

# The Matthew Rising Project

A CAUTIONARY TALE ABOUT TEENS EXPERIMENTING, THE DARK WEB, LOSS AND THE IMPACT OF THE OPIOID CRISIS ON FAMILY

Created by Playwright, Sharece M. Sellem | [www.VintageSoulProductions.com](http://www.VintageSoulProductions.com) | 2020  
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\*Pricing sheet available upon request



## ABOUT THE MATTHEW RISING PROJECT

### *A Response to the Opioid Crisis in Connecticut*

*The Matthew Rising Project* started as a fictional, yet painfully realistic story developed in response to the escalating opioid epidemic in Connecticut and beyond. In 2019, award-winning playwright, Sharece M. Sellem, found herself carrying out an informal style opioid education curriculum with residents in public housing facilities once a week for six weeks which led up to a Naloxone training for the residents. **She began to think of ways to reach populations that can be easily exposed and exploited. She thought about:**

**Young children.**

**Teenagers.**

**Young mothers.**

**Single parents.**

**Families in poverty.**

**Isolated families.**

**Families who've experienced significant trauma(s).**

**Families who don't have time to process grief and loss.**

*Matthew Rising* was developed as a 75-minute script to give the audience an inside look into the life of a family who experienced a loss due to substance abuse a year ago. Matthew is a teenager who doesn't have time to heal after his father's overdose. He stays home to watch his brother while his mother works three jobs to make ends meet. He is a brilliant kid who has a passion for gaming and coding so their isolating apartment becomes a sanctuary as he smokes weed and steps outside from time to time to hang out with his only friend, Spade. Being chronically absent has its drawbacks besides the obvious lack of education; he doesn't know that his alternative school is on the brink of closing. With the support of Mr. Path, his school social worker and his neighbor, Miss Angela, he works towards piecing his life together.

**VIEW TRAILER: <https://youtu.be/6i9G48wUgRo>**



## ***Teens & The Dark Web: We Need to Get Ahead of This Before it's Too Late***

Sharece was stunned to learn how illicit fentanyl, a deadly synthetic opioid, was (is) being made in labs and factories in different parts of the world, specifically in China (in large amounts) and sold on the dark web. She learned that websites that look like eBay and Amazon are being created regularly (and taken down regularly by the FBI) to catch the attention of people who dare to explore their murky domains. There are websites selling mislabeled drugs that look like common candies with colorful teen-catching candy names. The teenaged characters in this work, Matthew and Spade, want to find a way to make money in a safe way. Spade makes all sorts of strange drinks using sweet products. They innocently talk about the potential of starting a business with Spade's special mixes including alcohol and the candies they found online.

### **Some Serious Facts to Consider**

- In 2015 alone, there were 772 drug overdose deaths for adolescents ages 15 through 19 and they died at a rate of 3.7 per 100,000. - *According to the Center for Disease & Control's website*
- The New Haven Register reports: "Children and teenagers are dying from opioid drugs at triple the rates of two decades ago, with almost 9,000 deaths recorded, according to a Yale School of Medicine study published in JAMA Network Open."
- CT Mirror states: "Fentanyl related deaths now account for over 70 percent of overdoses. Connecticut is in a public health state of emergency."
- According to a study from Carnegie Mellon University, **the dark web drug market is booming with over 1,000 sites to take money from teens and deliver drugs to their doorsteps.** The study reported that dark web pharmacies bring in anywhere from \$300,000 to \$500,000 per day, with cannabis, ecstasy, cocaine and related products consistently accounting for 70 percent of online sales. <https://www.rehabs.com/pro-talk-articles/what-parents-need-to-know-about-teens-drugs-and-the-dark-web/>

### ***A Play, A Film & A Public Health Message***

The script was table read by two teen students from New Haven's Cooperative Arts High School, a Trauma Informed Schools staff member of Clifford Beers, the CEO of Clifford Beers, and a social worker from West Haven, CT. Present, was a staff member of New Haven Adult Education, a retired Connecticut teacher and supportive New Haven community member, and a staff member from the City of New Haven Livable Initiative to assist with the dramaturgical aspect of informing and molding the world of the story. After much feedback and revisions, the script was born and rehearsals commenced in October of 2019. Filming (AJ Lovelace) was made part of the process with the goal to create several ways to get this urgent and cautionary message to the community from the start to of the play process to the end.

