

Filmmaker Spike Lee's storytelling skills captivate audience at ASU event

Lee was the distinguished speaker for the 2025 Delivering Democracy lecture

By Dolores Tropiano, ASU News

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Legendary filmmaker Spike Lee was this year's distinguished speaker for the [Delivering Democracy 2025](#) dialogue — a free event organized by Arizona State University's [Center for the Study of Race and Democracy](#).

Lee captivated the audience in a conversation that was much like his award-winning films — engaging, entertaining and provocative. The event took place on March 1 at Pilgrim Rest Baptist Church in downtown Phoenix. Around 2,500 people packed the venue to see the famous scriptwriter who was honored with an ASU Gammage Courage Award.

[Lois Brown](#), director of the center and an English professor at ASU, hosted the wide-ranging talk that touched on history, politics, filmmaking, family and the role of artists in shaping public discourse.

The Delivering Democracy dialogue is now in its 12th year. Previous speakers include jazz legend Wynton Marsalis, actress Viola Davis and broadcast journalist Anderson Cooper.

Honoring changemakers

The event also honored this year's Architects of Change award. Recipients included actor and

Finding filmmaking

Donning his signature large white glasses, Lee shared stories of his early struggles and the start of his career.

producer Matthew Earl Jones; broadcast journalist Linda Williams; Jeffrey Guldner, CEO of Arizona Public Service Company; and Cloves Campbell II, publisher of the Arizona Informant.

He talked about growing up in Brooklyn, New York, during the summer of 1977, when, as he put it, NYC was broke and he discovered filmmaking.

“No one had any money,” he said. “There were no summer jobs. I mean, it was rough. It was the summer of the blackout, which is crazy.”

It was also the summer when a friend handed Lee her father’s 8mm camera and, according to the producer, “That day changed my life.”

The budding screenwriter went on to Morehouse College and earned a bachelor’s degree in mass communications before attending New York University’s graduate film school, where he remains a tenured professor. His credits include “Do the Right Thing,” “Mo’ Better Blues,” “Jungle Fever” and “Malcolm X.”

“I found something I wanted to do,” Lee said. “I want to repeat that now. I found something I wanted to do and it’s a blessing. Check this out ‘cause I’m dropping some knowledge.

“I’m blessed because I’m making a living doing what I love,” he continued. “The majority of people on this Earth ... are doing a job they hate. But here’s the thing ... (to be successful) you have to bust your buttocks.”

Brown asked Lee about securing funds for his earlier films.

“To make art, one needs to have money,” Brown said. “You had to be an entrepreneur in order to make every single early film.”

Lee recalled how he ran out of money while producing “Malcolm X.” He had to hold out his hat for friends like Janet Jackson, Oprah Winfrey, Magic Johnson and Michael Jordan — at times getting a little creative.

“Knowing how competitive my Brooklyn brother (Jordan) is, I just let it slip how much Magic gave me, knowing (Jordan’s) middle name was money. And boom, he said, ‘I got you.’”

Lee praised actor Denzel Washington for spending a year preparing for his part in “Malcolm X” and shared what it was like to watch his miraculous transformation into the African American revolutionary figure. Lee described him as the greatest living actor today.

“The cast and crew were pinching themselves because we were seeing the transformation right before our eyes,” Lee said. “The spirit of Malcolm X would come into him, and that was what we saw.”

He gave advice on what it takes to act at that level.

“This is for the young folks. Listen to Uncle Spike,” he said. “To get performances like that, you can’t just show up. You have to work hard. You are shuckin’ and jivin’.”

When Brown asked him about the influence artists can have, Lee said, “Artists — whether they be poets, filmmakers, singers — we have raised up at times of need ... to speak truth to power. We have to continue this tradition.”

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Main image



Filmmaker, author, actor and educator Spike Lee speaks during ASU's Delivering Democracy event, hosted by the Center for the Study of Race and Democracy, on Saturday, March 1, at the Pilgrim Rest Baptist Church in Phoenix. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)



ASU Foundation Professor Lois Brown (left) hosts the Delivering Democracy dialogue with filmmaker, author, actor and educator Spike Lee on Saturday, March 1, at the Pilgrim Rest Baptist Church in Phoenix. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News