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Sojourn

STETSON'S SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCACY & THE LAW JOURNAL

Recognizing the Importance of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Act

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Sojourner Truth

A letter to our readers

Welcome to the 1st edition of SOJOURN – the Stetson Social Justice Advocacy & the Law Journal. The title of our journal pays homage to Ms. Sojourner Truth, an abolitionist and a woman's rights activist from the 19thth century. In her journey as a human rights advocate, Sojourner Truth continually spoke out against social injustices; assisted individuals who had been emancipated from slavery; and challenged segregation in her daily life.

At the age of twenty nine, Sojourner Truth freed herself and one of her daughters on New York's Emancipation Day on July 4, 1827. She later successfully sued the man who claimed to "own" her five year old son, Peter. Her lawsuit filed in Ulster County Courthouse in New York state alleged that the sale of her son to someone in Alabama violated the provisions of New York's emancipation law. This legal success made Sojourner Truth the first Black woman to win a lawsuit against a white man in the United States. Ms. Truth's faith, courage and determination to fight for what she believed in, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds, inspires us as we launch this law journal.

SOJOURN is dedicated to speaking out on issues related to social justice and community organizing. Each issue of this journal will include articles that focus on significant legal research and action; and will encourage the building of community networks with activists, artists and other creative souls. We realize that various forms of art incorporate expression in powerful ways that the words of lawyers often cannot. And this is the reason why we seek to incorporate artistic expressions of justice and peace in photography, poetry and other art forms.

SOJOURN emphasizes how important it is for us to collaborate with a wide cross section of individuals in our communities when we are problem solving. Litigation in the courts is necessary but lawsuits alone will not change our societal culture. We must expand our concept of advocacy to include not just courtroom battles but community education and advocacy in our schools, our workplaces, and the streets of our communities. Through this expanded lens of advocacy and relationship building, we aim to inspire hope; hope that a better world is possible if we collectively work together to make it happen.

This first issue of the SOJOURN journal focuses on the importance of the Voting Rights and the Civil Rights Acts respectively enacted on August 5, 1965 and July 2, 1964. The recognition of these two laws is made even more significant in light of the recent changes to national and state public policies related to diversity, inclusion, equity, immigration, and access to participation in our democracy in general.

There is no doubt that we are at another crossroads in our democracy and our country's quest to breathe life into the words inscribed on the United States Supreme Court building --- "equal justice for all".

We hope that you will support us in spreading the word about SOJOURN and that you will join us on this journey to advocate for the civil and human rights of all people. It is through our collective advocacy and artistic expressions that our human dignity will be affirmed, uplifted and celebrated.

Together we can and will make a difference.

Peace & Blessings,
Professors Judith A.M. Scully & Kristen Adams
On behalf of Stetson's
Social Justice Advocacy Program

Protecting Voting Rights Remains a Moral Imperative for a Fair and Just Society

BY **ANOA CHANGA-PECK**

Despite judicial, legislative & executive actions designed to eviscerate the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA), it remains a testament to the power of collective struggle. It is still one of the greatest achievements of grassroots organizing to promote the ideal of a multiracial democracy. Nearly 20 years since a bipartisan majority in Congress last reauthorized the VRA, the landmark legislation has been all but rendered invalid. [1]

All three branches of the federal government are in now open collusion to dismantle the possibility of a multiracial democracy. Calls for "nationalizing" elections and federal government demands for full voter files echo pre-VRA efforts to block Black voters and others from exercising their constitutional right to vote.[2] From the Supreme Court's 2013 decision in Shelby County v. Holder to its calculated retreat in April 2026 in Louisiana v. Callais, No. 24-109, 2026 WL 1636952 (Apr. 29, 2026), historically marginalized communities are at great risk of mass disenfranchisement. [3] On its face, Callais seems to be narrowly tailored to address the Louisiana congressional map, but its' implications far exceed the state of Louisiana and electoral maps.

"This decision is not simply about maps" said Dr. Tracie L. Washington, President of the Louisiana Justice Institute. "It is about whether the law will continue to recognize and remedy racial discrimination in voting --- or whether it will turn a blind eye to it."

In Callais, the U.S. Supreme Court was focused on interpreting the boundaries of Section 2 of the VRA. This provision, seen as the cornerstone of the VRA, outlaws practices denying or abridging the right of any citizen to vote based on their race, color or membership in language minority groups. Prior to the Callais decision, political maps that diluted the electoral power of voters of color could be challenged under Section 2 of the VRA without the requirement of proving intentional discrimination. Congress had adopted an "effects test" in 1982 that the U.S. Supreme Court four years later upheld in the landmark case of Thornburgh v. Gingles. This was a civil rights triumph. In essence, Section 2 of the VRA was interpreted to explicitly bar the use of any election process that had discriminatory impact, even if there was no evidence of discriminatory intent. But it was this "effects test" that the court in Callais overturned.

In the 40 years after the recognition of the "effects test" Black political representation grew exponentially. As Sherilyn Ifill has noted, this was "largely because of the network of lawyers and activists who monitored redistricting efforts. For example, when the Congressional Black Caucus was formed in 1971, it had thirteen members. It now has 62. In 1981 before the Amendments to Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act, Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia had no Congressional representation although the population of those stats were 35%, 26% and 27% at that time. [4]

There were only 1,500 Black elected officials in the entire country in the decade before passage of the 1982 Amendments to the VRA. Within 30 years that number grew to 9,000. Today the number stands at well over 10,000 Black elected officials across the country. That progress was due to the threat of litigation under the VRA, by local and national activists and lawyers.[5]

What the Court did in Callais was to rewrite a congressional statute that has been the law of the land for 44 years and it cast aside the courageous actions of activists, lawyers, and legislators who worked to bring this country closer to becoming a true multi-racial democracy. Although the decision did not eliminate Section 2 entirely, Justice Elena Kagan in her dissent said it "renders Section 2 all but a dead letter" that will "eliminate the lion's share" of claims brought under that part of the Voting Rights Act.[6]

Kagan wrote. "Under cover of 'updat[ing]' and 're-align[ing]'" the Voting Rights Act, the majority opinion weakens Section 2 and "threatens a half-century's worth of gain in voting equality".[7]

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And while it may not seem like a big deal, stripping people's rights to elect representatives of their choosing makes it easier to deny the humanity of every person whose interests are deemed irrelevant or unprotected by the Constitution. As the late Ida B. Wells-Barnett wrote in 1910, "with no sacredness of the ballot, there can be no sacredness of human life itself."[8]

A widely celebrated journalist, anti-lynching advocate, and champion of universal suffrage, Wells-Barnett drew a clear connection among these issues in defense of Black lives. Both a warning and a call to action, Wells-Barnett's words emphasize that without the vote, Black communities cannot sufficiently protect their livelihood and humanity. The dispossession of Black political power leads to our erasure.

The right to vote has never been just about casting a ballot. It's the right from which all others flow. It's about self-determination and deciding which schools are funded, which neighborhoods are resourced, and which communities breathe clean air and drink clean water. It is about whether our children inherit a future shaped by their own voices or by the interests of a wealthy, unaccountable few.

Documenting the harms and efforts to bring about change remains as essential in 2026 as it was during Well-Barnett's era. Although witnessing the dismantling of voting rights and other hard-fought freedoms may feel overwhelming, we must remain mindful that our votes alone will not change the current situation.

Over 160 years of lessons from the fight for full citizenship and political participation make it clear that we must be engaged beyond voting. Full political participation is necessary to achieve a vision of a multiracial democracy. While powerful, the VRA was never meant to be our only tool. Building a better future requires more than voting. It requires civic participation, a willingness to do the hard relentless work of building community and remaining watchful over those we elect to ensure their continued commitment to our vision of a multiracial democracy.

As Black and brown organizers have long understood, "Power concedes nothing without a demand"; it must be seized. And once seized, it must be maintained, nurtured, and expanded. The power to decide for ourselves and our communities how we will be governed remains linked with our right to vote. That is the legacy of the VRA and the work we must continue.

To fully appreciate the impact and legacy of the VRA, we first need to understand the century-long struggle for full citizenship and political participation.

Lessons from The Fight for Full Citizenship (1865-1965)

Achieving the full promise of the VRA requires examining the historical reasons for its creation and advancing solutions to close the gaps that have emerged over the last 60 years.

If slavery is America's original sin, then the suppression of Black political participation and power is its second. While the Civil War initiated a series of events that would end chattel slavery, it left the issue of full citizenship for Black people to the post-war era. Despite three constitutional amendments and three civil rights laws, Black communities were mostly left without options or justice until the mid-20th century. In many ways, the VRA fulfilled the promise of full citizenship and political participation found in the 15th and 19th Amendments.

Without a doubt, the piecemeal and sometimes haphazard approach to securing and safeguarding Black citizenship and political participation has been rooted in appeasing white people—and not just those from former Confederate states. The desire for balance and moderation often came at the expense of Black interests and shaped most political decisions of the 19th and early 20th centuries. As the Civil War concluded, President Abraham Lincoln faced complex choices regarding Black emancipation and equality. Although opinions differ about his perceived hesitance to aggressively pursue Black rights and freedom, Lincoln's aim to appease white America influenced every decision he made.

In the 1864 presidential election, just months before the Civil War's end, Lincoln ran on a "unity ticket" with the Union's last remaining Southern politician, Andrew Johnson. By choosing Johnson, a states' rights originalist, Lincoln strategically aligned with someone representing white nationalism and everything it stood for as a way forward. When Lincoln was killed and Johnson became President, Johnson's states' rights philosophy governed the country. This decision would hinder full Black citizenship and self-determination for the next 100 years.

Between 1865 and 1870, Emancipation and the 13th Amendment ensured "freedom" for formerly enslaved Black people, but a great debate remained about whether freedom meant equal rights to those enjoyed by white men. [9] In How We Win The Civil War: Securing a Multiracial Democracy and Ending White Supremacy For Good, author Steve Phillips recounts the struggle over the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and the Reconstruction era fight for full citizenship. [10]

According to Phillips, Confederates and their allies in Congress refused to yield on efforts to expressly affirm equal rights for Black Americans through legislation and Constitutional amendments. He said that, like the fight over the 13th amendment, "the battle over codifying equity was ferocious, frenetic, and long-lasting." [11] Most decision-makers in Congress at this time were not members of the former Confederacy. Like moderates today who want to find a middle ground with extremists on the far right, the Reconstruction era Congress wanted just to get back to normal. Even if it meant leaving Black people to the vices of southern extremists.

Even before Reconstruction ended, the economic and political violence inflicted on Black communities was treated as a mere afterthought or inconvenience to a united white country committed to a radicalized notion of democracy. But without the presence of federal forces, Black Americans had little protection. In many areas of the country, they were citizens in name only.