# PRESS RELEASE

**For Immediate Release**

3:00pm, 11/22/19

The South Central Network of Care hosted by New Haven Collaborative, Greater New Haven LIST and Shoreline Collaborative Present: Matthew Rising, a play about the opioid crisis and the impact on family. Written and directed by local award-winning playwright, Sharece M. Sellem

*New Haven, CT— 11/22/19* — This free public meeting and special presentation following a panel discussion and lunch will be held at 10:00am on Thursday, January 16, 2019 at Bregamos Community Theater, 491 Blatchley Avenue, New Haven CT. To attend, RSVP is required in advance. Email: [ssellem@cliffordbeers.org](mailto:ssellem@cliffordbeers.org)

*“In light of the substance abuse epidemic and its impact on families, Clifford Beers is honored to be a lead in bringing families together into communities to support each other and build roads for healing.” – Alice M. Forrester, PhD, Chief Executive Officer of Clifford Beers*

*“Youth are experimenting with fentanyl and don’t know it because they are blindly buying laced candy-like drugs on the dark web,” said the playwright after attending a conference about the opioid epidemic this spring in Bristol, CT. “I hope this play will help shed light on how opioid misuse can enter vulnerable families creating the potential for serious danger and sometimes death.”*

## ***A Relevant and Urgent Cautionary Tale for Connecticut Youth***

**Synopsis:** Chronically absent from school, 17-year-old Matthew has been sinking into a deep depression ever since his father passed away last summer. His best friend, Spade, is finally excelling in school and owes it all to Mr. Path, Matthew’s trusted school social worker. With a newly ignited passion for entrepreneurship and a curious friend who loves to mix creative drinks, what will happen when disguised opioids are introduced to the teens? When life takes a turn and curiosity gets the best of Matthew and Spade, what will happen next?

The cast includes staff from Clifford Beers and two New Haven theater students from Cooperative Arts and Humanities High School. The process is being filmed as a with hopes to raise awareness for this growing nationwide concern. **This project has been awarded the Art Workforce Initiative Sponsorship provided by the New Haven Arts Council and CT Office of the Arts. Additional sponsorship and support for this free event and lunch provided by D. PERVS T.O.P. BBQ include: Bregamos Community Theater, Vintage Soul Productions, Clifford Beers, DMHAS (Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services), Greater New Haven LIST, TriCircle Inc. and UI Light the Arts.**

###

MEDIA & REVIEWS

**Thursday,  
JANUARY  
16, 2020**



Play written by Sharece M. Sellem

**MATTHEW RISING**  
A play about the opioid crisis and the impact on family

Chronically absent from school, 17-year-old Matthew has been sinking into a deep depression ever since his father passed away last summer. His best friend, Spade, is finally excelling in school and owes it all to Mr. Path, Matthew's trusted school social worker. With a newly ignited passion for entrepreneurship and a curious friend who loves to mix creative drinks, what will happen when disguised opioids are introduced to the teens? When life takes a turn and curiosity gets the best of Matthew and Spade, what will happen next?

**\*\*NEW LOCATION\*\***  
Long Wharf Theatre, Stage 2 -- 222 Sargent Dr, New Haven, CT 06511



**10:00AM to 1:30PM**  
Lunch & panel discussion following the play.

**WAITLIST as of 12/10/19 -- RSVP to [ssellem@cliffordbeers.org](mailto:ssellem@cliffordbeers.org)**

Hosted by the South Central Network of Care (Greater New Haven LIST, New Haven Collaborative & Shoreline Collaborative)



Greater New Haven LIST



# The Opioid Crisis Hits The Stage

[Lucy Gellman](#) | January 17th, 2020

Article Link Here: <https://www.newhavenarts.org/arts-paper/articles/the-opioid-crisis-hits-the-stage>



Donte Warren as Spade in *Matthew Rising*. Lucy Gellman Photos.

Lights up. Matthew and Spade are at the kitchen table, mixing drinks. The bottles stand at a haphazard stagger: maple syrup, coca-cola, a few plastic nips. There are packets of effervescent tablets waiting to unleash their giggly fizz. Sting's *Shape Of My Heart* comes right from someone's phone. Spade checks to make sure he's got his protective eyewear, a pair of swim goggles.

Then Matthew’s mom bursts through the door. The terror and exhaustion in her eyes tell us everything we need to know.

