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Detroit, Michigan (May 29, 2025) -

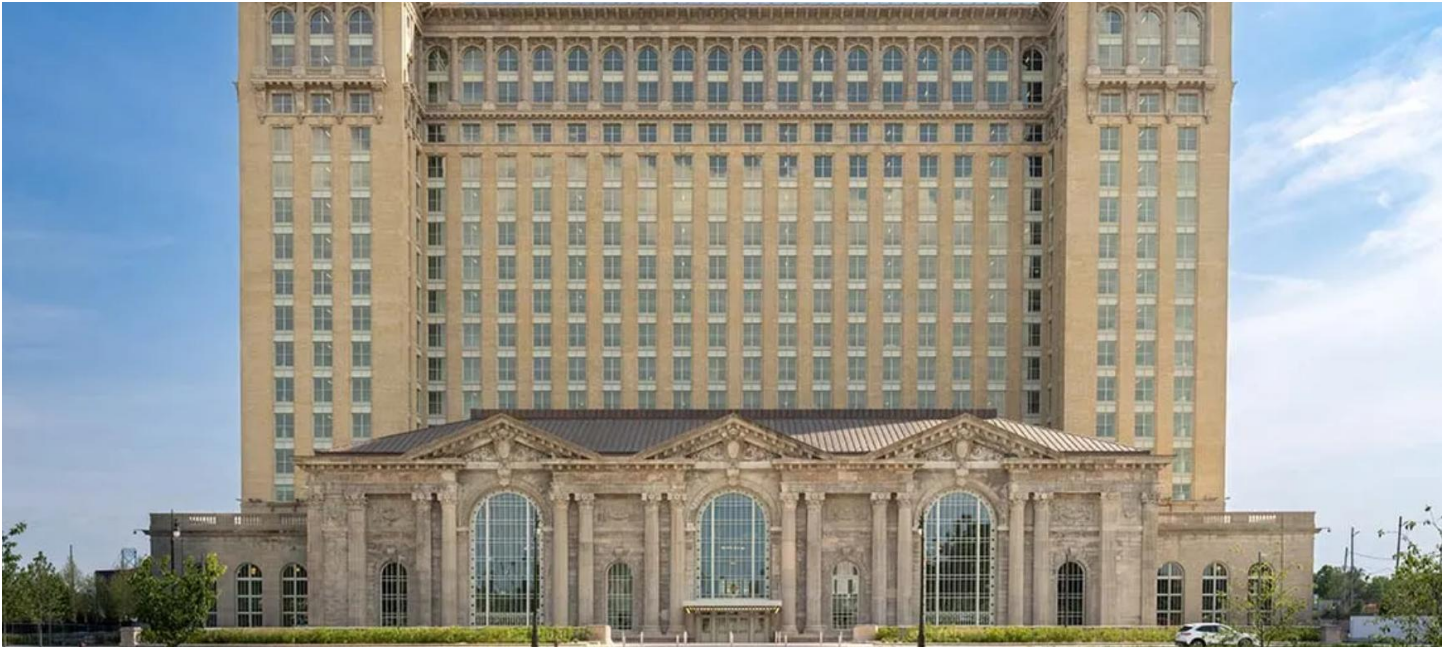
Alumna commits to scholarship opportunities for single parents pursuing higher education

A J Johnson, with Bridge Detroit, is a 2024 Michigan Press Association award-winning journalist through the annual MPA Better Newspaper Contest. The statewide competition inspires all journalists to produce their best work, which in turn nurtures stronger communities. "After the judges have reviewed the thousands of submissions and made their decisions, awards will be given, bragging rights established and perhaps a few toasts made to the winners. It is a rare moment in our profession where we allow ourselves to reflect and experience something akin to satisfaction for a job well done. Anyone in this business today is in it, not for kudos, but because of a passion and desire to serve our readers, our advertisers and our communities. For us the work is the reward. But on the occasion of MPA BNC contest awards, let's take a moment to say to all our coworkers and all our colleagues — Good job! And to the winners — Congratulations!" — Wes Smith, Michigan Press Association Past-President and Group Publisher of View Newspaper Group.

A J Johnson, a *Detroit Documenter* since 2022, has written for Outlier Media, Bridge Detroit, and Planet Detroit and contributed to award-winning coverage with the Detroit Free Press on juvenile detainments. Her coverage includes business, civic engagement, community, education, government, and policy. She is now a 2024 Michigan Press Association award-winning journalist.