The irrational fear of a growing and empowered Black electorate and feelings of false superiority delayed and denied consistent access to protection at the ballot box and more.[12] As Professor Stephen Houston Marshall explained in Telling It Just Like It Is: The Tragicomedy of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the 15th Amendment marked the beginning of the end of a series of political compromises that would pave the way for the restoration of Southern state governance and control. [13]

According to Marshall, white fear and anxiety twisted Black people's pursuit and desire for citizenship and equality into an aggressive invasion and threat of domination. Black disenfranchisement arose and largely sustained within this context of racial domination. [14]

Drawing heavily from the work of Wells-Barnett, Marshall connected the targeted racial violence with white resentment of Black political and economic gains. [15]

Writing forty years after the ratification of the 15th Amendment, Wells-Barnett laid bare the connection between voting rights and ending lynchings in the 1910 article How Enfranchisement Stops Lynchings.[16] She called out the failures of modern society to uphold and enforce the "glorious achievement" of the 14th and 15th amendments. Wells-Barnett stated:

"One-third of the states of the union have made and enforced laws which abridge the rights of American citizens. Although the Constitution specifically says, no state shall do so. They do deprive persons of life, liberty and property without due process of law, and do deny equal protection of the laws to persons of Negro descent. The right of citizens to vote is denied and abridged in these states, on account of race, color and previous condition of servitude, and has been so denied ever since the withdrawal of the United States troops from the South. This in spite of the fifteenth amendment, which declares that no state shall do this." [17]

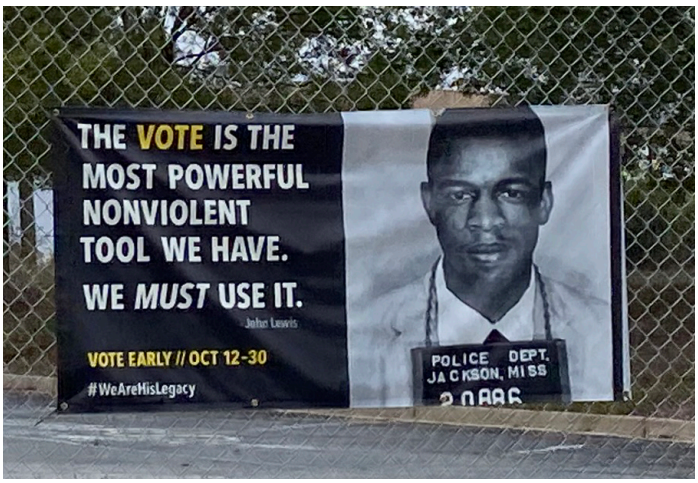
States like South Carolina and Texas enacted all-white primaries and turned the Democratic Party into a private entity immune from the purview of the 14th and 15th Amendments.[18] As Carol Anderson wrote in One Person, No Vote, "what the states could not accomplish by law, they were more than willing to achieve by violence." [19]

For Wells-Barnett, South Carolina was the harbinger of butchery and cruelty, endorsing actions that flew in the face of the country's alleged commitment to democracy and liberty.[20] In her analysis, Black people could not meaningfully object to or protest harmful laws and policies. The denial of representation means no say in how taxes are distributed, trial by jury, or any way to punish those who would otherwise harm Black families and communities.[21] Focusing squarely on South Carolina, she delivered an impassioned plea for enforcing the laws of the land regarding anti-lynching, anti-mob rule, and the full faith and credit of the 14th and 15th amendments.[22]

In Texas, the murder of free Black people and the exploitation of labor further enshrined white supremacist power and domination.[23] While not unique to Texas, the KKK played a critical role in securing political power through extremists' violence and repression. The cruelty and exclusionary attitudes were features of the social and political systems governing daily life, not incidental occurrences that could easily be removed.

Political violence of varying forms continued to take root in the decades leading up to the passage of the VRA. High-profile figures, including South Carolina Senator Benjamin Tillman and Georgia Governor Eugene Talmadge, openly justified violence against southern Black people. Tillman was a major instigator of the 1895 state constitution, rewritten to explicitly deny Black political power, "restoring whites' supremacy in all matters political."[24] The question of full citizenship and political participation for Black and other non-white Americans intensified after the end of World War II. Talmadge had threatened Black voters to "stay away from white folk's ballot boxes."[25] One notable victim of this campaign was World War II veteran Maceo Snipes.[26] Snipes was murdered after casting a ballot in Georgia's Democratic primary, making him the first Black person in his county to do so.[27] Snipes tested the limits of the Supreme Court's decision in Smith v. Allwright, 321 U.S. 649 (1944), which affirmed the right of citizens to vote for elected officials without restrictions based on race.

Daring to vote could cost someone their life. And southern white supremacists didn't care if the Black person killed for voting (Snipes) had helped save the world from fascism. Even with the 24th Amendment's ban on poll taxes and minimum support for voting rights in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the moderate approach to Black civil rights and political participation had proven ineffective. Voter registration efforts and challenges to segregation in public accommodations met significant obstacles, including violence. When voting rights activists were violently attacked on the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma, Americans had a full view of the brutality of political repression in the Jim Crow South.



VRA Closed the Gap and Expanded Access (1965-2013)

Despite the violent obstacles put in their path, Black Americans drove the organizing and litigation that seeded the ground for the crescendo of voices demanding a voting rights act in the Spring of 1965. Two days after the racist attack in Selma known as Bloody Sunday, Johnson promised the nation a federal law protecting the right to vote. President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the VRA into law just five months after the horrific attack on Selma's Edmund Pettus Bridge.

One of the most significant legislative victories in American history, the VRA marked a break from the generational practice of Black political exclusion. Signed into law 100 years after Emancipation, the VRA established a path for descendants of formerly enslaved Africans to gain full citizenship and engage in political life without interruption.

A 1966 Duke Law Journal article praised the VRA for establishing "a single, unified program to achieve voting equality" that avoided policing individual state prac-

tices.[28] The VRA explicitly prohibited discrimination based on race and outlined specific practices that were prohibited. Millions of non-white voters gained ballot access and an opportunity for fair representation as a result. Thousands of Black, Latino, and AAPI elected officials assumed office at the federal, state, and local levels as a result.

Combined, Sections 4 and 5 of the VRA established a preclearance system that gave the Department of Justice oversight over potential electoral changes.[29] The provisions served as a deterrent and check on changes that would hurt Black voter participation. The provision was last reauthorized for 25 years in 2006.[30] Virginia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina were covered by preclearance from 1965 to 2013. Texas, Arizona, and Arkansas were subsequently added to the list. California, Florida, Michigan, North Carolina, New York, and South Dakota had some covered areas within the purview of Section 5.[31] In February 2013, the Center for American Progress outlined the VRA's continued importance for building a diverse electorate and safeguarding the full faith and promise of American democracy.[32] The organization outlined the importance of retaining Section 5 preclearance to prevent disenfranchisement in places where discrimination still impacted voting practices. One example given was the continued racial polarization in voting in Mississippi. Another example shared was intentionally discriminatory laws in Texas and Georgia that were blocked from implementation because of Section 5.[33]

Even with the VRA, the underrepresentation of Black populations in coverage persisted. The think tank also highlighted several instances in 2010 of discriminatory voter laws blocked by Section 5, including proof-of-citizenship laws, voter ID laws, and restrictions on early voting.[34] Passage of the VRA closed the voter registration gap between Black and white voters in several southern states.

In Mississippi, non-white voter registration increased from 6.7% to 59.8% after the Act.[35] Alabama's non-white voter registration rose from 19.3% to 51.6%, and Georgia shifted from 27.4% to 52.6%. [36] A 2023 study published in the Journal of Political Economy found the VRA expanded representation of Black elected officials in local governments, specifically county commissions.[37] Researchers found that representation on county commissions contributed to increased public infrastructure funding in Black communities.[38]

The Voting Rights Act also addressed the voting rights of other groups historically affected by white supremacist state actions. From 1965 to 2013, the act served as a guiding framework for protecting citizens' voting rights and paved the way for additional measures to ensure free and fair elections. For Native Americans, who were disenfranchised and dispossessed on land of their ancestors, gaining citizenship and political participation followed a similarly complicated path. In 1924, Congress passed the Indian Citizenship Act, but it did not explicitly grant the right to vote or other rights, leaving indigenous people technically equal to white male citizens.

In 1975, Congress extended and expanded the VRA to include language minorities. But like the early struggle for voting rights, protections for non-native English speakers faced their own political violence. Chicano political organizer Modesto Rodriguez testified before the Subcommittee on Civil and Constitutional Rights of the House Committee on the Judiciary in February 1975, supporting the expansion of the VRA to protect non-native English speakers. He recounted economic intimidation and police presence at voter precincts. Rodriguez described one instance where police pulled guns on Spanish-speaking voters and another where a Mexican-American voter was arrested after asking a white woman to stop photographing. While recruiting others to testify, Rodriguez was beaten by police himself, leading to permanent hearing loss on one side. [39]

In 1992, the VRA was again extended to include the Voting Rights Language Assistance Act and extended the language minority provisions of section 203 for another 15 years. It assisted those with limited English proficiency.[40] The National Voter Registration Act became law in 1993, providing greater uniformity and accessibility for voter registration.[41] The NVRA made it possible for people to register through other government agencies, like the Department of Motor Vehicles, when applying for federal financial aid or other public assistance. The NVRA also provided uniform guidance for when and how voters could be removed from voter rolls.

When it was last reauthorized in 2006, Congress extended the VRA's preclearance provision for another twenty-five years. At the time, Congress acknowledged the persisting impact of discrimination on voting rights.[42] Congress conducted an extensive review of available data from several sources, including individual testimony, members of Congress, and other governmental sources. The House Committee on the Judiciary acknowledged the progress made in the 40 years since the VRA was passed but found that "vestiges of discrimination in voting continue to exist as demonstrated by second-generation barriers constructed to prevent minority voters from fully participating in the electoral process."[43]

The reauthorization report also warned about the impact of Supreme Court decisions on the Act's effectiveness. Noting decisions in Reno v. Bossier Parish II and Georgia v. Ashcroft, the House committee reported that it held that the Supreme Court "misconstrued Congress' original intent in enacting the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and narrowed the protections afforded by section 5 of such Act."[44] The report continued to say that "40 years has not been a sufficient amount of time to eliminate the vestiges of discrimination following nearly 100 years of disregard for the dictates of the 15th amendment and to ensure that the right of all citizens to vote is protected as guaranteed by the Constitution."[45]

Congress found that states continued efforts to deny or frustrate the voting rights and political participation of non-white citizens. And yet, four years after it acknowledged the importance of protecting voters from the "vestiges of discrimination," Shelby County, Alabama, sued to invalidate the VRA's most impactful provisions.

Shelby County v. Holder and the Empire Strikes Back

Despite a well-documented history of persisting discrimination in voting rights, and Congressional action, the Supreme Court delivered a harmful blow to this landmark voting rights law. The majority's rationale in Shelby County v. Holder, 570 U.S. 529 (2013), ignored clear findings of fact and evidence considered by Congress. It also disregarded the congressional record concerning the information considered when deciding whether to adjust the formula used to evaluate what jurisdictions were covered by preclearance. If there had not been sufficient progress to undo generations of harm in by 2006, a mere seven years should not have been considered enough time to close the gap.

Authored by Chief Justice John Roberts, Shelby County disregarded both congressional intent and well documented findings of fact about the persisting presence of discrimination in voting.[46] Despite the clear evidence to the contrary, Shelby County invalidated the coverage formula in Section 4. The Court left it up to Congress to update the formula.[47] Congressional failure to do so while there was a pro-democracy majority haunts us to this day.

While Shelby County did not completely undo the VRA, it undermined one of the strongest enforcement mechanisms for protecting ballot access. Without the updated formula, preclearance was rendered useless. And absent preclearance, previously covered jurisdictions were free to enact laws regardless of potential discriminatory impact on Black voters and other groups impacted by systemic discrimination.