So unfolds *Matthew Rising*, a new play, documentary, and public health project from [writer and director Sharece Sellem](#), the [South Central Network of Care](#) and [Clifford Beers Clinic](#). The work, which premiered Thursday to a packed house at [Long Wharf Theatre](#), dives into [the dark web](#) and [new forms of opioid addiction](#) in the midst of an ongoing [massive public health crisis](#).

It is supported by Clifford Beers, the [Connecticut Office of the Arts](#), Greater New Haven LIST, Arts Council of Greater New Haven, [Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services](#) (DHMAS), [TriCircle Inc.](#), [UI’s Lighting Up the Arts](#) grant program, [Vintage Soul Productions](#), [Bregamos Community Theatre](#), and Long Wharf.



Sharece Sellem: “One of the best ways to shine a light on something is to do it literally.”



“One of the best ways to shine a light on something is to do it literally, and have it on stage so you can see it,” said Sellem at Thursday’s performance. “I think this can be beneficial for providers, to see what it looks like on the inside of the home, and it’s helpful for people in the community. They can come to their own families and educate themselves.”

The work for *Matthew Rising* began several months ago, when Sellem attended a conference on the opioid epidemic in Bristol. At the time, she was already working with Clifford Beers in community engagement, and trying to find a way to bridge community outreach, education, storytelling, and theater. While she was at the conference, she attended a panel on the “dark web,” which has become a hard-to-track and harder-to-regulate player in the illicit sale of synthetic opioids.

Often, she learned, internet vendors put those opioids into chewable or hard candy form, selling them to youth and adults who can re-circulate them to their friends. Vendors don’t disclose what is in the candies—including doses of the highly addictive and highly deadly drug Fentanyl. Sellem, who had been doing work with those affected by the opioid crisis for years, felt like the ground had been taken from under her.

“That was scary to me,” she said Thursday. “That to me was like, wow. We need to get ahead of this.”

In *Matthew Rising*, she has found the right educational tool to do it—including a cast that comes from the New Haven community. As lights come up, the audience meets Matthew (Co-Op High School junior Juwan Lee) and his mother ([Valerie Brookshire](#)), a single mom who has been stretched in every direction society can stretch her.



Valerie Brookshire in *Matthew Rising*.

She has a part-time job that doesn't pay nearly enough, a bus pass that is perennially running on empty, and a sick young son at home—which means that Matthew will need to stay back from school to babysit. She's doing the best she can after the death of Matthew's dad, whose loss to the opioid crisis [strikes close to home](#).

There's also his close friend Spade (Co-Op junior Donte Warren), whose drink mixing skills are outmatched only by his good grades. There's Mr. Path (Clifford Beers staffer and [musician Manny Sorrells](#)), who checks in on Matthew at home and meets with him when he makes it to school. There's the kooky and sweet neighbor Miss Angela (Clifford Beers CEO [Alice Forrester](#)), who turns Matthew on to business courses at the local library, but also has her own struggle with prescribed opiates.

As they step onto a set designed and painted by [David Sepulveda](#), they are the students, neighbors, moms, educators, and friends who populate New Haven. Matthew may be haunted by his father's death, but he is also whip-smart and

sweet, with a love for Spade that speaks to the sheer power of male friendship. Miss Angela is a little heavy on the [Marianne Williamson good energy](#), but she also has moments where her boomer ramblings speak straight up truth to power. Matthew’s mom may be at her limit—or well beyond it—but she wants to do right by her son, with a compassion for him that is palpable.

Together, they bust through the stigma of drug abuse, showing how a system can manipulate, misinform, and misdirect those suffering from pain in the service of profit. In 2001, pain was designated as [the fifth vital sign](#), with new standards for pain measurement that doctors across the U.S. could use. Within ten years, prescription of opioids had soared. New, cheaper synthetic forms were [finding their way onto the market](#).



Clifford Beers CEO Alice Forrester as Miss Angela in *Matthew Rising*.

[Purdue Pharma](#) assured healthcare providers that the OxyContin it was manufacturing wasn’t addictive, while dedicating millions of dollars to

marketing the product. Veterans were [offered potent painkillers](#), but rarely got the mental health services to which they were [ostensibly entitled](#) by the federal government. Fentanyl, which was used as an intravenous anesthetic from the middle of the twentieth century through the 1990s, became part of pain treatment and then made its way onto the streets.