As a way of giving back to the community and to the city who has supported her, she is donating a \$1,000 scholarship, each, to a deserving single-parent Detroit native attending her alma maters at the University of Michigan-Dearborn and Henry Ford College, to use as they see fit, for the 2025-2026 academic school year. In a time of economic uncertainty, she aims to apply the lessons she learned from her parents that education is to be valued. A former STEM scholar, she was also an honors graduate (who benefitted from various scholarships and grants) at Focus: HOPE ITC and the University of Michigan School of Information. To date, her work has been lauded by federal (U.S. Comptroller General of the United States), state (a tribute from a Michigan Senator), and local leaders such as two Detroit Mayors (one, as an appointee) and Detroit City Council (Spirit of Detroit award) for success in academic and community/economic development efforts.

Without further adieu, the award-winning piece is below, starting on the next page:



Michigan Central Station in Corktown. Credit: Stephen McGee/Michigan Central



by AJ Johnson

June 18, 2024 11:07 am



Opinion: Train station rebirth proof ‘Detroit never left’



I grew up on the northwest side of Detroit and anytime my friends or family came to visit my new home in Hubbard-Richard, they would inevitably drive past the dreaded monstrosity on Michigan Avenue.

Living in the shadow of the Michigan Central Depot was embarrassing. Rundown Roosevelt Park was no picnic to look at, either. I was hesitant to host dinners and parties, feeling a bit ashamed to have that view lurking in my backyard.

For Detroiters, Michigan Central Station had been called a lot of things in its storied 111-year-old history: Eyesore. Ruin porn. Blight.

Abandoned in 1988, battered and neglected by the Moroun family and so many others, it was long past due for a renaissance revival. Ford Motor Co. and Michigan Central

delivered. No one is more excited about the rebirth of the image of Detroit than a native Detroiter like myself.

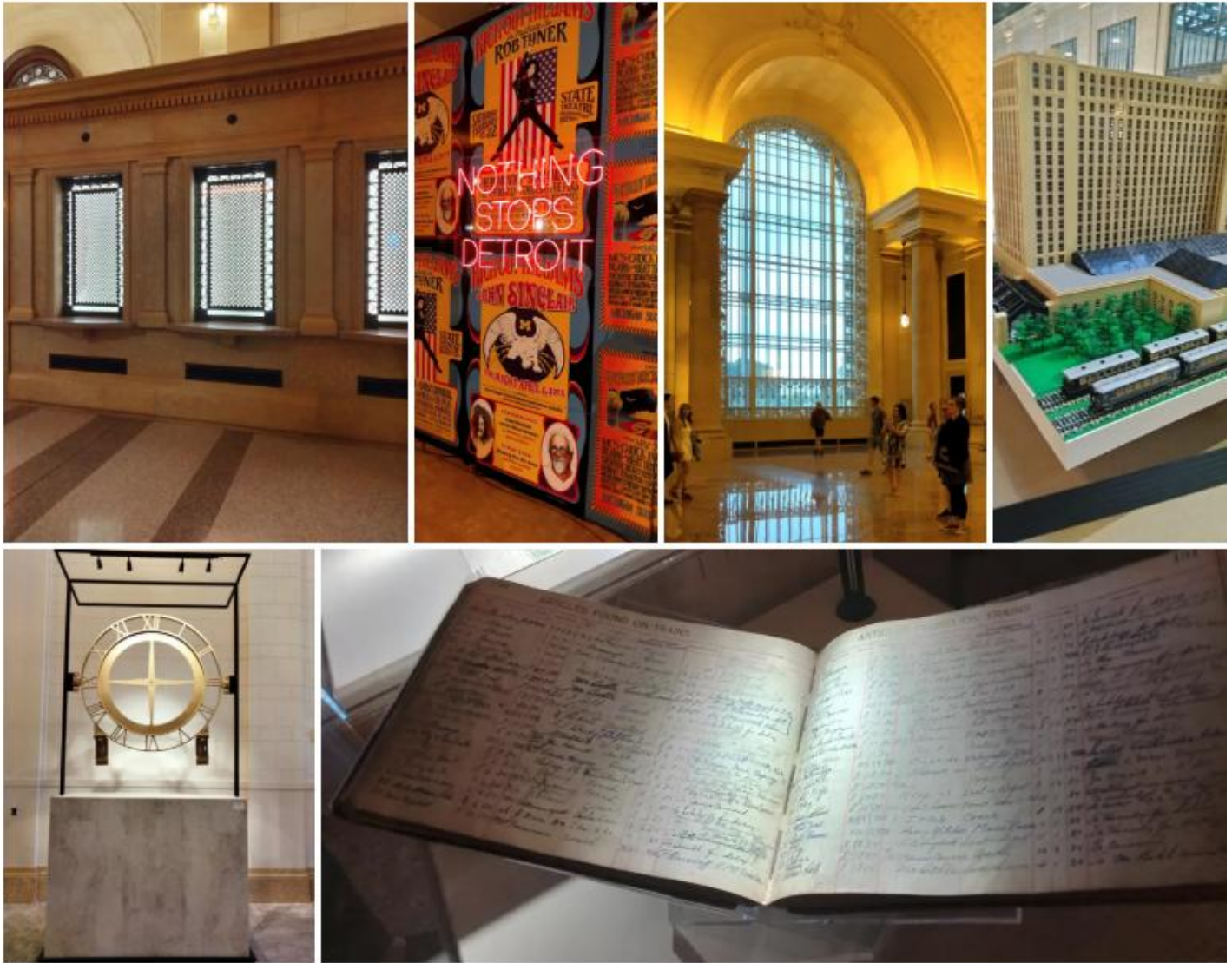
The depot had attracted an online [cult following](#) for its decades-long decay, and [a host of films](#) in and around it were used to depict haunting, dystopian futures such as in *Batman v. Superman* (2016), *Transformers* (2007), and *The Island* (2005). They called it [ruin porn](#) and Detroit was its sexiest goddess. It's almost hard now to picture what the train station looked like before the 6-year-long restoration, but it had come to represent everything wrong with an *urban city gone bad*: [city mismanagement](#), [police misconduct](#), and [financial ruin](#). But that all changed on June 6.