Writing the dissent in Shelby County, the late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg emphasized Congressional intent in sustaining the coverage formula and preclearance to "guard against backsliding."[48] She pointed out the limitations in the Civil Rights Acts of 1957, 1960, and 1964 and the need for a new form of political solution to political power. She also highlighted the increase in "second-generation barriers" such as racial gerrymandering and the redrawing of legislative districts to dilute nonwhite voting power. Another example was at-large voting in areas with large Black populations instead of voting by district. [49]

In many ways, Ginsburg's dissent reads as if she had a crystal ball into the country's political future. Texas wasted no time in implementing a strict photo ID law previously forbidden by Section 5 mere hours after Shelby County was announced.[50] Not to be outdone, North Carolina passed a bill instituting severe restrictions on ballot access with a clear impact on Black voters. A strict photo ID law, coupled with restrictions on early voting and the elimination of same-day registration, were among the changes in the new law. Without section 5 preclearance, the burden shifted to impacted communities across the country to litigate each proposed change and each law, despite the similar patterns and impact.

The racial and political polarization noted in the covered jurisdictions took on new life in the years after Shelby County. The "second generation barriers" Ginsburg warned about increased in their deployment, expanding barriers to ballot access and meaningful political participation. Nearly 1,700 polling places were closed between 2012 and 2018. Texas, Georgia, and Arizona accounted for the largest share of closures and engaged in mass voter purges. [51]

While litigation has always been part of voting rights defense, pursuing Section 2 litigation offered only a piecemeal approach to addressing persistent harms. It also lacked the swift protections that could be provided by requiring laws and other potential discriminatory changes to be flagged and evaluated under the prior system of preclearance. Congress considered the need for both Section 2 legal challenges and preclearance, not either or. The congressional record makes it clear that Section 2 alone was an insufficient remedy to resolve the ongoing discrimination and harm.

Rolling back voting rights a central component of the authoritarian agenda

The right to vote is a foundational part of our ability to advocate for ourselves, our communities, and our families. As we move toward an increasingly multiracial majority, factions within the country are doubling down on fear and control. Without the right to vote, we are subject to the whims of a tyrannical minority, abusing power and resources. Over the past year, we've witnessed major incursions against institutional norms and widely held egalitarian beliefs cast aside. Balance and separation of powers, one person one vote, and free and fair elections are just a few of the basic principles in danger.

Even before the current moment, states not previously covered by section 5, like Wisconsin and Ohio, adopted policies and efforts that had detrimental impacts on Black voters and other disenfranchised groups. These states and others began adopting strict Voter ID requirements and other steps to encumber ballot access. Like the quick spread of anti-abortion laws and bans, strict voter ID requirements, and other policies spread to the detriment of citizens residing in those states. Research from the Center for Democracy and Civic Engagement documented how millions of Americans lack the form of ID often championed by the strict voter ID laws. Black eligible voters were most likely to lack access to the required ID, followed by Hispanic and AAPI eligible voters. [52]

Legislators continue to use the excuse of virtually nonexistent voter fraud and the made-up threat of non-citizen voting to justify the increased barriers. After the historic expansion of ballot access during the 2020 election and the COVID-19 pandemic, extremist state legislatures moved to enact a new round of restrictions. These limitations include the use of ballot drop boxes, absentee ballots, and targeting third-party voter registration,

which have increased barriers.[53] New proposals in Congress have the potential to usher in devastating changes to the election process, undermining millions of otherwise eligible voters and local and state election administrations. Despite claiming to protect or secure U.S. elections, proposed legislation like the SAVE Act, SAVE America Act, and MEGA Act are fake solutions to a made-up problem. Like the fear tactics employed to advance the Crime Bill and support policies like stop and frisk, these laws do not keep our communities safe. But they could serve as weapons of mass disenfranchisement, further blocking our communities from having a voice and vote. [54]

Even without the latest voter suppression proposals, the past decade has proven the need for more comprehensive protections that ensure political participation for all deemed eligible. The extreme polarization Justice Ginsburg warned about also made its way into the Supreme Court, leading to diminished protections in gerrymandering cases and eroding the 14th Amendment. In Alexander v. South Carolina State Conference of the NAACP, 602 U.S. 1 (2024), the Supreme Court's conservative majority paved the way for racial gerrymandering, disguised as political gerrymandering, to be even more permissible. [55]

The decision paved the way for the alarming trend that emerged in the summer of 2025 when Republican governors and state legislators responded to another call to action issued by President Trump. While gerrymandering and redrawing maps on a whim was not entirely new, the call for mid-decade Congressional redistricting was unprecedented. Several Republican controlled states convened special legislative sessions aimed at deepening white minority rule. Texas and Missouri have led the way in passing new Congressional maps aimed at erasing Black and Latino political representation. Democratic-controlled states like California responded in kind, attempting to restore balance to Congress.

According to a report released by Black Voters Matter and Fair Fight Action, without the protection of Section 2, "Republican-controlled legislatures in the South could eliminate 191 state legislative seats currently held by Democrats, with the vast majority representing majority-Black districts."[56] In addition, the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals has denied the full intent and impact of Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act. Despite explicit intent in Congressional reports and decades of precedent, the Eighth Circuit refuses to recognize Section 2 as providing does private individuals to bring suit under the VRA. The vast majority of VRA litigation under Section 2 were initiated by affected voters or pro-voting rights advocacy groups.[57] Voters in Arkansas, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota have been denied the private right of action to protect political participation and representation of their communities.[58]

Officials across branches and levels of government seem to be colluding to undermine the foundational principle of free and fair elections. A perverse call-and-response played out in the days following Callais, with elected officials rushing to return the country to the post-Reconstruction era.

The barriers and burdens imposed on the right to vote require more than a restoration of the VRA as it once existed. While some states have adopted individual frameworks that protect voting rights and political participation, the current political landscape demands a new national standard.[59] Even as a deeply entrenched and well-resourced far-right minority controls large shares of the current political and economic landscape, people are organizing and building powerful coalitions to protect our families and futures.

Power in Practice: Rebuilding Democracy, Block by Block

While the protections of the VRA were not absolute, they provided a framework for defending and strengthening our democracy. And if we've learned nothing else from the past 160 years of pro-democracy advocacy and organizing, it's that democracy is not a spectator sport. It is a year-round effort to build power rooted in community.

Casting a vote isn't just about choosing a candidate. We are engaged in a collective practice that can shape agendas and determine who decides which policies are advanced. It means the difference between our families and neighbors living under a constant state of terror, or policies that prioritize community care.

At its core, protecting and expanding the right to vote and political participation is about power. The power to decide for ourselves how we will live and who will represent our communities. It's the power we see from millions of people taking to the streets to declare that kings and billionaires will not rule them. And the kind of power that defends community members under attack. From block club meetings to kitchen tables, we have more power than we realize when we come together.

Sustaining our communities and the rights we have enjoyed requires going beyond restoring the VRA. It requires us to expand the scope of pro-democracy legislation and imagine new approaches to protecting not just racial equity in voting, but economic, environmental, and gender justice. We must build cross-issue coalitions, recognizing that the same forces that suppress Black voters also attack other issues, including reproductive rights, workers' rights, and climate justice.

But our votes alone will not change the current situation. Watching the dismantling of voting rights and other hard-fought freedoms may feel overwhelming. But an organized people can shake the foundation of a corrupt system. As the co-founders of the Black Voters Matter Fund, Cliff Albright and LaTosha Brown have said, "real change comes from grassroots organizing."[60] Throughout our collective history, we've seen countless examples of organized people defeating a seemingly powerful opposition.

Reclaiming stolen ground and building forward requires a new approach to defining the stakes and sustaining our wins. Protecting our rights and freedoms takes an entire coalition of people, not just a few high-profile faces in key places. Over 160 years of lessons from the fight for full citizenship and political participation make it clear that we must be engaged beyond voting.

Organized communities demanded the right to vote, improvements in working conditions, and ended Jim Crow segregation. There is an entire cadre of voting rights and pro-democracy organizations and formations at the state and national level. Every day, our communities are defying the odds, often with support from power-building grassroots organizations.

Groups like the Louisiana-based Power Coalition for

Equity and Justice and Alabama Forward have taken the fight for fair representation to the Supreme Court. Florida Rising, Advance Carolina, and Texas Organizing Project are mobilizing year-round to bring policies and political futures closer to the people. Other groups like the California Black Freedom Fund and Black Leaders Organizing Communities (BLOC) help communities build opportunity. These organizations hold the line and organize for our justice and freedom 365 days a year.

"There is no off-cycle" is a common mantra from the field which means we must work consistently and persistently to pursue fair representation and equal rights. Civic engagement and political participation must be a part of our regular way of life. We can sustain the energy and determination necessary through our deep commitment to freedom and a beloved community. Democracy is a collective practice. It requires investment in shared experiences and values, leading to shared outcomes.

Basic economic issues are deeply connected to who controls the country. The decisions made by those in elected and appointed positions can make the difference between a data center driving up costs and impacting water quality. Issues like utility and grocery costs, childcare, health insurance, and consumer debt can make or break a family. These issues are also prime ground for organizing beyond the ballot box.

There are many ways to get involved and stay informed. Show up at events in your community, sign up to volunteer, and tune into virtual events and meetings. Register for a training workshop or serve at the polls during your community's elections. Many major political moments started because everyday people stood up and said "no more". Just as Wells-Barnett documented and advocated against the atrocities of lynching and disenfranchisement, so must we pick up the mantle of witness and advocate for a multiracial democracy today.

We can and must follow in the footsteps of our ancestors who pursued their dream of a multiracial democracy that would give all communities a fair chance of being represented and developed to their fullest potential.

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Executive Orders in Action: What They Mean for Our Rights

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For decades, the federal government has implemented policies aimed at building a workforce that reflects the diversity of the nation. These efforts, supported by both Republican and Democratic administrations, originated in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, and eventually aimed to promote equal opportunity for all women, all racial and ethnic populations, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people with disabilities. Yet, in January of 2025, newly elected President Donald Trump issued a series of executive orders that represented one of the most sweeping efforts to dismantle this legacy in modern history. These orders, which target diversity programs, gender identity recognition, birthright citizenship, and affirmative action, simultaneously threaten decades of civil rights progress and raise serious constitutional questions that will likely be litigated for years to come.

The term "civil rights" refers to the legal guarantees of equal treatment and protection from discrimination. In this article, a series of executive orders issued by President Donald Trump in the opening weeks of 2025 are analyzed. Many civil rights advocates have condemned these executive orders as unprecedented rollbacks of federal diversity programs and protections for marginalized groups. This brief overview of the situation will show why these executive orders represent a significant threat to the civil rights that people have fought to gain in this country.

The Executive Orders

Executive Order 14151 – Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Accessibility

The first of these orders, Executive Order 14151, signed on January 20, 2025, eliminates all Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility (DEIA) programs across federal agencies. The order requires the dissolution of all DEIA-related offices and the termination of employees holding DEIA-related positions. President Trump justified the Order by asserting that such programs, particularly those implemented under the Biden administration, constitute "illegal discrimination." For several months, there were questions about what exactly constituted "illegal discrimination". Without guidance on this term, many organizations panicked. It is important to note, however, that the Department of Justice (DOJ) seven months later did provide guidance on how to interpret the term "illegal discrimination". The memo indicated that race-based scholarships, internships and leadership initiatives would be designated as "illegal". Similarly, designated "safe spaces" exclusively for students of a specific race or ethnic group would be deemed "illegal". And it gave several examples of how recruitment strategies, job criteria and college admission criteria could be deemed "illegal" as well. It explicitly stated that institutions must maintain sex separated sports competitions and intimate spaces and that failure to affirm sex based boundaries constitutes "illegal discrimination".

