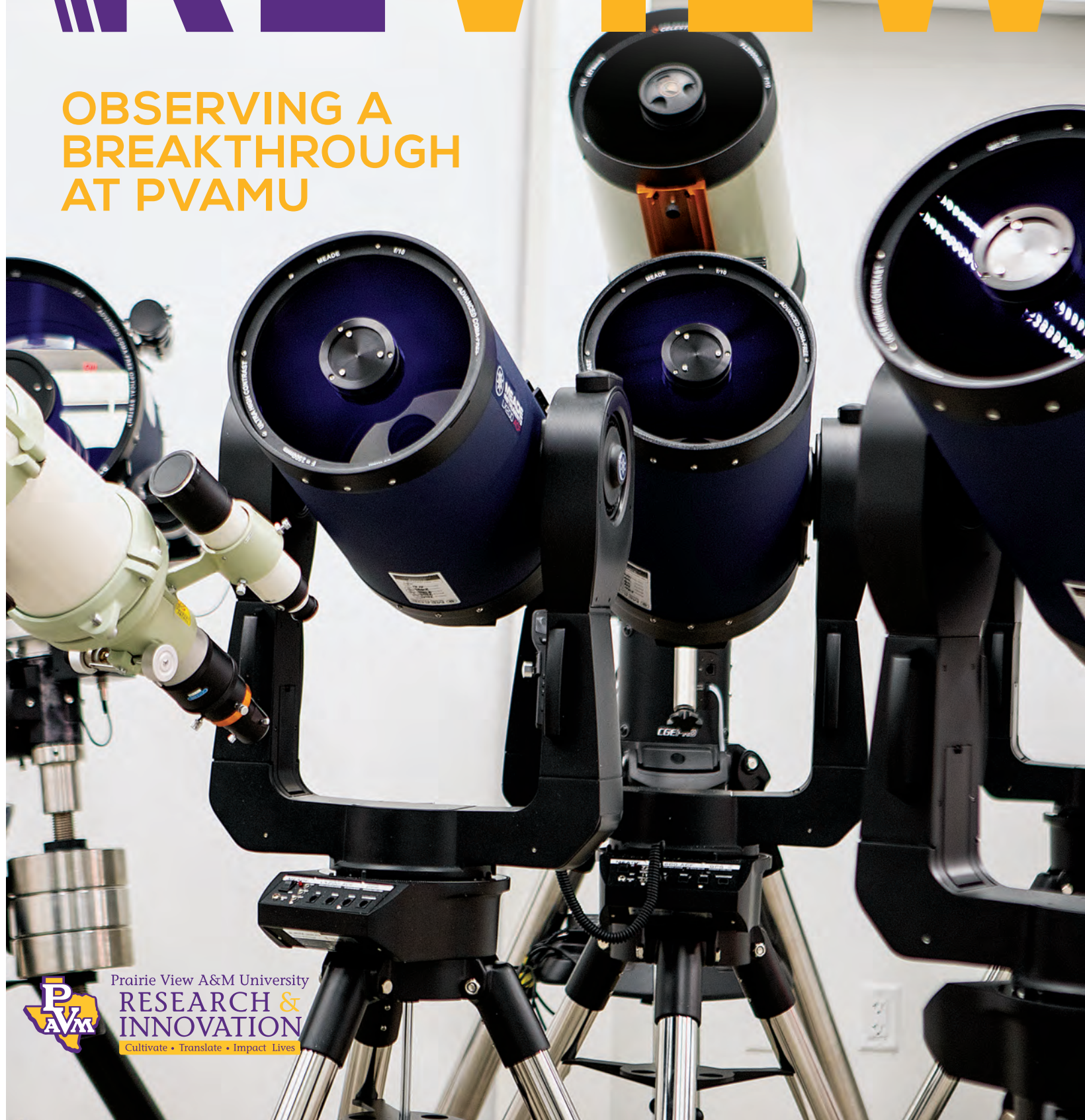


VOL 4 NO 1 2020

RESEARCH EXCELLENCE AT THE VIEW

REVIEW

OBSERVING A
BREAKTHROUGH
AT PVAMU



Prairie View A&M University
**RESEARCH &
INNOVATION**
Cultivate • Translate • Impact Lives



• ASSISTANT PROFESSOR •
• TIFFANY THOMAS, PH.D. •
PRESERVING LEGACY OF PROUD
HISTORICAL COMMUNITIES

BUILDING HOPE

SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE'S COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT GRADUATE PROGRAM HELPS PRESERVE LEGACY OF PROUD HISTORICAL COMMUNITIES THAT ARE FORGOTTEN, OVERLOOKED

Tiffany Thomas, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor,
City Councilwoman,
Community Development,
School of Architecture

The church historically has been at the center of African American progress and community. When Tiffany D. Thomas and her students found themselves leading a large community development project to help save a historically African American neighborhood from gentrification, not surprisingly, the church was at the center of their work.

