



September 11, 2023

Dr. Thomas LoBasso
Office of the President
Daytona State College
1200 W. International Speedway Blvd.
Daytona Beach, FL 32114

Sent via Electronic Mail to Thomas.LoBasso@DaytonaState.edu

Dear President LoBasso:

As nonpartisan organizations dedicated to freedom of speech, thought, and inquiry, the National Coalition Against Censorship, the American Civil Liberties Union of Florida, and the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression are deeply disturbed by reports indicating that in December 2022, the administration at Daytona State College may have canceled an upcoming exhibition because it refers to racialized police violence in the United States. Institutions of higher education are responsible for presenting students with a wide range of viewpoints, no matter how controversial or unpopular they may be, and efforts to suppress the free exchange of ideas are an affront to academic freedom. As a public school, Daytona State College is subject to the First Amendment imperative to not discriminate against ideas based on their viewpoint. NCAC, ACLU-FL and FIRE urge Daytona State College to reschedule the exhibition at the earliest possible date.

It is our understanding that *Stranger Fruit*, the canceled show, is a solo photography exhibition by artist Jon Henry that had been in development for over two years and received a grant from the Florida Division of Arts and Culture. Responding to high profile cases of racialized police violence, *Stranger Fruit* focuses on the maternal and familial loss that endures far longer than media attention and criminal trial proceedings that accompany such tragedies. Taking inspiration from Michelangelo's 15th century marble sculpture *La Pietà* in which Mary holds the body of Jesus in her arms, Henry's photographic series stages representations of Black mothers with the seemingly lifeless bodies of their sons.

The show was to be on display at Daytona State College's Southeast Museum of Photography (SMP) from January 11 through April 15, 2023. But in December 2022, a museum employee wrote the artist to explain that the exhibition would need to be indefinitely canceled, due to recent HVAC issues that resulted in building leaks.

Then in August of 2023, Jon Henry received an anonymous letter from a former employee stating that the real reason for the cancellation was the show's content, and that the Daytona State College administration felt the subject of the exhibition was at odds with the school's small police training program. A report by *Hyperallergic* indicates that another former employee has also since confirmed this account. Recently, NCAC's Arts & Culture Advocacy Program spoke with a third former employee who worked within the SMP as a Museum Assistant during the time of the cancellation and the months following. All three whistleblowers claim that the cancellation was announced mid-December 2022, shortly after the exhibition's press release had circulated up to the administration for approval. The former Museum Assistant expressed no knowledge of any leaks nor of any repairs made within the gallery in which Jon Henry's work was to be shown, neither in the months leading up to, nor the months following his scheduled exhibition.

We understand that representatives from Daytona State College maintain that the exhibition was canceled because of ongoing HVAC leaks (and has provided documentation of work order requests dating back to September 2022), but the fact that the exhibition was indefinitely canceled—rather than merely shortened, relocated, or rescheduled—lends credence to allegations that the real motive for the cancelation was the show's content. Indeed, exhibitions across the country are routinely being purged of any content that reflects issues of police violence. Moreover, according to SMP's website and social media accounts, it appears that other exhibitions opened or remained on view in the same building between January and April 2023.

Higher education provides an opportunity for students to engage with different ideas and viewpoints so that they may develop their own interpretations of the world around them. As the Daytona State College website states, “[d]iversity of people, thought and expression provides energy and vitality for the learning process.” The college also expresses support for “academic freedom and intellectual pursuit,” thereby promising students will be introduced to a diverse range of contrasting and competing ideas. Henry's exhibition should be considered relevant for DSC students—and especially those enrolled in the college's police academy—precisely because it grapples with ongoing issues that plague the field of policing and society at large.

Finally, as a public university bound by the First Amendment, Daytona State College may not censor artistic expression on campus, particularly where it sends a political message or addresses other matters of public concern. If the reason for the December cancellation of *Stranger Fruit* was indeed simply temporary and based on logistical limitations, Daytona State College should reschedule the exhibition for the earliest date available.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Larison
Director, Arts & Culture Advocacy Program
National Coalition Against Censorship

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Katie Blankenship". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

Katie Blankenship
Deputy Legal Director
American Civil Liberties Union of Florida

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Alex Morey". The signature is cursive and somewhat stylized, with a long horizontal stroke.

Alex Morey
Director, Campus Rights Advocacy
Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression

cc: Dr. Amy Locklear, Provost and Executive Vice President