Prior to the issuance of the DOJ memorandum, DEIA offices in agencies that received federal funding were shut down, and federal government agencies were directed to submit the names of employees involved in diversity-related initiatives to the Office of Management and Budget within sixty days. This directive, widely seen as a precursor to imminent terminations, has already led to reports of individuals being targeted and investigated simply for their participation in DEIA training or events.

Executive Order 14151 has already had a major impact on the federal

workforce. The Department of Defense (recently renamed to Department of War), following the issuance of the Order, moved quicky to end official celebrations of heritage months such as Black History Month and Disability Employment Awareness Month. Although the Order only applies to agencies receiving federal funds, it signals a broad cultural and legal shift in our society. Many private sector employers such as Target, while not being legally required to comply, have felt pressured to align their position on DEIA with the current government administration. The fear of facing political and financial repercussions for failure to align with the government's agenda motivated many private sector companies to dismantle their diversity programs. This retraction of inclusive practices across both public and private sectors, is resulting in the dismantling of decades of work toward more equitable hiring, programming and representation in the workplace.

Executive Order 14160 – Birthright Citizenship

On January 20, 2025, President Trump also signed Executive Order 14160, which targets birthright citizenship. This Order directed government agencies to deny citizenship to children born in the United States if their parents are undocumented immigrants or non-citizens on temporary visas.

The Fourteenth Amendment guarantees that "all persons born or naturalized in the United States" are citizens. This clause has long been interpreted by courts, including the Supreme Court of the United States, to apply regardless of parental immigration status. Since there is long standing legal precedent, many lawsuits were filed to challenge this use of executive power. At least ten lawsuits challenging the executive order have been brought by various plaintiffs, including 22 U.S. state attorneys general, civil liberties and immigrant rights groups, and pregnant women. Multiple federal judges found Executive Order 14160 to be unconstitutional and issued nationwide injunctions purporting to prevent the enforcement of this Executive Order. The Trump administration appealed these decisions to the United States Supreme Court. In June 2025, the Supreme Court issued a ruling in the case of Trump v. CASA that raised more questions than it answered because it did not decide the merits of whether naturalized citizenship status can be altered by executive action.

In their 6-3 majority opinion, the United States Supreme Court stated that nationwide injunctions exceed the authority of federal courts unless the case before them is a class action lawsuit. Since the cases that had been filed at that point were not class action lawsuits, the Court held that the lower federal district courts could only issue an injunction that addresses the needs of the litigants in front of them. This left open the possibility of nationwide injunctions being issued in class action lawsuits. Within hours of the U.S. Supreme Court ruling, the ACLU, Democracy Defenders and several other nonprofit organizations filed class action lawsuits in the Maryland Federal District Court (CASA, Inc. et. al v. Trump) and in the New Hampshire Federal District Court ("Barbara" et al, v. Trump). These cases resulted in temporary court orders declaring that this Executive Order could not be enforced due to the fact that it contradicts the plain language of the 14th Amendment and that denial of citizenship constitutes irreparable harm. The cases are not yet fully resolved and the legal battles continue.

These cases are important because the revocation of citizenship for naturalized citizens could lead to the creation of a permanent class of stateless individuals. These stateless individuals born on American soil would be denied any legal recognition or rights by the United States and all other countries, and would be uniquely vulnerable to discrimination and abuse due to their inability to access basic rights and privileges. This outcome directly contradicts the original purpose of the Fourteenth Amendment, which was adopted after the Civil War to ensure that all people regardless of race would be afforded fundamental rights and freedoms.

Executive Order 14173 – DEIA, Affirmative |Action, and Federal Contractors

On January 21, 2025, Trump issued Executive Order 14173: Ending Illegal Discrimination & Restoring Merit Based Opportunity. This Order places a prohibition on federal agencies contracting with organizations that engage in DEIA or affirmative action initiatives. It revokes significant portions of Executive Order 11246, which was signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965. President Johnson's Order had required that federal contractors implement affirmative action initiatives to ensure that women and minority groups were given employment opportunities with the contractors. In just 60 years, this Order has been reversed to have the complete opposite impact. Trump's new Order requires that federal contractors certify that they do not operate DEIA-related programs to be eligible for funding. This means that companies attempting to address historical discrimination through voluntary initiatives may be excluded from the federal marketplace.

Historically underrepresented groups are likely to be severely economically impacted by this Order as they face greater challenges in securing jobs and government contracts. Even with affirmative action initiatives in place prior to this rollback, minority- and women-owned businesses received a small amount of federal contracting dollars at 9.4% and 4.9% respectively as of 2020. It is likely that these numbers will shrink even further following the issuance of Executive Order 14173. The Order also removes federal contractor obligations to not discriminate in employment practices based on race, sex, religion, sexual orientation, or national origin. These regulatory changes may enable discriminatory practices to reemerge under the guise of contracts being awarded based on merit.

Executive Order 14168 – Transgender Identity & Sex Assigned at Birth

The Trump administration has made it no secret that it has issues with the existence and acceptance of the transgender community. Executive Order 14168 was a direct attack on the recognition of gender self-identification in the federal workplace. Under the Order, federal agencies were directed to remove the word "gender" from official materials and replace it with "sex," defined strictly by one's assigned sex at birth. The directive was effectively an elimination of all recognition of transgender and nonbinary individuals in federal documentation and policy. The Order further bans federal funding for gender-affirming care and prohibits self-identification of gender on official documents such as passports. The transgender and nonbinary communities have fought hard to be seen by others the way they see themselves, and this Trump executive order will serve as a major blow to those communities as it pertains to government recognition.

There is a complex legal landscape surrounding this topic. The Supreme Court held in Bostock v. Clay County (2020) that any employer that fires an individual for being gay or transgender violated Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 for discrimination of sex. However, the Court was careful to note that its decision did not address sex-segregated spaces, such as bathrooms. Trump is now utilizing the ambiguity left by the Supreme Court to justify limiting access to various single-sex facilities such as detention centers and women's shelter based solely on birth-assigned sex. The consequences of such provisions are likely to prove dangerous for transgender individuals, who are sure to face obstacles in accessing identification, healthcare, and safe public accommodations. Executive Order 14168 also mandated that transgender inmates be housed according to their assigned sex birth. This directive has already prompted legal action due to the heightened risk of violence it creates.

Executive Order 14201 – Transgender Identity & Sports

The Trump administration continued to follow through with its campaign promises surrounding transgender individuals when the President signed Executive Order 14201 titled "Keeping Men Out of Women's Sports." The Order bans transgender women from competing in women's sports and threatens educational institutions with the elimination of federal funds if they disregard the Order. It goes further to direct the State Department to put pressure on internal organizations, such as the International Olympic Committee, to adopt similar bans. Even though transgender athletes represent less than ten out of more than 500,000 NCAA athletes, the Order intends to bar them entirely from sports. This Order explicitly references enforcement of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which states that no person shall be excluded from participation in any educational program or activity on the basis of sex. Enforcement of Title IX will pressure public educational institutions, including K-12 schools, to keep transgender women out of women's sports under the guise of allowing women fair athletic opportunities.

Executive Order 14183 – Transgender Identity & The Military

The Trump administration's assault on transgender and nonbinary people was extended to the United States military through Executive Order 14183. The Order implements a ban on transgender individuals from enlisting or continuing service, and that all military personnel are required to use facilities corresponding to their assigned sex at birth. Furthermore, the usage of self-identifying pronouns was banned by the Order, and it puts an end to gender-affirming care for active service members. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth later clarified that individuals with any history of gender dysphoria would no longer be eligible to join the military. While President Trump has framed this Order as an effort to maintain, as stated in the Order's title, "military excellence and readiness," the policy unfairly singles out an already marginalized population, that represents less than 0.6% of all adults that have served in the armed forces. It stigmatizes transgender and nonbinary individuals to make it seem that they are incapable of military service, effectively equating gender nonconformity with a mental defect. This undermines the dignity and sacrifice of individuals that volunteered to serve their country and removes a critical opportunity for better economic outcomes that the military often provides. Now, transgender and nonbinary individuals are having that opportunity snatched away from them.

These executive orders represent a coordinated and far-reaching rollback of civil rights protections as they seek to reverse the progress made over the last several decades. They challenge constitutional guarantees, restrict recognition of historically marginalized identities, and create new barriers to equal opportunity in nearly every area of public life. Many of these Orders will or currently do face court challenges. But the legal battles will likely be long, and consequently we face much uncertainty about the future of civil rights. The consequences of these Orders will be felt by public servants, military members, children in schools, nonwhite citizens, and many other groups of people that these Orders seek to harm. It is not hyperbole to state that this country is at a crossroads. The outcome of these legal battles will determine not just the future of DEIA programs, immigrant families, or transgender rights, but the integrity of civil rights protections in the United States.

In the next sections of this article, we explore some of the nonprofit law firms that are fighting back as well as some of the community based organizations that engage in education and direct action.

Fighting Back

Organizations Taking Legal Action

One distinctive and time-honored avenue for combatting oppression and attacks on civil rights is using the law. As mentioned above, several organizations have filed lawsuits challenging the executive orders mentioned above.

American Civil Liberties Union (the ACLU)

The ACLU is a non-partisan defender of individual freedoms that has championed civil rights since the 1920s. Historically, the ACLU has used the courts to challenge violations of civil rights guaranteed by the

Constitution. It has collaborated with several other organizations in notable court cases which include Brown v. Board of Education (in conjunction with the Na-tional Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)) and Roe v. Wade. In 2025 the ACLU is representing the plaintiff in Orr v. Trump. This law-suit challenges the State Department's response to Ex-ecutive Order 14168, which requires changing the sex designations on passports for non-binary, intersex, and transgender citizens to reflect the sex they were as-signed at birth. In June 2025, the U.S. District Court of Massachusetts, the court this case is currently in, or-dered the State Department to allow people to self-se-lect the sex designation on most new passports, regard-less of if their gender identity is different from their sex assigned at birth or not.

NAACP Legal Defense Fund

Founded by Thurgood Marshall in 1940, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund (LDF) is a civil and human rights law firm that uses the courts, among other forms of ac-tivism, to promote racial justice and equality in the United States. The LDF has a rich history of defending civil rights in iconic cases such as Brown v. Board of Ed-ucation and Shelby County v. Holder. Currently, the LDF is representing members of organizations, such as the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and Make the Road New York, whose children may lose their birthright citizenship under Executive Order 14160 in New Hampshire Indonesian Community Support v. Donald J. Trump. The LDF has secured a temporary in-junction that blocked Trump's birthright citizenship exec-utive order. Despite this success, the legal fight is not over as the Government has filed an appeal against this injunction.

Lambda Legal

Established in 1973, Lambda Legal is a civil rights legal firm fighting for equality and freedom for the LGBTQ+ community. Lambda Legal has represented the commu-nity in landmark cases such as Lawrence v. Texas and Obergefell v. Hodges. This organization has filed two lawsuits against the Trump administration due to recent executive orders. In National Urban League v. Trump, Lambda Legal and the LDF are representing a group of organizations in a suit challenging Executive Orders 14173, 14168, and 14151. This lawsuit asserts that the Trump administration violates the organizations' rights to free speech and due process and engages in intentional discrimination. As of October 2025, there have been no successful temporary court orders to prevent the en-forcement of the executive orders challenged in this law-suit.