After 36 years closed, the 18-story-high, 640,000-square-foot building drew a [Motown legend](#) and twenty thousand attendees for a grand reopening party on its 30-acre campus. But those numbers don't tell the whole story. June 15 was my day to tour inside, and it did not disappoint.

The size and breadth of the Grand Hall was breathtaking from a ceiling so tall you must lean your head back to take it all in, to the shiny marble floors the size of a city block. Delicate elements were handcrafted, recreated and remolded. From the 29,000 Guastavino tiles lining the ceiling to the intricate details of the 3-D printed, hand-painted Rams' Head trim in the historic Reading Room, no feature was left deficient.

According to a [Michigan Central](#) Fact Sheet, the equivalent of 8.6 miles of grout were used to stabilize and seal the Guastavino tiles of the 54-foot tall Grand Hall. No stone – figuratively or literally – was left unturned. The outside is no less majestic than the inside, with tall, elaborately adorned Corinthian columns with impressive rosettes across the top and cornices across the ceiling.

Inside, two members of the [Michigan LEGO users group](#) displayed a colorful model of Michigan Central Station bordered by Vernor, Michigan, 15th, and Bagley. For the tour, we entered through the Michigan Avenue entrance into the room formerly known as the historic Women's Waiting Room. An employee told me that the room was made to separate the women from men who were known to have and prefer a wholly separate smoking cigar room. After tourists and residents collectively watched a short historical movie about Detroit and the train station on a 15-foot tall LED cube, the door opened and I could hear the audible gasps as guests viewed the enormity of the 1,184 restored windows and the decorative and ornate archways, trims, and cornice of the Grand Hall. After that shared experience, the tour was self-guided.



Editor's note: All photos in collage by AJ Johnson

Tickets for the June 6 [live concert](#) were sold out but the event was live-streamed on Instagram, LinkedIn, and Facebook, and area businesses and restaurants hosted watch parties.

As a ticketholder and resident of the community surrounding the station, I arrived a few hours before the general public to get a sense of the security and it was extensive, including bomb-sniffing dogs and numerous checks on-site.

I spent time watching others see what I always see, every day: The most beautiful, calm, and peaceful city.

