th grade student at the Philadelphia High School for Creative and Performing Arts (CAPA), and reception entertainment by **Equinox**, an instrumental quartet of young men also from CAPA.

This event is free and open to the public, but registration is required. Learn more about the program agenda and register at [whyy.org/events](https://whyy.org/events).

This event is part of WHYY’s *America 250: A Community Conversation* series in partnership with the McNeil Center for Early American Studies and is made possible thanks to support from the Philadelphia Funder Collaborative for the Semiquincentennial.

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#### **About WHYY:**

WHYY, the Philadelphia region’s leading independent, non-commercial public media provider, has served southeastern Pennsylvania, southern New Jersey and all of Delaware for more than 70 years. WHYY’s mission is to engage audiences, expand perspectives, and empower communities through lifelong learning, truthful reporting, healthy dialogue, and amplification of diverse voices. The station’s national production and presentation roster for public media includes *Fresh Air with Terry Gross & Tonya Mosley*, the award-winning weekday magazine of contemporary arts and issues; the children’s arts education series *Albie’s Elevator* and *The Infinite Art Hunt*; the weekly science and health program & podcast, *The Pulse* as well as a variety of documentaries, series, and specials. WHYY also serves as the Local Primary 1 (LP1) station for the Philadelphia emergency alert system (EAS) operational area, acting as the region’s primary broadcaster for receiving and relaying emergency alerts to other stations and cable systems—ensuring the public receives timely and potentially lifesaving information. For more information, visit [WHYY.org](https://whyy.org)

#### **About the McNeil Center for Early American Studies:**

Established as the Philadelphia Center for Early American Studies in 1978 and renamed in honor of its benefactor Robert L. McNeil, Jr., in 1998, the McNeil Center facilitates scholarly inquiry into the histories and cultures of North America in the Atlantic world before 1850, with a particular but by no means exclusive emphasis on the mid-Atlantic region. The Center offers pre- and post-doctoral fellowships to encourage use of the Philadelphia area’s magnificent manuscript, rare book, and museum collections, conducts a seminar series to promote intellectual community among local and visiting faculty and graduate students, and organizes occasional national conferences to foster interdisciplinary research.

#### **About the National Constitution Center:**

The National Constitution Center brings together people of all ages and perspectives, across America and around the world, to learn about, debate, and celebrate the greatest vision of human freedom in history, the U.S. Constitution. A private, nonprofit organization, the Center serves as America’s leading platform for nonpartisan constitutional education and debate. As the *Museum of We The People*, the Center brings the Constitution to life for visitors of all ages through interactive programs and exhibits. As *America’s Town Hall*, the Center brings the leading conservative and liberal thought leaders together to debate the Constitution on all media platforms. As a *Headquarters for Civic Education*, the Center delivers the best educational programs and online resources that inspire citizens and engage all Americans in learning about the U.S. Constitution.