In PFLAG v. Trump, Lambda Legal is partnering with Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) to challenge Executive Orders 14168 and 14187. This lawsuit was filed to combat the denial of critical federal funds to healthcare providers, which has forced provider networks to prematurely cancel appointments and care for transgender youth. A temporary court order was issued to prevent the federal government from withdrawing federal funding to coerce hospitals into stopping gender-affirming medical care for minors.

Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund

The Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) is dedicated to protecting and defending the immigration, voting, employment, and education rights of Latinos in the United States. MALDEF has historically litigated on behalf of immigrant rights including in the most recent Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) case in the 5th Circuit, in which a judge has approved to move forward with a settlement agreement. This organization provides resources for Latinos and immigrants in the United States through legal representation and Know Your Rights campaigns. In response to Executive Order 14160 regarding birthright citizenship, MALDEF re-leased a statement condemning the Order and advised that it will monitor the actions of federal agencies for any implementation of this Order and take appropriate action as necessary.

It is not law alone, however, that will protect our rights. We have a long tradition in the United States of grass-roots community organizing working in tandem with legal action to expand our democracy and ensure that the full spectrum of our humanity is respected.

Organizations Providing Community-Led Education

Community-led education initiatives can provide valuable information to communities that are being censored or minimized as a result of the executive orders. These initiatives empower individuals to share accurate narratives, preserve cultural knowledge, and foster solidarity in the face of institutional suppression. By creating independent platforms for education and dialogue, communities can ensure that diverse voices and histories remain accessible despite governmental restrictions.

Southern Poverty Law Center

Learning for Justice is a community education program established by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) that seeks to educate and create dialogue between communities and those proximate to injustices in the South. This program provides tools and resources for families, youth, and educators to learn about history, diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice to combat the current anti-DEI agendas of the current administration and local school systems. By providing these resources, Learning for Justice encourages educational practices and supports community-led activism against the Orders.

Association for the Study of African American Life and History

The Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) hosts "Freedom Schools" over the summer for students in cities across the nation. These schools teach a diverse and academically rigorous curriculum focused on African American History. Freedom Schools create an academic environment geared towards empowering students and enhancing their cultural awareness. By providing culturally relevant education and civic engagement, Freedom Schools build community resilience to oppose and mitigate the impact of the Trump administration's executive orders.

Minority-Owned & Women-Owned Businesses

While the private sector isn't directly affected by the anti-DEI policies in these executive orders, the policies may affect which government contracts or grants that minority- and woman-owned businesses can receive. It is for this reason that the public must act to further support minority- and women-owned businesses in their communities. Though finding businesses owned by minorities and/or women may be difficult, there are a variety of online resources such as buywomenowned.com and supportblackowned.com that allow consumers to consciously choose where they spend their money.

Individuals Taking Action

While non-profits and civil rights firms lead institutional resistance, individual actions by citizens serve as a critical component of opposition to the Trump administration's anti-diversity and anti-equity policies. These actions, often decentralized and sometimes spontaneous, have played a significant role in challenging administrative policies and mobilizing public dissent.

Protesting

Beyond the legal sphere, individual citizens have engaged in a series of direct protests and civil disobedience to voice their dissent. These actions are often organized by grassroots movements, but their power comes from the collective action of private citizens. One of the most impactful examples of how mobilization and direct action can be utilized not only in our local communities but worldwide is the 2020 example of the Black Lives Matter protests against systemic racism in United States policing.

Although not as widespread or as multicultural, the current "Rage Against the Regime" and "No Kings" protests, for instance, saw tens of thousands of individuals mobilizing in cities across the country. The protests addressed a wide range of administrative actions and policies, including immigration enforcement, the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), and the administration's response to documents related to the Jeffrey Epstein case.

These individual-driven demonstrations have created a surge of popular dissent. The organizers of these protests emphasized their non-violent nature and provided resources for citizen engagement, such as The Methods of Nonviolent Action by Gene Sharp. The protests have

demonstrated that opposition to the Orders and executive power was not just a matter for institutional bodies, but a deeply felt concern for many citizens who used their personal time and voices to take to the streets. History tells us that there is power in solidarity of the people.

Mental Health Resources

The heightened political polarization and contentious policy debates surrounding the executive orders have had a profound impact on the mental health of many, including legal professionals, activists, and the general public. These executive orders can create feelings of hopelessness for the future and for the progress that has been made in past decades. In response, a significant expansion of mental health resources has emerged, often spearheaded by legal- and community-based organizations.

Grassroots and non-profit organizations have stepped up to provide essential support that is open and unaffected by the executive orders in these trying times. Groups like the National Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health America have created specific guides and tools for managing anxiety and stress related to news consumption and political events. Organizations such as United We Dream, a youth-led immigrant rights group, have integrated mental health workshops and "healing justice" spaces directly into their advocacy work with children.

While self-care is an essential practice for individual well-being, it is not sufficient on its own, particularly in communities facing systemic oppression or collective stress. Community care extends the principles of self-care into collective support networks, emphasizing mutual aid, shared responsibility, and solidarity among members. By fostering resilience, connection, and sustainable wellness, community care ensures that no one bears the burden of care alone. Prioritizing community care complements individual self-care and addresses structural inequalities that cannot be mitigated through personal practices alone.

This proactive approach of prioritizing both individual and communal mental health recognizes that effective activism and legal advocacy are unsustainable without a robust focus on psychological well-being. These efforts highlight a growing awareness that the challenges of the modern political landscape are not just legal or political, but deeply personal and psychological as well.

Conclusion

The series of executive orders issued in the opening months of 2025 represents a coordinated and profound rollback of civil rights protections. As this analysis has demonstrated, these orders were not isolated policy changes but a far-reaching effort to dismantle decades of progress across a spectrum of issues, from workplace diversity and birthright citizenship to protections for transgender individuals in the military and in public life. The Executive Orders, specifically 14151, 14160, 14173, 14168, 14201, and 14183, collectively challenge established constitutional principles, create new legal ambiguities, and signal a broader cultural shift that threatens to re-legitimize discriminatory practices.

The threat of these executive orders to the integrity of the United States civil rights framework is supported by the clear and immediate consequences felt by public servants, military members, and marginalized communities. The swift legal challenges from organizations such as the ACLU, NAACP Legal Defense Fund, and Lambda Legal underscore the gravity of the situation and the critical role that litigation will play in shaping the future. Additionally, the widespread response from community-led education initiatives and individual citizens highlights that the defense of these rights is not confined to the courtroom but is a deeply-felt, society-wide imperative.

Ultimately, the nation finds itself at a crossroads. The outcome of the legal battles and the resilience of grassroots opposition will determine whether the hard-won gains of the past sixty years can be preserved. The integrity of civil rights protections in the United States hangs in the balance. This ongoing fight is not merely a matter of policy, but a foundational struggle for justice and equality in the United States.

The St. Petersburg Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation Center

BY JUDITH A.M. SCULLY

ST. PETERSBURG
TRHT
TRUTH, RACIAL HEALING &
TRANSFORMATION CENTER

The year 2020 was a turning point for racial justice in our nation. In 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement took to the streets to protest racial injustices in policing in the United States. Through a video that went viral that year, the world witnessed former police officer Derek Chauvin murder George Floyd by placing his knee on Mr. Floyd's neck for 9 minutes and 29 seconds. Floyd's "I can't breathe" statement before he died, became a mantra for racial justice activists. Protests sprouted up worldwide. The focus on the desperate need for racial justice in the United States was not just about policing. It also encompassed systemic racial injustice in housing, banking, education, employment, and health care.

Corporations and institutions of higher learning in the United States rushed to initiate resolutions and calls for action to raise awareness of racial inequities. As a result of this momentum, four institutions of higher learning in St. Peters-burg, Florida came together to discuss what we could do to promote racial equity in our City. After a year-long series of discussions with community members and organizations, the St. Petersburg Truth Racial Healing and Transformation (TRHT) Center was born.

At the St. Petersburg TRHT Center, our ultimate goal is to make St. Petersburg a more just and equitable place to live. Our partners include the NAACP, the Urban League, the Collard Green Festival, Racewithoutisms, the Carter G Woodson African American Museum, the City of St. Petersburg, Mi Gente, Collective Empowerment of Tampa Bay Area, Community Tampa Bay and the African American Heritage Trail.

Our organization is part of a national network of TRHT-designated centers that focus on truth telling and relationship building as a means of healing historical injustices that were caused by segregation in law and economics.

Our work focuses on three primary programs ---

1) Community Conversations; 2) our National Day of Racial Healing; and 3) our Racial Justice Fellowship. The community conversations gather community members from diverse backgrounds.

Our community conversations provide a safe, non-judgmental space for community members to share their experiences and are designed for individuals from different racial groups to recognize their shared humanity. Through these conversations we build sustainable relationships that allow us to work together with the goal of eliminating racial discrimination.

The National Day of Racial Healing is held annually on the Tuesday following Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day. On this day, the national network of TRHT centers, gather people together to foster racial healing with events that include uplifting performances, dialogue, and reflection. While the rest of this article focuses on the Racial Justice Fellowship, more information about all of our programs can be found on our website at www.stpetetrht.org.

THE RACIAL JUSTICE FELLOWSHIP

The Racial Justice Fellowship (RJF) creates a pipeline of young leaders, RJF alumni, who become dedicated to racial equity, as well as racial healing and transformation. RJF Alumni Aaron Rose is one of them. Rose worked on a project to document structural racism in St. Petersburg with the Foundation for a Healthy St. Petersburg, and on a com-munity outreach project for racial healing with the African American Heritage Association of St. Pete. "My experience as a Racial Justice Fellow with TRHT truly shaped my college journey and future trajectory," Rose said. "I was fortunate to be selected as a fellow during my freshman year, which led me down a path where having conversations about racial issues were not only allowed but encouraged. I learned how to stand and speak up for both myself and others."

Racial Justice Fellows each receive a $500/semester stipend and a $1,000 summer stipend to support them in a six-week summer internship with local community organizations focused on racial justice work. For Rose, the financial support not only helped him to become a young leader of racial justice projects with nonprofits but also motivated him to become a mentor to other young people. "I had always desired to be a trailblazer, and TRHT equipped me not only with the skills to do so, but with mentors who helped pave the way for me," Rose said. "And this now allows me to pay it forward to the next generation."

In addition to helping us provide opportunities for our students, the summer internship program has helped us build community connections with several nonprofit organizations in our City. Every year since 2021, our Fellows have engaged in a series of dialogs and townhalls. In these conversations, our fellows are introduced to community activists, policymakers and influencers who share their perspectives and wisdom. Through this process, we build influential relationships that inspire our fellows, provide them with guidance and serve as a life-long lessons in community building. Kima Sibayan is among the RJF Alumni who have been inspired by these organizations that

focused on race and crime. She is passionate about criminal justice reform, abolition work, and community activism and is considering returning to Florida and attending law school. "My year in the racial justice fellowship was one of the most informative years during my undergraduate experience," Sibayan said. "The program opened my mind to a new world of information that I wouldn't have gotten anywhere else. I'm so grateful that I found my passion for racial healing and advocacy so young and at such an important moment in history."

The fellows also explore the vital role that telling the truth plays in narrating historical events. They examine the significance of learning about our racial history so that we can heal and grow from the harms that were previously endured. They focus attention on the importance of gathering data to support our narratives, and they begin to understand the role that activism plays in creating remedies for racial harms.