Anyone who knows me will tell you that I frequently say “Detroit never left.” It’s always been a place of beauty to me with rose-colored glasses, even when others and even our own local media express disappointment or feature only the negativity.

I raised my family here, was educated here, and bought my home here. When I left for a short period, I could not wait to come back because what we have here in Detroit is so beautiful that everyone who comes here recognizes it. There is a magnetic sense of togetherness, grit, and resolve that is found in very few places, and that makes us – those who weathered the storms – unique.

Whenever we do something great in Detroit, whether it be hosting the NFL Draft, a Super Bowl, the Grand Prix, or when we have an awesome reopening, you better believe it will be magnificent and that feeling is contagious, leaving everyone feeling fantastically connected.

Once the concert began, all the joy, pride, and sheer exuberance of the night took over as we – strangers and friends – enjoyed songs from the artists that we love as we swayed and sang along to hits like *Ain’t No Mountain High Enough*, *You Brought the Sunshine*, *Seven Nation Army*, and the song *Didn’t Ya Know*, which was performed by Common as a memorial to the great producer and much beloved Detroiter J Dilla. For those of us who love hip-hop, there was not a dry eye in the house – well, outside. The production ended with Eminem’s performance of [Not Afraid](#), a story of triumph, not unlike Detroit’s resurgence on the local and national scene.

It was, for me, and visitors near and far, a night to remember.

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2024 MPA Better Newspaper Contest



Statewide Contest Spotlights Quality Journalism

Members of the Wisconsin Press Association reviewed 349 entries submitted by 13 Michigan News Media members this year. The competition inspires all journalists to produce their best work, which in turn nurtures stronger communities.

"The annual Michigan Press Association Better Newspaper Contest gives our members a chance each year to assess and put forth their team's best work in journalism, photojournalism, column writing, graphic design and advertising. After the judges have reviewed the thousands of submissions and made their decisions, awards will be given, bragging rights established and perhaps a few toasts made to the winners. It is a rare moment in our profession where we allow ourselves to reflect and experience something akin to satisfaction for a job well done. Anyone in this business today is in it, not for kudos, but because of a passion and desire to serve our readers, our advertisers and our communities. For us the work is the reward. But on the occasion of MPA BNC contest awards, let's take a moment to say to all our coworkers and all our colleagues — Good job! And to the winners — Congratulations!"

— Wes Smith, Michigan Press Association Past-President and Group Publisher of View Newspaper Group

The 2024 "News Media Publication of the Year" award is presented to the top News Media publication in the Local and Statewide circulation classes based on points accumulated (100 for first, 70 for second and 40 for third) in all Editorial contest categories. Winners of those awards are listed below.

Circulation Class	News Media Publication
Local	Flint Beat
Statewide	Michigan Advance

The MPA Rookie Writer Award recognizes exemplary efforts of new writers just breaking into journalism. The three finalists are: Abby Poirier of Crains Grand Rapids Business, Aya Miller of Kalamazoo Gazette and Michael Livingston of Traverse City Record-Eagle, with the award going to **Aya Miller**.

The MPA Public Service Award recognizes a distinguished example of meritorious public service by a newspaper or newspaper individual that has made a significant contribution to the betterment of their community. Winners of those awards are listed below based on their circulation Class:

News Media-Statewide: Bridge Michigan for "The Unfulfilled Promises of Michigan Business Incentives"
News Media-Local: BridgeDetroit for "Jena Booker's coverage of Detroit concrete crushing operations"

The 2025 MPA Better Newspaper Contest opens August 1, 2025.

Class 42 - Best Opinion

News Media-Local - Class 42 - Best Opinion

7 Entries

1st Place Glen Arbor Sun Newspaper

Overlooking Jim Harrison

Tim Mulherin

2nd Place BridgeDetroit

Opinion: Train station rebirth proof 'Detroit never left'

A.J. Johnson

3rd Place Glen Arbor Sun Newspaper

In defense of journalism, civil liberties, and a more perfect union

Eric Carlson

News Media-Statewide - Class 42 - Best Opinion

12 Entries

1st Place Bridge Michigan

Opinion | An awful law led to Flint water disaster. Why it is still in

place?

Curt Guyette

2nd Place Between The Lines

The Dark Side of Advocacy, According to This Leading Michigan

Trans Advocate

Julisa Abad

3rd Place Michigan Advance

Rick Haglund