

News

She Didn't See Her Black Heritage In Crossword Puzzles. So She Started Publishing Her Own

By DEEPTI HAJELA
Associated Press

It started a couple of years ago when Juliana Pache was doing a crossword puzzle and got stuck.

She was unfamiliar with the reference that the clue made. It made her think about what a crossword puzzle would look like if the clues and answers included more of some subjects that she WAS familiar with, thanks to her own identity and interests — Black history and Black popular culture.

When she couldn't find such a thing, Pache decided to do it herself. In January 2023, she created blackcrossword.com, a site that offers a free mini-crossword puzzle every day. And Tuesday marked the release of her first book, "Black Crossword: 100 Mini Puzzles Celebrating the African Diaspora."

It's a good moment for

it, nearly 111 years after the first crossword appeared in a New York newspaper. Recent years have seen an increasing amount of conversation around representation in crossword puzzles, from who's constructing them to what words can be used for answers and how the clues are framed.

"I had never made a crossword puzzle before," Pache, 32, said with a laugh. "But I was like, I can figure it out."

And she did.

Made 'with Black people in mind'

Each puzzle on Pache's site includes at least a few clues and answers connecting to Black culture. The tagline on the site: "If you know, you know."

The book is brimming with the kinds of puzzles that she estimates about 2,200 people play daily on her site — squares made up of five lines, each with five spaces. She

aims for at least three of the clues to be references to aspects of Black cultures from around the world.

Pache, a native of the New York City borough of Queens with family ties to Cuba and the Dominican Republic, had a couple of goals in mind when she started.

"I'm 'making it with Black people in mind,' she said. "And then if anyone else enjoys it, they learn things from it, that's a bonus but it's not my focus."

She's also trying to show the diversity in Black communities and cultures with the clues and words she uses, and to encourage people from different parts of the African diaspora to learn about each other.

"I also want to make it challenging, not just for people who might be interested in Black culture, but people within Black culture who might be interested in other re-

gions," she said. "Part of my mission with this is to highlight Black people from all over, Black culture from all over. And I think ... that keeps us learning about each other."

What, really, is 'general knowledge'?

While on the surface it might just seem like a game, the knowledge base required for crosswords does say something about what kind of knowledge is considered "general" and "universal" and what isn't, said Michelle Pera-McGhee, a data journalist at The Pudding, a site that focuses on data-driven stories.

In 2020, Pera-McGhee undertook a data project analyzing crossword puzzles through the decades from a handful of the most well-known media outlets. The project assessed clues and answers that used the names of real people to determine a breakdown along gender and race categories.

Unsurprisingly, the data indicated that for the most part, men were



Juliana Pache poses for a photo in Washington Square Park in New York, Tuesday, July 16, 2024.

disproportionately more likely than women to be featured, as well as white people compared to racial and ethnic minorities.

It's "interesting because it's supposed to be easy," Pera-McGhee said. "You want ... ideally to reference things that people, everybody knows about because everyone learns about them in school or whatever. ... What are the things that we decide we all should know?"

There are efforts to make crosswords more accessible and representative, including the recently started fellowship for puzzle constructors from underrepresented groups at The New York Times, among the most

high-profile crossword puzzles around. Puzzle creators have made puzzles aimed at LGBTQ+ communities, at women, using a wider array of references as Pache is doing.

Bottom line, "it is really cool to see our culture reflected in this medium," Pache said.

And, Pera-McGhee said, it can be cool to learn new things.

"It's kind of enriching to have things in the puzzle that you don't know about," she said. "It's not that the experience of not knowing is bad. It's just that it should maybe be spread out along with the experience of knowing. Both are kind of good in the crossword-solving experience."

OREGON PROBLEM GAMBLING RESOURCE

OPGR

A PAUSE ON GAMBLING

Dry January. Sober October. You may have heard of these health initiatives that encourage people to put away the alcohol for an entire month. It's a way to put a habit on pause and reevaluate the role it plays in your day-to-day life. A chance to try out new strategies and alternatives. An opportunity to let your mind rest. Sometimes, it's simply a way to feel better.

If gambling has taken a larger role in your life than you're comfortable with, taking a break, even a temporary one, can help you see new paths forward. Much like a month-long pause on alcohol can help people achieve a more mindful way of drinking, cutting back or taking a pause on gambling can provide similar benefits.

FINDING A WAY FORWARD

Oregon Problem Gambling Resource (OPGR) can help. With online tools and resources, you'll be able to start exploring your relationship with gambling. If you want more structured help, we can provide that too. From trained counselors to supportive communities, the way you interact is up to you. And help is always free.

If you're ready to start exploring what cutting back could look like for you, visit us online at opgr.org. Connect with us by call, chat, or text. The choices are yours.

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