If *Matthew Rising* is a play about a country that doesn't take care of its people as well as it takes care of its corporations, it's told from a deeply human and sometimes visceral perspective. Sellem has a keen eye for detail, with nods to addiction that stretch beyond illicit opiates to Big Pharma, Big Tobacco, and Big Tech. It allows her to be nimble, showing how major drug epidemics feed into each other all driven by late-stage capitalism, economic exploitation, and institutional racism that is still very much alive and well.

When Spade asks of a Fentanyl-laced candy “so it's not like crack,” it's a flashback to the history of an epidemic that demonized people of color and offered prison time instead of rehabilitation or drug maintenance. When a dark web provider offers to send the boys a free sample, the audience may remember Purdue's early [patient coupon starter program](#), through which patients could get a free, weeklong or multi-week trial of the highly addictive drug OxyContin.

In a smart move, Sellem has used a large projector to show Matthew's text exchanges with Spade, reminding her audiences that computer and smartphone technology has opened a whole other side of addiction. She has used Spade's wardrobe—a series of t-shirts advertising Coca-Cola and playing cards that reference his name—as a proxy for gambling with one's health and one's life (so too with a series of votive candles). She never has to write the words into the script, because they're right there out in front of the viewer.

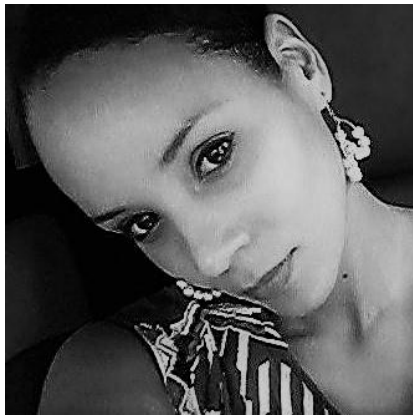
And in what may be the show's greatest strength, she reminds the audience that pain, which takes multiple forms, goes largely undiagnosed and equally untreated. The substances to which characters turn in the show are not products of their weakness or their recklessness, but evidence of a social infrastructure that has failed them. When Miss Angela proclaims that she takes prescribed meds because "when you're in so much pain, you don't even care anymore. You just want the pain to stop," it feels like she's speaking to every character in the show.

But Sellem also shows that the anecdote is joy, to which every character in the play is entitled and only some of them get. It is a powerful call to arms, a reminder to exercise care and compassion instead of blame. A collective urging, indeed, to hold institutions accountable rather than the people they have taken advantage of.

Going forward, Sellem said she hopes to bring performances to other schools, theaters, and workplaces in both the city and the state—ideally changing up the cast with people from those institutions. In a talkback after the performance, a panel of service providers urged the audience to bring the knowledge back to their communities and their networks of care.

"Please, think about your own biases and your own stigma-producing language, and how you react to a loved one ... around substance use disorder," said Carol Jones, a senior case manager at New London's [Alliance For Living](#). "We have to be able to put our ideas aside, our biases aside, our own thoughts. Learn. Be educated. These are folks with a disease. We have to support people and meet people where they are."

## SHARECE M. SELLEM, Vintage Soul Productions



To inquire about **The Matthew Rising Project**, contact Sharece M. Sellem directly at [smsellem@vintagesoulproductions.com](mailto:smsellem@vintagesoulproductions.com).

A native of Hartford, CT, Sharece M. Sellem is a playwright, choreographer, director and performing arts instructor based out of New Haven, CT. She was trained by American Intercontinental University's Media Production Program, Headlong Performance Institute of Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania and Yale University's Practical Approach to Directing Summer Program. Her resume includes performances at Bregamos Community Theater, Long Wharf Theatre, Pride Arts Center of Chicago, Charter Oak Cultural Center, Carriage House Theater, Illinois Voices Theatre, Norwich Arts Center, University of California San Diego and more. She is also the Community Engagement Artist for Long Wharf Theatre.

## THEATER FOR THE SOUL

*The Matthew Rising Project* is the first of VSP's Theatre for the Soul series. We are developing works that address and reveal current social issues through the art of performance and storytelling.



The name, Vintage Soul, comes from the feeling that we have so much to learn from the past whether our personal and unique stories or those of old with gems to teach lessons and help us look into present. By visiting the past we learn about ourselves in many ways. By performing we celebrate life and all of it's beautiful and tragic memories. We are a network of performing artists who love to share the gift of theater with our community. Website: [www.VintageSoulProductions.com](http://www.VintageSoulProductions.com)

This project was filmed by AJ Lovelace, CEO & President, The Evolutionary Artists Company. Website: [www.evartco.com](http://www.evartco.com)