**PINEY POINT
A HOUSTON NEIGHBORHOOD
ROOTS AS A FREEDOM COLONY THAT HAS**

Thomas, an assistant professor of Community Development in the School of Architecture, and her students have been working to help residents of Piney Point. Piney Point, a Houston neighborhood that has roots as a freedom colony, needed support to find their voice to halt gentrification, seek long-overdue infrastructure improvements and document the historical legacy of the area. Thomas and her students' efforts are funded by a mini-grant from the USDA/NIFA Higher Education Challenge Grant for Innovative Community Development Education, which offers federal funds to define the pedagogy and training for best-practices in community development. At the heart of Piney Point is Pilgrim Rest Missionary Baptist Church, which dates to 1865. It is one of the oldest African American churches in Houston. Piney Point Elementary school rests on land that freed slaves donated to Houston Independent School District for a school that still exists today. Helping to document Piney Point's history is only part of Thomas' work. The primary goal is to arm long-time African American and elderly residents with the information they need to approach city government and law enforcement to make data-informed requests for much-needed city services and other improvements. Many of the current residents are descendants of the founders of the community, and the majority of them own their lots.

***“WE’RE ALWAYS GOING TO
ADVOCATE FOR THE COMMUNITY
AND THE MOST VULNERABLE”***



*THOMAS BRINGS A WEALTH OF
COMMUNITY ORGANIZING AND
ADVOCACY WORK TO PVAMU*



Now, many of the elderly people of color who often “don’t have language, don’t have context and don’t have knowledge of how to navigate the system” are facing squatters or being manipulated into signing over their property to commercial developers, Thomas says. That’s when Thomas and her students step in.

“Our program is different in that we’re always going to advocate for the community and the most vulnerable because they often lack the infrastructure and information to accomplish what they need,” says Thomas, whose Community Development Graduate Program is the only Master of Science in Community Development program in Texas and the only one at an HBCU. Thomas is a graduate of the program and was part of the first graduating class. The program will celebrate 20 years in 2020. Thomas brings a wealth of community organizing and advocacy work to PVAMU. She has worked with the Urban League, as well as served as a trustee with Alief Independent School District. She first began working at PVAMU as an adjunct and became a full-time tenure-track professor in 2018 with a research focus on citizen-led community development and community-engaged research practices.

“THEY NEED A VOICE AND THEIR STORY NEEDS TO BE TOLD ON A LARGER SCALE.”

“Piney Point is never in the news and no one is talking about environmental justice or any issue for that matter for them,” she says. “They’re unknown and they’re forgotten. That’s why we leveraged our program to help them advocate for change on things that matter to them. There’s a story there. They need a voice and their story needs to be told on a larger scale.”

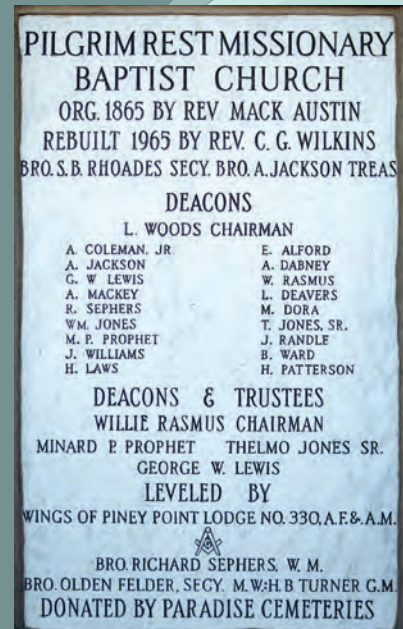
When people think of “community development,” they often think about housing — exclusively, Thomas says, but at PVAMU, community development is much broader, aligning with economic development. The program teaches fundamentals around real estate, historic preservation, community leadership, community development politics and community research. The program fuses a variety of disciplines, including community development, research, community advocacy, architecture and GIS data mapping. The School of Architecture broadly offers undergraduate degrees in architecture, construction science and digital media arts. On the graduate side are degrees in architecture and community development.

