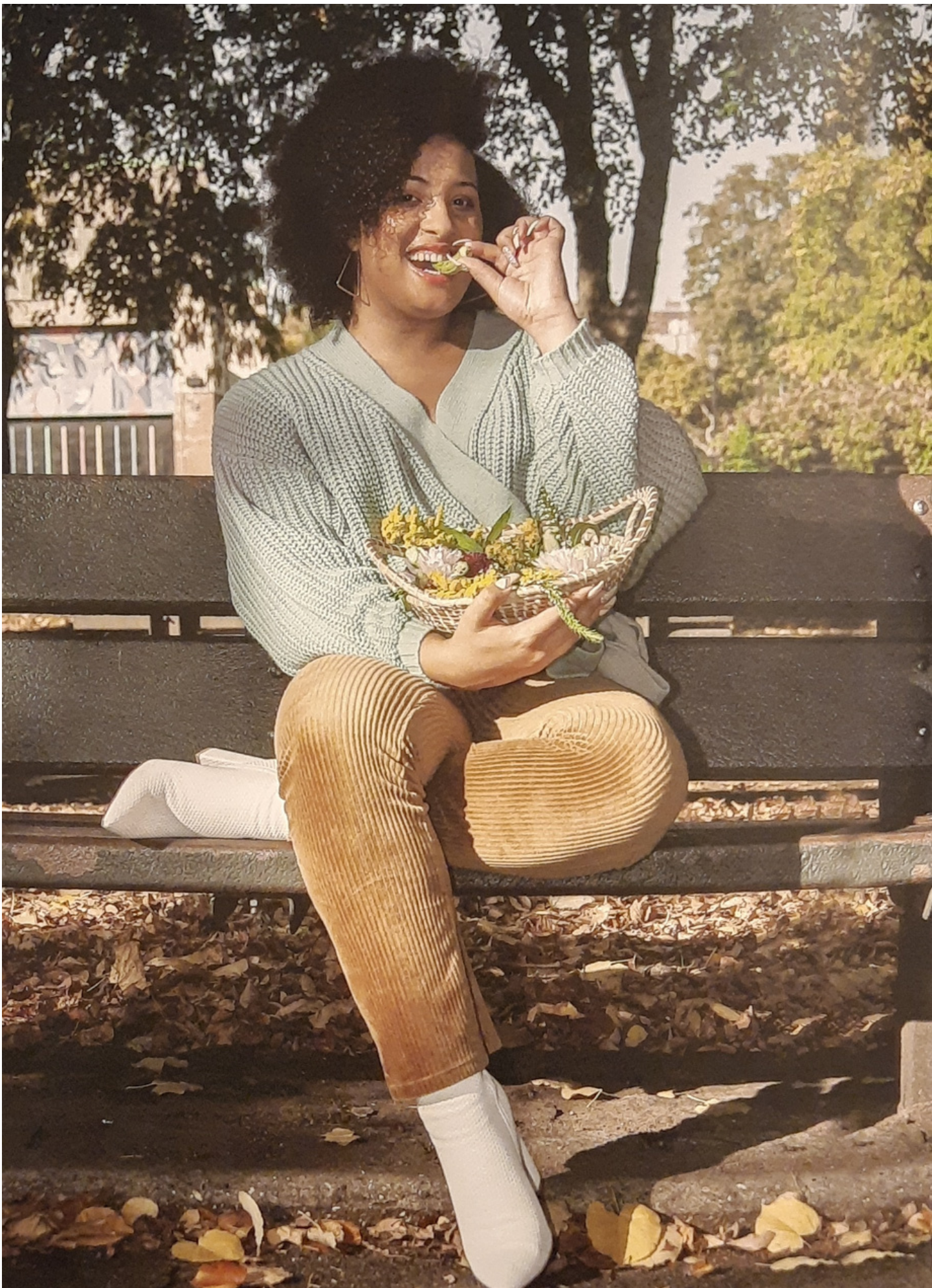




Shine on!

IANNE FIELDS STEWART OF THE
OKRA PROJECT IS ONE OF BROOKLYN'S
BOLDEST AND BRIGHTEST ACTIVISTS

*by Tiffani Rozier
portraits by Shanita Sims
illustrations by Nancy Pappas*



In a society that systematically devalues, dehumanizes, and disenfranchises Black bodies and communities, Ianne Fields Stewart (she/her/they/them) has an expansive vision to create spaces where Black queer and trans people find pleasure and thrive, not as an exception but as a rule. An Alabama-born, New York-based Black, queer, and transfeminine storyteller, Ianne is an accomplished performer, cultural thought-leader, teacher, advocate, and activist. She is a fierce guardian and protector of the Black Trans community and a champion of Black women and femmes unapologetically taking up the space—an outspoken voice in conversations about transphobia, racism, and other issues facing marginalized communities.

Whether she is co-organizing a rally where over 15,000 souls, all dressed in white, gathered in support of Black Trans Lives outside the Brooklyn Museum this June or expanding the vision of The Okra Project, rest is a central value of Ianne's work. Inspired by Black Power Naps, an art installation series that centers rest as power, she encourages marginalized communities to prioritize rest and self-care, reject the belief that labor determines the value of Black life, and reclaim their laziness. Poverty, systemic racism, transphobia, and homophobia are often barriers to resources that provide connection, support, safety, healing, rest, and renewal. Having the audacity to center rest, care, and luxury in her work makes Ianne's activism so impactful and The Okra Project incredibly special.

Ianne founded The Okra Project in the winter of 2018 as a temporary solution to the loneliness Black Trans people often endure during the holiday season. The universe had bigger plans. The project raised \$6,000 within three days of its launch; it was all the confirmation she needed to commit to “keep this thing running till the wheels fell off.” The Okra Project connected Black Trans chefs with members of the Black Trans community, and they prepared a healthy, home-cooked, and culturally-specific meal at no cost.

It was a service deeply rooted in connection, kindness, and rest. As those who view cooking as a sacred act understand, to feed another is an act of love. “...preparing food and feeding people brings nourishment not only to our bodies but to our spirits. Feeding people is a way of loving them, in the same way, that feeding ourselves is a way of honoring our createdness and fragility.” -Shauna Niequist, author of *Bittersweet: Thoughts on Change, Grace, and Learning the Hard Way*.

The chef visits were paused because of the pandemic, but The Okra Project is now distributing funds to those experiencing issues related to hunger, health, evictions, unemployment, and more. They also launched the Nina Pop and Tony McDade Free Therapy: Care Lanes program, which allows its community members to select the specific services they need, from one-on-one therapy to spiritual counseling. The idea that no one is left behind continues to serve as the guiding principle.

The future of The Okra Project is as bright as its founder. Ianne continues her work as an artist on both stage and film. She is sharing her talent and skills as a teaching artist, director, choreographer, and playwright. She wears the hat of an activist by challenging traditional

casting practices, creating new roles for marginalized actors, and inspiring the next generation of artists. Ianne plans to build a brick-and-mortar location in Brooklyn, complete with spaces that promote rest, healing, and celebration. It will be a haven for Black Trans people, a place where they are embraced, deeply cared for, and where they can discover community and connection. To support, visit theokraproject.com.