Through the guidance of our community partners and our Board members, our Fellows learn the importance of articulating their own stories and they begin to recognize their own power to transform not only themselves and each other, but our society as a whole. RJF alumni Blake Radford explains how working as a RJF to create a resource list for natural disasters for the Urban League of St. Petersburg, helped him recognize this power. "The fact that I was able to assist others lifted my spirits," Radford said. "Being able to speak, work with and get to know students from different walks of life and educational paths broadened my horizons and showed me that even while we each have a different story there are so many of us who share a common goal: To make this world a better place for all."

Our fellows learn about the specific racial history of the City of St. Petersburg, and they explore how diversity, inclusion and equity contribute to our civic health. They also examine the impact that the Florida legislature has in either impeding or promoting racial equity.

In July 2022, when we were bringing in our second cohort of Racial Justice Fellows, the Florida legislature enacted a new law known as House Bill 7 (HB7) -- the Stop the Wrongs Against Our Kids and Employees Act. This law is commonly referred to as the Stop W.O.K.E. Act. It is a modern-day censorship law geared at restricting conversations about race and gender in state-funded schools. The law reflects the belief that people edu-cated about the racial history of the United States pose a radical threat to the maintenance of a society based on the myth of white supremacy. It is not a coincidence that Florida's Stop W.O.K.E. Act arrived in a moment of time when people across the globe were focused on learning more about racial injustices in this country. It attempted to thwart racial progress. Undaunted, our work at the TRHT continued.

Our work continued as attempts to thwart racial progress spread across the United States. In the past five years, more than 200 local, state, and federal government entities in the United States have introduced 670 bills, resolutions, executive orders, and other measures that dismiss the study of race and race-based theories as racist. These laws are referred to as "anti-critical race theory" or "anti-CRT" laws. The term "critical race theory" (CRT) was originally defined as a system of inquiry in the field of law that was used to question what impact a policy or practice has on racial equity. Legislators, however, have coopted the term "critical race theory" to refer to any topic that mentions race discrimination, bias, white privilege, and/or diversity and makes people feel uncomfortable. They have misled the public into believing that CRT promotes racism and discrimination and that it is taught in elementary schools (which it is not).

Consequently, we also introduce our Racial Justice Fellows to what Critical Race Theory is and why it is controversial, and we focus on the need to continue to address current racial inequities in our society.

Fellows have found the challenge of confronting any discomfort with discussing race can lead to growth. "My tenure in the TRHT Racial Justice fellowship was highly impactful," RJF Alumni Katherine Kirkeminde said. "At times, it was challenging because it caused me to re-evaluate my own positions and to engage in deep introspection. Sometimes it was uncomfortable to examine my own thoughts. But I discovered that when I greet introspection with awe and wonder, I am more likely to learn and grow. The opportunity to learn from others who had radically different experiences than me was one of the fellowship's greatest strengths. It taught me how to 'reach across the aisle' in order to actively seek out those voices that are often unheard. We need that now, more than ever."

Kirkeminde is in the Master of Arts program for Applied Anthropology at University of South Florida (USF), with a focus on heritage studies where she continues to explore difficult conversations and is investigating Folklore as a third-space in the Deep South. She is also a member of the Black Cemeteries Network. As a RJ Fellow, she interned with USF Professor Dr. Anna Dixon, focusing on capital defense appeals. "She gained a great deal of experience and did excellent work for the fellowship, work that materially advanced her training as well as the cause of justice," Dr. Dixon said. "This fellowship truly was a springboard for Katherine's professional career, and I look forward to watching her continue to make the world a more just place."

Despite the political environment, the TRHT continues to focus on its mission.

We have hosted 50 fellows in the past four years. Although the two state institutions of higher learning have formally withdrawn from our collaboration, we continue to attract students from these schools to serve in our fellowship program. "The work of the TRHT is invaluable and is needed now more than ever," said Gwendolyn Reese, Consulting, Inc., and president of the African American Heritage Association of St. Petersburg. "Getting beyond the chaos we are currently experiencing will require truth telling, healing and forgiving and people who are knowledgeable and courageous enough to guide us through the process. TRHT is preparing young people for this task."

STETSON'S CIVIL RIGHTS COURSE:

A Journey Towards Justice Through History

Each year Stetson Law School offers a unique summer course in civil rights that consists of 35 hours of class instruction followed by a week on the road travelling to Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia. The students fly into Memphis and we journey on a bus together through nine different cities in the South.

This course was launched in 2006 and was originally conceived by Law Professor Robert D. Bickel, an extraordinary educator who served as a member of the Stetson law faculty for thirty-eight years. He envisioned a "traveling classroom" where students would meet civil rights icons in the very locations where history was made. His belief in the power of experiential learning—especially in the context of constitutional law and civil rights— inspired a deeper understanding of justice and civic responsibility.

In 2013, Professor Judith Scully along with Professor Bickel co-created the Social Justice Advocacy (SJA) Concentration Program to provide students with a structured pathway for developing skills in civil rights and social justice lawyering. The SJA program integrates coursework, experiential learning, and community engagement, preparing graduates to advocate effectively for equity and systemic change, both inside and outside the courtroom. Our civil rights course is a hallmark experience for students interested in social justice advocacy. However, students do not need to be a part of the SJA program to register for this 5 credit summer course. The course is now taught by Professors Kristen Adams and Professor Scully, who also co-direct the SJA Program.

Stetson's Civil Rights Travel course faculty and students at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama (2024)

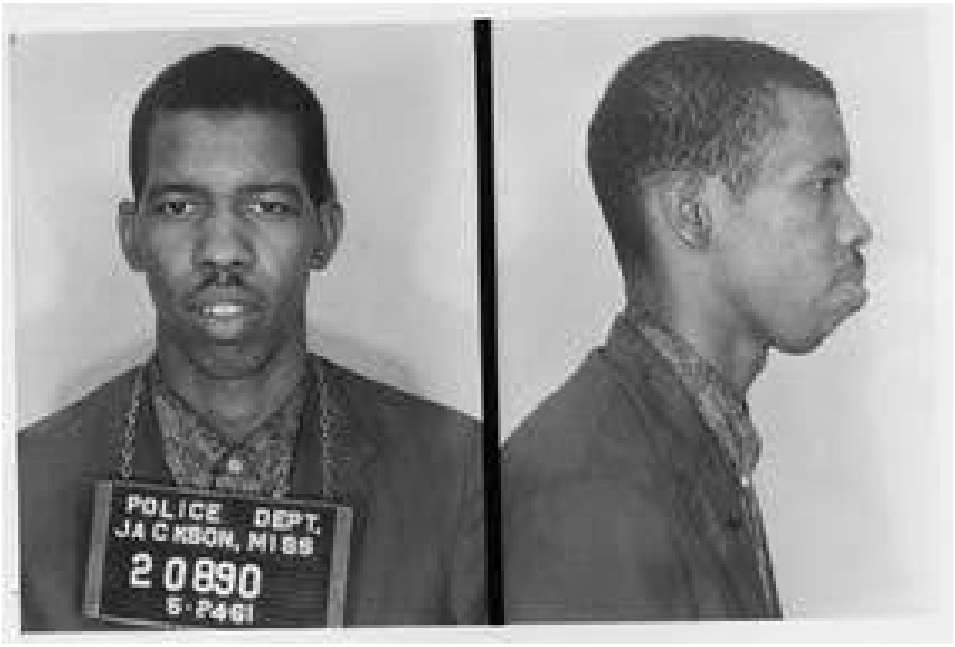
The travel portion of the class includes undergraduate students from the DeLand campus representing a variety of different disciplines and areas of interest. Some – but not all – of these students are interested in pursuing a career in law. Dr. Jeremy Posadas, the Hal S. Marchman Chair of Civic and Social Responsibility, whose work explores power, labor, autonomy, and systemic oppression based on class, gender, and race, together with Dr. Sam Houston, whose scholarship in the department of religious studies includes modern Islamic thought and comparative religious ethics, now design the travel portion of the course in partnership with Professors Adams and Scully.

While travelling, students visit a large number of historical sites and museums such as the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, the Equal Justice Initiative's Legacy Museum in Montgomery, and the National Center for Human and Civil Rights in Atlanta. These visits are not passive tours—they are immersive experiences that include conversations with civil rights veterans, reflections on case law, and emotional reckonings with the legacy of racial violence.

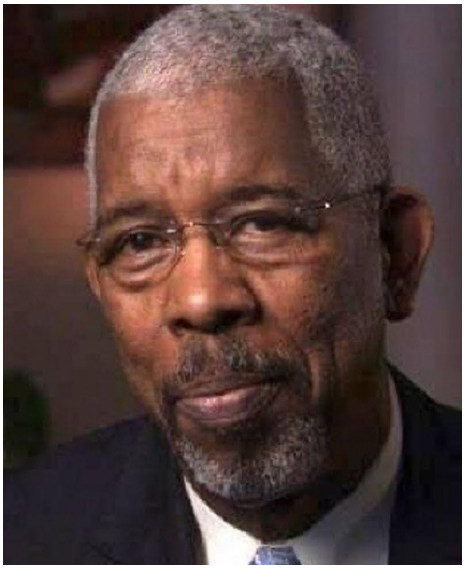
During both the classroom and travel portions of this class, students meet with attorneys and other community leaders who are currently engaged in civil rights and public interest work. It is through these conversations, that many of our students gain insights into their own future career goals and plans. Student Noah Peretz wrote, "This journey was not just about learning history, it was about feeling it." Student Mariah Knopp wrote, "As I head home, I carry with me not only historical knowledge, but also a deeper sense of responsibil-ity. Whether as a legal professional, a parent, or an everyday advocate, I have a role to play in pushing justice forward." The course is described by many stu-dents as "life-changing," a testament to its enduring impact.

Honoring the Civil Rights Veterans

At the heart of the Civil Rights Course are the veterans of the movement—individuals whose courage, resilience, and wisdom breathe life into the history that our students are studying. The veterans are not just guest speakers; they are mentors and moral guides. Their willingness to tell their stories helps our students to understand the significant emotional cost of being a freedom fighter. And, the encounters that our students have with these living legends instills in our students the inspiration they need to understand their role in fighting for freedom and civil rights. Several dozen veterans have shared their stories with us throughout the years, and each one is a treasured human who will not be forgotten.



Mr. Ernest "Rip" Patton, Freedom Rider



Mr. Ernest "Rip" Patton – For many years, starting in 2007, Mr. Patton was an essential and beloved part of our civil rights course. In 1960, Mr. Patton participated in the Nashville sit-ins that ultimately led to the desegregation of the city's lunch counters. Later, he was a Free-dom Rider[1] who was among the first to arrive in Jackson, Mississippi, where he was arrested and spent forty days at the notorious Parchman Prison.[2] During that time, he helped to keep the other Freedom Riders' spirits up by leading freedom songs in his beautiful baritone voice. For several years, Mr. Patton traveled with us and our students on the bus, sharing his history, singing freedom songs and narrating stories of other civil rights veterans. His stories, humor, and humility left indelible marks on countless students. Since his passing in 2021, the course continues to honor his memory.