“Our students come to us from a broad interdisciplinary background – some are professionals, some are mid-career professionals, some are retirees who want to pursue community as their path in whatever form that is,” Thomas says. “It’s a highly integrated program. The MCD really comes to life in class when you have students from social work, sociology, finance, real estate, architecture learning together. When you have all those elements in place, the final work product is off the charts. For many of our students, when they have that real-time experience working on a project like Piney Point, they start to say, ‘Yes, this is exactly what I want to do and why I chose this program. In my head I saw it, but now I get to touch it and talk about it.’”

With her Introduction to Community Development and Community Research course, students apply classroom methodology in helping Piney Point stem aggressive gentrification. In some cases, commercial development, such

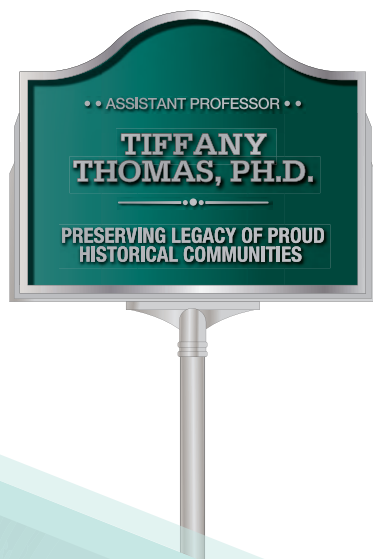
as mechanic shops, have sprouted up around residential homes, displacing people and destroying the historical roots of the community. Thomas has applied for grant funding to help place historical markers on significant structures in the neighborhood to halt the gentrification in what will likely be a two-year or more effort. In a truly interdisciplinary integrated approach, Thomas and other faculty decide on a theme for the year and synthesize the learning curriculum, where students benefit from shared experiences across disciplines working on a community initiative. Thomas and her students led the research and engagement into the community, while students in real estate and finance helped with assessing property land values, and architecture students examine the built environment. Thomas and her students are working with the Piney Point civic club to help them understand their community priorities through community meetings led by the residents, canvassing door to door to complete a survey and by reporting back the data-driven results to better inform the community of next steps to take, if they so choose.

This past summer, Thomas and her students conducted a public safety study at the request of Park Glen West HOA, a neighborhood in Alief known for the highest homicide rates in the city of Houston.



The class completed a digital map of unsafe apartment complexes and GIS mapped every pot-hole in a community that needs safety assessment. They also canvassed the neighborhood and knocked on doors to assess residents' feelings about their safety. This work resulted in a presentation for the community, and serves as preliminary data she is using to apply for a grant to connect crime and social determinants of health. In support of Piney Point, Thomas is applying for a \$24,000 capacity grant for disaster recovery planning, with drainage and asset mapping that will be key in pressing for capital improvements to prevent flooding. This work is particularly important to Thomas, who saw her childhood home in New Orleans destroyed by Hurricane Katrina.

"WE'RE CREATING EXPERTS IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND RESEARCH, AND THEY ARE ABLE TO ARTICULATE IT IN A WAY NO ONE ELSE CAN. BECAUSE THEY ARE TRAINED AT PRAIRIE VIEW A&M."



**“
At the heart of Piney Point is Pilgrim Rest Missionary Baptist Church, which dates to 1865. It is one of the oldest African American churches in Houston.
”**

“Seniors deserve to be able to age in place, and so the focus must be on what protections need to be there to get them out safely, if necessary,” Thomas says. Another goal is completing a digital map of Piney Point to help document the community as it was 100 years ago and to better preserve its history. “I am a community-engaged scholar and I believe that academia has a meaningful place in the community. Prairie View A&M is in the best position to support the most under-served communities and people.”

Beyond those goals, Thomas says she gets satisfaction in seeing her students begin to see their work not as “duty work” to save communities, but as meaningful research work that they can write about in case studies, publish and present, leading to further research to stretch their professional development. One architecture student from Port Arthur, for example, became interested in disaster recovery because she had personally witnessed three hurricanes devastate Southeast Texas. In her architecture studio class, she developed a redesign of Port Arthur and set up a meeting with city officials, offering information-based counsel that container homes, while popular and lower cost, were not a good fit for hurricane prone communities. City officials listened.

“It’s not just duty work,” Thomas says. “We’re creating experts in community development and research, and they are able to articulate it in a way no one else can because they are trained at Prairie View A&M.” ◉