

# Detroit Free Press

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## DETROIT IS

# For 2 sisters, bringing their story to historic site has been winning Detroit B&B recipe

*Growing up, Francina and Roderica James always found a way to be together, even with being separated by a grade in school. Today, the sister's togetherness is a source of comfort for their B&B guests.*



**Scott Talley**

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## Key Points

- Sisters Francina and Roderica James have recreated the atmosphere of their childhood home in their luxury bed and breakfast, The Cochrane House, located in Detroit's Brush Park Historic District.
  - The Cochrane House features decor that blends African American and African culture with Detroit's rich history, including artwork and images that celebrate influential figures and places in the city.
  - The sisters credit their mother, Mary Frances James, for instilling in them a strong work ethic and entrepreneurial spirit, which they say has been instrumental in their success.
  - Through The Cochrane House, Francina and Roderica aim to challenge perceptions and showcase the richness and diversity of Black life in Detroit.
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For Francina and Roderica James — sisters separated in age by only 13 months — taking a trip down memory lane to relive times spent in their childhood home on West Outer Drive off Meyers during the 1980s and '90s is a most joyful experience.

That joy can be seen by the sparkle in their eyes, and heard in their extended moments of laughter, followed by periods of silence when their smiles speak louder than words as they take turns recalling special moments.

But Francina and Roderica are able to do more than just talk about their childhood home to people they meet. The affable sisters also can show people from near and far what their home was like, to a degree, because they are the co-owners of The Cochrane House Luxury Historic Inn located in Detroit's Brush Park Historic District.

The exterior of The Cochrane House provides a glimpse of what Brush Park was like around 1870 when it was originally built as a red brick home for Dr. John Terry, and then shortly afterward purchased by Lyman Cochrane — a former Michigan Superior Court judge and a state senator — during a time when Brush Park was called “Little Paris” for its mansions. However, inside The Cochrane House today, which Francina and Roderica opened as an adult, luxury bed-and-breakfast in May 2018, is an atmosphere patterned after the sisters' childhood home.

“People that we grew up with, when they come in here, the first thing that they say is that this reminds them of Outer Drive,” explained 46-year-old Roderica, the younger of the two sisters, about The Cochrane House, which for some is a leisurely walk away from Comerica Park, Ford Field, Little Caesars Arena and other popular Detroit entertainment destinations and restaurants in and around downtown. “Even though the decor is different, the feel and the comfort we provide at The Cochrane House is the same that we had growing up on Outer Drive.”

From a living room that they created from a shared vision, on the afternoon of March 11 — nearly two weeks into Women’s History Month and two days away from 313 Day in Detroit — Roderica and Francina were proud to explain how the present-day version of The Cochrane House is deeply connected to history year-round. And that connection strongly comes to life through the decor, which blends African American and African culture with Detroit’s rich history.

A tiny sampling of what guests come across while strolling through The Cochrane House, with jazz music playing in the background, includes colorful African masks and other symbols reflecting the African continent, and artwork from African American artists that chronicles the African American experience across several time periods, including a piece titled “Harriet” by Chanell Angeli, which pays homage to the courageous Underground Railroad “conductor” Harriet Tubman. There also are many images throughout the interior of The Cochrane House that celebrate people, institutions and places that have left a lasting mark on Detroit, including Joe Louis, “Little” Stevie Wonder, Della Reese, The Flame Show Bar, Black Bottom, Paradise Valley and more that are captured on one extravagant mural at the top of the staircase created by award-winning, Detroit-based artist Desiree Kelly.

Then there is one precious piece of art located at the bottom of the staircase that certainly is as significant as any piece within the art-filled bed-and-breakfast because that painting, titled “Mama’s Girls” by Detroit artist Tab Rasul, shows Roderica and Francina sitting on the staircase with their mother, the late Mary Frances James. The sisters say it was Mary James who introduced them to the world of entrepreneurship. And it was Mary James, a longtime Detroit Public Schools teacher and later an entrepreneur, who worked beside her daughters — even while weakened by colon cancer — to assist with the extensive and arduous

restoration of The Cochrane House, which took several years to complete after Roderica and Francina purchased the property in 2010.

In addition, Mary James had a hand in the freshly prepared breakfasts that Francina and Roderica cook and serve to guests at The Cochrane House because she required her daughters to use their own hands early in life.

“My mom, when we were in middle school, was taking classes as she was working on her master’s. And she said: ‘Francina and Roderica, I don’t have time to cook,’” recalled 47-year-old Francina, who, like her sister, would go on to graduate from Martin Luther King High School, with Francina graduating in 1995 and Roderica in 1996. “So, mom bought us a microwave and a plug-in grill. We would get meat from Eastern Market and we had to cook for ourselves.

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“When we were little, we were like: ‘We gotta cook?!’ But it’s just amazing how all of those experiences have divinely worked out, step by step. And they have allowed us to do what we’re doing today.”

The breakfasts cooked by Francina and Roderica — breakfasts that one guest described in a review as “better than home cooked,” featuring savory comfort food like fried potatoes with hand-cut onions, grits, honey-buttered biscuits, bacon, chicken sausage, waffles and homemade jam — also reflect the profound bond shared by the sisters, which they say goes back to their days growing up on Outer Drive.

“People have told us that it looks like we’re dancing together in the kitchen because of the way we move around and anticipate each other’s next step,” explained Roderica, who shared an apartment in Ypsilanti with her sister in

college when Francina was attending the University of Michigan and Roderica was attending Eastern Michigan University. “Mama used to always say: ‘We’re all we got.’ She said that no matter what happens outside the doors of our home, in any situation, you and your sister are all you got. So, I can’t remember a point in our lives when Cina and I haven’t been together, and we have always been each other’s best friend automatically.”

The two best friends say The Cochrane House has provided them with an opportunity to meet many new friends among overnight guests, as well as people that have attended special events at The Cochrane House such as weddings, retreats and conferences that impact the community. In fact, as they tell it, repeat guests have become like family to ‘Rica’ and ‘Cina,’ as they often are affectionately called by people who know them well. However, the sisters’ fellowship does not end there because through The Cochrane House’s nonprofit arm, also known as the Mary Frances Almon-James Youth Organization, they have been able to connect with the community in a different way.

“We have provided toys to over 300 families within the last seven years through our annual Christmas Toy giveaway,” Francina reported. “We do it in our mother’s honor.”

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And with everything they do in the name of their business, Francina and Roderica, who also are the proud daughters of the late Roderick James — a stylish man who served as an attorney for the city of Highland Park — hope to make a statement about their city and culture.

“We enjoy exposing our guests and other cultures to who Black Detroiters *really* are,” Roderica said as Francina smiled and nodded in agreement. “People have perceptions, so for my sister and I, one of our goals is to break some of these perceptions that people have. There are a lot of people in Detroit that have lived the same kind of life that my sister and I have, but other people don’t realize this. So, we are able to give our guests a peek into Black Detroit and a view of what our lives are really all about.”

*Scott Talley is a native Detroiter, a proud product of Detroit Public Schools and a lifelong lover of Detroit culture in its diverse forms. In his second tour with the Free Press, which he grew up reading as a child, he is excited and humbled to cover the city’s neighborhoods and the many interesting people who define its various communities. Contact him at [stalley@freepress.com](mailto:stalley@freepress.com) or follow him on Twitter @STalleyfreep. Read more of Scott's stories at [www.freep.com/mosaic/detroit-is/](http://www.freep.com/mosaic/detroit-is/). Please help us grow great community-focused journalism by becoming a subscriber.*