Some of the veterans who have recently shared their experiences with us include the following:

Ms. Frankie Henry – Ms. Frankie Henry, who was a Nashville sit-in participant, described herself as becoming involved in the movement "by accident," when she encountered Diane Nash[3] right before she was about to board a bus to go home after class at Tennessee State University. She later found herself on the front lines of the Nashville sit-ins. She still bears the scars of the lit cigarette a white woman extinguished on her arm during the sit-ins. Her parents' home was attacked after her name was published in the paper, and her education was delayed for a decade after she was expelled for missing class, but she persevered, became a teacher, and now shares her insights with many audiences.

Ms. Kredelle Petway – Ms. Petway joined the movement as a result of her parents' activism – and especially that of her father, Reverend Matthew Petway. In 1961, Ms. Petway, together with her father and brother, participated in a Freedom Rider flight from Montgomery, Alabama to Jackson, Mississippi. She remembers an enormous police presence when they landed. She and her family members were arrested, charged with breach of the peace, and jailed. She later participated in civil rights protests in Tallahassee, Florida where she was attending college. In 1967, she applied for a federal job with the Internal Revenue Service. She initially faced difficulty when her arrest record was revealed but she was eventually hired by the IRS, and she became a mentor to other Black employees, helping them to move up through the ranks by ensuring they received proper training.

Dr. Sam Houston, Dr. Jeremy Posadas, Prof. Judith Scully, Professor Kristen Adams and Mr. Hezekiah Watkins (seated).

Mr. Hezekiah Watkins – Mr. Watkins was the youngest Freedom Rider, arrested at age 13 in 1961 after going down to the Greyhound bus station in Jackson planning merely to get a glimpse of the Freedom Riders there. His friend pushed him inside, and he was promptly mistaken for an "outside agitator," arrested, and incarcerated for a time on death row at Parchman Prison in Mississippi, unable to contact his family to let them know where he was until his release. He continued his activism for civil rights after his release, participated in 1964's Freedom Summer efforts to register Black voters, and was arrested more than one hundred times. For many years, Mr. Watkins has shared his stories with visitors to the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum.

Each of these individuals, along with many more, have contributed to our students personal growth and development. Their stories are woven into the course's fabric, reminding students that history is not distant—it is alive, and it demands engagement.

As student Marjorie Kammerlohr wrote, "Hearing the stories of the civil rights veterans, seeing the work that was done, that continues to be done every day, and the need that still exists, inspired me then--and inspires me still--to walk in the path left for me by the brave spirits who have gone before."

In a time when legislation seeks to erase the past and silence the present, this course affirms that history matters—and that justice begins with truth

Curriculum Evolution

Expanding the Map: Small Cities, Big Stories

Over the years, the Civil Rights Course has expanded to include a broader geographical scope that challenges students to rethink where civil rights battles were fought—and who fought them. We now include visits to cities and towns in the Mississippi Delta that played pivotal roles in the movement including **Sumner, Mississippi,** where we visit the courthouse where the Emmett Till trial took place and discuss the 2007 Resolution of Apology presented by the citizens of Tallahatchie County to Emmett Till's family. We also visit the hometown of voting rights and democracy champion, Fannie Lou Hamer in **Ruleville, Mississippi,** whose legacy is honored at a Memorial Garden.

These additions ensure that students learn that resistance and resilience flourished in small towns, rural communities, and places often overlooked in mainstream narratives.

We also visit many smaller, community-based museums and civil rights sites such as:

- The **Mound Bayou Museum,** which preserves the legacy of a once economically and socially thriving Black Mississippi community founded by formerly enslaved people.

- The **National Voting Rights Museum** in Selma, which centers the stories of lesser-known foot soldiers; and

- The **Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) Civil Rights Education Center** located on Jackson State's University campus, where our students learn about the collec-tive impact of several organizations including the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and a host of local Mississippi organizations that were instrumental in organizing the 1963 Freedom Vote, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and 1964's Freedom Summer.

These spaces offer a contrast to larger, well-funded institutions and prompt students to reflect on how resources and funding shape historical narratives.

Localizing the Movement: St. Petersburg's Civil Rights History

The classroom component of the course now includes the civil rights history of St. Petersburg, Florida, introducing our students to local civil rights struggles:

- Students learn about the Courageous Twelve, a group of Black police officers who challenged segregation within the St. Petersburg Police Department by filing suit in 1965 seeking to gain the full rights and authority of their white counterparts.[4]

- They visit the lynching memorial to John Evans, a powerful reminder of racial terror and the importance of public memory.[5]

- A walking tour of the Deuces[6] and the African American History Trail[7] introduces students to the cultural and economic legacy of St. Petersburg's Black community.

- Visits to the Carter G. Woodson African American History Museum and the Foundation for a Healthy St. Pete (including its "history wall") provide context for ongoing efforts to address structural racism and promote racial equity.

These local experiences help students understand that civil rights history is not just something to be studied—it is something to be lived, remembered, and acted upon in their own communities.

Reflective and Creative Engagement

The course encourages students to process their experiences through:

- **Listening to a curated "course playlist" of music** that inspired civil rights activists

- **Journaling that includes poetry, photography, and visual art,** and reflections on readings from the book Voices of a People's History of the United States as well as selected poems. Our journaling assignments include **interactive journaling prompts,** that guide students to:

  – Identify the lynching histories of counties they have lived in and explore personal connections to the lynching memorials.

  – Examine the role of public art in creating historical narratives.

  – Consider the impact of museum funding on storytelling.

  – Connect historical injustices to present-day movements.

  – Seek hope and resilience in the face of painful truths.

As student JC Pritchett wrote, *"Art adds another layer to the movement. Physical mediums and songs allow for a level of emotion and expression that is often stifled by the rigidness of written words. Some things truly have to be felt."*

The course's emphasis on community museums, oral histories, and public art—especially in underfunded spaces—underscores the importance of storytelling as resistance. Students are encouraged to ask: Who controls the narrative? Whose stories are told, and whose are

The Impact on Students

Students enter the Civil Rights Course with curiosity and leave with a commitment to be more courageous. They begin to see themselves not just as learners, but as inheritors of a legacy and stewards of justice.

The course also fosters a sense of responsibility. Student Zenea Johnson wrote, *"I found myself analyzing my own duties in ensuring that not only do we continue to acknowledge the path paved from the literal blood, sweat,nd tears of the Civil Rights Era Foot Soldiers, but that I play my part in making sure OUR history is not erased."*

The course's impact is visible in the students' journals that are filled with raw emotion, thoughtful analysis, and creative expression that often includes poems, sketches, and photographs.

The course inspires students and equips them not only with knowledge, but with purpose.

Gratitude For Sustaining the Civil Rights Course

Stetson Civil Rights Course thrives because of the generosity and vision of individuals and organizations who believe in the power of experiential education and the importance of preserving civil rights history. Their support has enabled students to walk in the footsteps of history, engage with civil rights veterans, and reflect deeply on justice and advocacy. We are especially grateful to:

Wil Florin and Tommy Roebig, Partners in the law firm Florin|Roebig. Wil and Tommy are both distinguished alumni of Stetson University College of Law. Their firm's steadfast support of the Civil Rights Travel Course, which helps to cover the students' travel costs and the honoraria for our speakers, reflects their deep commitment to justice and legal education.

Tammy Briant, a graduate of Stetson Law and former Director of Student Affairs. Tammy Briant helped shape the Civil Rights Travel Course alongside Professor Robert Bickel, first as an administrative assistant and then as an adjunct professor. Together with her husband, Kareem Spratling, a respected public finance attorney and Managing Shareholder at Bryant Miller Olive's Tampa office. Tammy established a scholarship supporting the Travel Course.

The Van Gundy Family, The Van Gundy Civil Rights Endowment honors the legacy of a family deeply committed to justice and education and the meaningful participation of their daughter Ali Van Gundy, who found this course so meaningful that she participated twice. The Van Gundy family's support helps ensure that students can engage with civil rights history in meaningful and transformative ways.

Teaching Civil Rights in an Anti-History Era

In an era marked by increasing resistance to historical truth, equity, and inclusion, the Civil Rights Travel Course stands as a bold act of educational commitment and inquiry. It invites students to walk the streets where blood was shed for justice, to listen to the voices of those who lived through brutality and triumph, and to reflect deeply on the role of law in both oppression and liberation.

Students are asked to consider not only landmark cases and historical events, but to also examine the structural racism embedded in urban renewal projects, the racial disparities in mass incarceration, and the role of artists and activists in shaping public memory. The course challenges students to confront uncomfortable truths and to seek hope amid the pain.

As student Haven Flaherty wrote, *"I walked away from this trip and course feeling a lot more hopeful than when I came in. The civil rights movement was and is a longstanding ight for equality and justice that has never ended and probably will not end any time soon."*

In a time when legislation seeks to erase the past and silence the present, this course affirms that history mat-ters —and that justice begins with truth.

Expanding the Vision

As the Civil Rights Travel Course continues to evolve, so too does its vision.

In recent years, faculty have begun discussing ways to include community members in the travel experience. The idea is simple but profound: to create a shared space where students, educators, and local residents can learn together, reflect together, and build relationships rooted in justice and remembrance. The Woodson African American Museum of Florida has expressed interest in partnering with the course, offering a model for how institutions can collaborate to deepen public understanding of civil rights history.

If this expansion occurs, it will reflect a belief that civil rights education should not be confined to academic settings, but should instead be accessible, communal, and rooted in rich dialogue, broad perspectives, and a deeper sense of collective responsibility.

A Call to Action

As we look to the future, we invite others to join us in sustaining and expanding this work. With additional support, we hope to:

- Include community members in future travel cohorts.
- Partner with institutions like the Woodson African American Museum of Florida.
- Expand our curriculum to continue to address emerging civil rights issues and to include shorter civil rights learning journeys to additional destinations.
- Provide more scholarship support to ensure that no student is excluded due to financial barriers.
- Continue to honor and compensate civil rights veterans who share their stories with our students.

If you are interested in supporting the Civil Rights Travel Course—whether through financial contributions, partnerships, or advocacy—we welcome your involvement. Together, we can ensure that this vital work continues and grows.

FOOTNOTES

1. Freedom Rides began in May 1961 following the Supreme Court's decision in Boynton v. Virginia, which desegregated interstate travel facilities. These rides on interstate transportation sought to challenge local and state statutes regarding segregation and force the federal government to enforce its own laws. Freedom Riders faced horrendous, violent abuse, imprisonment, and attempted murder for their participation in these rides. The Freedom Riders invigorated the Civil Rights movement and created a crisis, both constitutionally and morally for American government. See Raymond Arsenault, Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice (Oxford Univ. Press 2006).

