

# THE *Current*

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[Debra Herrick](#)

## **Hallmark uplifts Black love with historic Mahogany movie premier — lecturer Wendy Eley Jackson wrote the screenplay**

After inheriting her estranged grandmother's winery in Napa Valley, Cassandra, a high-powered attorney, takes a sabbatical from her job to renovate the vineyard. With the help of handsome local Alec, she learns more about the grandmother she hardly knew and finally opens herself up to love.

Sound familiar? It's a perennial storyline of romance and self-discovery, but in this movie, [Hallmark Mahogany's "Napa Ever After,"](#) there's an important twist: an all Black leading cast and a Black executive and creative leadership team behind it.

Written by [Wendy Eley Jackson](#), a lecturer in the Department of Film and Media Studies at UC Santa Barbara, the film is part of an effort to create movies that appeal to African-American families, particularly women, and reflect the themes of love, romance and personal growth. In a historic first, "Napa Ever After" was the first Mahogany movie — inspired by Hallmark's Mahogany line of African-American cards — to premiere on the main Hallmark Channel. It was also the first to premiere on a Saturday night, as opposed to Sunday night.

“African-American love is not embraced in the media and our nuances and cultures are mimicked, but not very well celebrated,” Jackson said, noting that writing a screenplay for Mahogany was a rare opportunity to represent positive Black family values and celebrations around death, love and friendship.

Hallmark began its African-American cards line in 1987; in 2021, it launched Mahogany’s media initiative which quickly brought to the Hallmark ecosystem a slate of uplifting African-American movies, including “Unthinkably Good Things,” “Nashville Legacy” and “Christmas with a Kiss.” Each movie, like “Napa Ever After,” approaches universal themes that work well within the Hallmark world. But it all leads with love.

Like the movie’s male protagonist Alec (Colin Lawrence), Jackson was raised by a single professional dad who was prominent in the community. In her screenplay, she created roles for African-American men that were taking care of their children and contributing to their communities.

“A lot of the scenes that are portrayed in the media don’t show strong Black representation of how men take care of their families and how they are in their communities,” Jackson said, “and I felt like Alec’s character resonated with me as a little girl growing up without a mom, but loving my dad and having my own father be an inspiration.”

That impetus for better representation of Black men is an extension of Mahogany’s effort to present more real life representations for and about Black women. In Jackson’s script, Cassandra (Denise Bates) is an attorney with a privileged background, including having a grandmother who owns her own property in Napa County.

“Yes, there is generational wealth in African-American experiences in America,” said Jackson, who drew inspiration from her personal relationship with Iris Duplantier Rideau, the founder of the Santa Ynez Valley winery Rideau Vineyard. Rideau was the first Black woman to own and operate a winery in the U.S when she opened her vineyard on Alamo Pintado Road in 1995. In researching her screenplay, Jackson spent time with Rideau and formed a friendship that continues today.

“Iris is not just a mom and a grandmother, but she’s a great grandmother who hails from the South,” Jackson said. “I took elements of the inspiration of my relationship

with her and what I learned about wineries from her. It takes a lot to get them up and going, that's for sure, and having that be part of the arc of Cassandra's story too was important. Even as she's learning and falling in love all at the same time, lots of things come to fruition."

Jackson also sought to portray smaller, everyday Black experiences, including the power of friendships and mentorships in the African-American community. "People watch movies looking for inspiration," she said. "They're looking for hope; they're looking for family; they're looking for themes that have core values that appeal to them."

One mentor for Jackson is Toni Judkins, senior vice president of programming and development at Mahogany, who brought her onto the project. The Hallmark executive was instrumental in launching Mahogany, and Jackson credits her with not only having the vision that fits with the brand but an ability to "understand what we need to see" and what we need to see more of.

Judkins added that making an African-American movie like "Napa Ever After" is also about taking something that's universal, and making it specific to a Black female character's experience.

"What I wanted for the film is what I want for African-American women when they come to Hallmark to watch Mahogany movies — to see their story represented no differently than a general market story with the same production value, same quality of story writing and the same quality of actors," Judkins said. "These experiences are integrated into the Hallmark landscape and into this world of telling stories about love and the pursuit of love."

On the set of "Napa Ever After," representation extended beyond the cast members. Black professionals held senior positions from wardrobe to director of photography. "What was so amazing was to walk onto the set and to see the diversity, the people of color, so excited for the opportunity to work as heads of departments," Judkins said. "We made sure that there was representation in most of the key positions behind the camera... because so many times you'll have movies that are not Black movies, but they have people of color in them, and that extra step makes a difference. You need to have folks behind the camera that represent and know that community, that know the difference in hair texture and how to light people of color and do their makeup."

Jackson continues to solicit inspiration from friends and family and has held watch parties for “Napa Ever After” to hear her community of women’s responses. She has a group of 10 women she calls the “Golden Girls” despite being aged 22 to 85. The group of African-American women living in Santa Barbara includes Joanne Mead Young, the wife of Michael Young, emeritus vice chancellor of Student Affairs for UCSB.

“I need a think tank,” Jackson said. “I want to know what feels good to you.” It’s part of how she researches her characters and stories.

One of the big remarks she’s heard so far about “Napa Ever After”?

“People loved the music. Loved the music!” she said. “I’m originally from Atlanta, and so there is a small piece of SWV in there.”

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