2. Parchman Prison is a penitentiary in Parchman, Mississippi that began operation in 1905 and was modeled after a traditional southern plantation. It was composed of 3 working farms, one for white men, one for women, and a 20,000-acre cotton plantation for black prisoners. The prisoners, often arrested for fabricated or minor offenses, experienced beatings, whippings, starvation, deplorable living conditions, and murder at the hands of guards. It has earned a reputation as one of the most dangerous prisons in the Western Hemisphere. The prison remains active today, though not as a working plantation. See Han-nah Grabenstein, Inside Mississippi's Notorious Parchman Prison, PBS NewsHour (Jan. 29, 2018), https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/inside-mississippis-notorious-parchman-prison

3. Diane Nash was a founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and was a pivotal organizer and advocate for various civil rights protests from the Freedom Rides to the Selma to Montgomery March to the March on Washington. See Lucia Cheng, Meet Diane Nash, the Civil Rights Icon Awarded the U.S.' Highest Civilian Honor, Smithsonian Mag. (July 7, 2022), https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/diane-nash-presidential-medal-freedom-civil-rights-180980380/

4. Bloody Sunday occurred on March 7, 1965 in Selma, Alabama. Marchers peacefully protesting voting and civil rights abuses in the South attempted to march from Selma to Montgomery and, upon crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge, were met with tear gas and severe beatings from Alabama law enforcement. More than 15 marchers were hospitalized due to their injuries, including Congressman John Lewis. See Christopher Klein, How Selma's 'Bloody Sunday' Became a Turning Point in the Civil Rights Movement, History.com (May 28, 2025), https://www.history.com/articles/selma-bloody-sunday-attack-civil-rights-movement

5. Prior to the Courageous 12's lawsuit, black police officers were not allowed to arrest white people or work in predominantly white neighborhoods. See St. Pete's 'Courageous 12': Black Officers Who Changed Policing, WTSP.com (Oct. 8, 2025), https://www.wtsp.com/article/news/local/black-history/st-pete-police-courageous-12/67-076db427-28e3-4be7-910c-0bfb1d8d4c75

6. Pinellas Remembers is a local organiza-tion dedicated to advocating for and educating about the truth of racial terror lynching in Pinellas County, FL. In 2021, the Equal Justice Initiative partnered with Pinellas Remembers to create and unveil a monument commemorating the lynching of John Evans. See About, Pinellas Remembers, https://www.pinellasremembers.org/about.

7. The area at and around 22nd Street South and 9th Ave South is nicknamed "the Deuces" as a nod to the 2 twos in 22nd Street. The once-segregated area served as a downtown hub for the African American community and other marginalized groups throughout the 1900s with over 100 thriving businesses, professional spaces, entertainment spaces, and stores. See Jon Wilson, African- American History in St. Petersburg's Deuces Neighborhood, Visit Florida, https://www.visitflorida.com/travel-ideas/articles/st-petersburg-african-american-deuces-neighborhood/

8. The African American Heritage Trail is a walking trail through the Deuces neighborhood that honors and depicts the first century of "Black life, culture and contribution in the city of St. Petersburg." See Heritage Trail, African Am. Heritage Ass'n of St. Petersburg, https://www.afamheritag-estpete.com/heritage-trail.

A Tribute to the Ancestors who have Influenced the Stetson Civil Rights Course

Sankofa is a Ghanian word that embodies the idea that learning from the past is essential for making decisions in the present and the future. It emphasizes the importance of reflecting on history and honoring the ancestors who paved the way for us. In this tradition, we wish to recognize some of the civil rights veterans who have now joined the ancestors and whose contributions continue to reverberate in the work we do in the Stetson Civil Rights course. These brave souls who have now taken rest include:

Ms. Patricia Jenkins-Armstrong – Ms. Jenkins-Armstrong, who passed away in 2023, was a member of the Nashville youth movement and the 1961 Freedom Rides.[1] She was on the first bus to reach Montgomery on May 21, where the group was subjected to a vicious attack by a white mob. Later that night, the group, some of whom were seriously injured, met at a mass meeting at Rev. Ralph Abernathy's First Baptist Church. While Dr. King spoke, another white mob attacked the church and its parishioners. The packed church remained under siege until the parishioners and Freedom Riders were evacuated by the Alabama National Guard, in the presence of federal Marshalls, during the pre-dawn hours of May 22. Ms. Armstrong was later arrested on May 25 in Montgomery in a protest led by Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth.

Dr. Catherine Burks-Brooks- Dr. Brooks was one of the initial 13 Freedom Riders in 1961 on a Greyhound bus from Nashville, Tennessee to Jackson, Mississippi. She was arrested and imprisoned in Parchman Prison at 21 years old and expelled from Tennessee State University. Throughout her life, she empowered youth, working as a teacher and a social worker.

https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/21/us/catherine-burks-brooks-dead.html

Mr. King Hollands – Mr. Hollands, who joined the ancestors in 2023, was one of the first Black students to integrate Father Ryan High School in Nashville in 1954, after the Supreme Court's decision that same year in Brown v. Board of Education. Later, as a college junior studying physics at Fisk University, he participated in the 1960 Nashville sit-ins. He spent two weeks in jail in February of that year after being arrested for sitting at the lunch counter of Woolworth's in downtown Nashville A life-long community leader and connector of people, for decades he was actively involved in a Nashville-based civil rights veterans of the movement who met regularly.

https://wpln.org/post/episodes/celebrating-civil-rights-activist-and-beloved-nashville-native-king-hollands/

Judge Frank Johnson- Judge Johnson was a federal judge from 1955-1979 who issued many landmark rulings that empowered the civil rights movement. His rulings ordered black people to be on voting rolls, desegregated Alabama public schools, favorably ended the Montgomery Bus Boycott, ended segregation in public libraries, allowed Freedom Riders to travel, and ended discrimination in bus terminals among many other feats. Because of these rulings, Judge Johnson faced retaliation and harassment from the Ku Klux Klan and other officials. His passion for justice and social issues paved the way for the civil rights movement to continue onward.

Mr. Kwame Lillard- Mr. Lillard was a Freedom Rider, an organizer of and participant in the Nashville lunch counter sit-ins, former Metro Councilmember, and a lifelong civil rights activist and freedom fighter. As a 19 year old student at Tennessee State University, Mr. Lillard participated in his first sit-in in Nashville and was later arrested for his participation. He was a key coordinator in the Freedom Rides in 1961. One night he courageously drove from Nashville to Alabama to rescue Freedom Riders dropped off in Klan territory. He dedicated his life to working in social activism and building Black institutions, bringing. Kwanzaa and the African American Cultural Street Festival to Nashville.

https://www.nashvillescene.com/news/pithinthewind/nashville-civil-rights-leader-and-freedom-rider-kwame-lillard-dies-at-81/article_9216001f-6167-5fb1-894c-564a8ee833df.htm

Mr. George Sailie – Mr. Sailie, who passed away in 2024, marched for voting rights on what became known as Bloody Sunday.[8] Our students were fortunate to meet Mr. Sailie as he was waiting one morning in Selma by the Edmund Pettus Bridge, as he often did, to share his story with passersby. We had the opportunity to connect with him immediately before we participated in our own reflective march over the bridge to honor the sacrifice of those who participated in the Bloody Sunday march. Mr. Sailie, who still bore the scars on his head from the beatings he endured that day, was honored in Selma as the oldest surviving foot soldier. To honor his memory, his flag-draped coffin was carried over the Edmund Pettus Bridge by a horse-drawn carriage before his burial.

Mr. John Seigenthaler – Mr. Seigenthaler was a journalist and First Amendment advocate who served as chief negotiator for Attorney General Robert Kennedy during the Freedom Rides. He led coverage of the civil rights movement during a time when most Southern newspapers refused to cover those stories. He was attacked and hospitalized while aiding Freedom Riders in Montgomery. Before Mr. Seigenthaler passed away in 2014, his First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University in Nashville was a regular stop for our students during the Travel Course.

https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/12/john-seigenthaler-obit-113859/

"You cannot change any society unless you take responsibility for it, unless you see yourself as belonging to it and responsible for changing it."

– Grace Lee Boggs

Biography
JANICE WESLEY KELSEY

After hearing Rev. James Bevel speak directly to high school students, Janice Kelsey

became involved in the Civil Rights Movement in Birmingham, Alabama at the age of 16. On May 2, 1963, she participated in the first mass march in the "children's campaign." She was arrested, put in the "paddy wagon," and jailed with other children in dormitories at the fairgrounds which, ironically, was otherwise inaccessible to them except on very limited dates and times.

Ms. Kelsey became a teacher in 1968, just 5 years after the Birmingham Children's Crusade. She always wanted to be an educator after being inspired by her aunt who was a teacher. As she learned more about life and the communities she lived in, her aspirations to work with youth were only strengthened. Ms. Kelsey dedicated more than 30 years to the education system as a teacher, a counselor, and a principal.

She earned a Masters and Educational Specialist Degrees in Counseling from the University of Alabama. She has served as an independent educational consultant, working with the African American Studies program at University of Alabama, the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, and United Way of Central Alabama.

I Woke Up With My Mind on Freedom

Remarks by Ms Janice Wesley Kelsey on March 25,2025 at Stetson Law School.

Introduction

Birmingham, Alabama was known for having unbending segregation laws. The city was given the nickname "Bombingham" because of the many unsolved bombings of homes and churches during the 1960's. The world watched in horror as thousands of children in Birmingham, the youngest being around eight years old, were met with police brutality. The year was 1963. On May 2nd, 3rd, and 4th, a children's crusade that had been organized by Rev. James Bevel under the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. took place in Birmingham.

The children were repelled with high powered firehoses that sheared hair and clothing. They were risking their lives walking into the path of vicious German Shepherd police dogs. The children sang songs of freedom and liberation. Evidence of the city's acts of violence and brutality against harmless children, who had committed no crimes, reached Europe, Asia, and several other parts of the world. Birmingham had forced the United States government to take action. Miss Janice Wesley Kelsey, one of the children demonstrators in 1963 was arrested at the age of sixteen.

Ms. Janice Kelsey & Stetson University student Eduardo de Souza Machado (B.A. 2026)

MS. KELSEY: In the Spring of the year 1963, I was in the eleventh grade and I thought all was well in my world. I was interested in dancing and dating and being popular, and Civil Rights was not on my radar, but I had a girlfriend whose mother and sister attended the mass meetings that were held at different churches on Monday nights. My girlfriend went to these meetings with her mom. And she would come to school and tell me about these mass meetings. And this sparked my interest. She talked about the crowds and that it would be standing room only, and I liked being in crowds. So, I wanted to go. She talked about the music, and she said that everybody in that choir had a beautiful voice and people were singing and clapping. And I liked music. She talked about these preachers who would attend these meetings, Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. And I had heard of their names but I didn't know much about them, and what she said was they dressed really well, three-piece suits and alligator shoes. And I wanted to see that. And finally, she said, "A lot of cute boys come to these meetings." Well when I heard that I had to go.

So I got permission from my mom to attend my first mass meeting. It was all of what my girlfriend had described, and I was glad to be in the place. Well, in the midst of the meeting, Reverend James Bevel invited all of the teenagers to meet him in the church's fellowship area. And when we got there, he tried to identify who was present by calling our school names. And we all had so much school pride. He would call our school names, and we would cheer. After he assessed who was present, he started to ask some questions, and one of the questions he asked: "Are any of you guys taking typing?" I know they're calling it "keyboarding" now, but it was "typing" then, and I raised my hand because I was a good typist. And he asked, "Okay, you take typing, How many electronic typewriters do you have at your school?" And I said, "We have one, but I get to type on it because I'm a good typist." He said, "Do you know how many typewriters they have at Phillips High School?" Phillips was a school for white kids so I'd never been there. He said, "They have three rooms of electric typewriters. They don't even practice on the things you have at your school." That was my first reality check that maybe something was wrong with this scenario.

He didn't stop there. He asked about the football teams. My brother was with me and he was on the football team at our school. He asked, "Hey, have you ever wondered why your helmets are always blue and white when you get them but your school colors are green and gray?" My brother said, "We always paint them the right colors and so when it's time to play, we're ready." He said, "Well, why do they come in the wrong colors?" We didn't know the answer to that. Rev. Bevel said, "It's because you are getting the old equipment when Ramsey (the white high school) gets new equipment." I didn't think that was fair.

But Bevel was on a roll, he didn't just talk about me and my school, he shared a lot of things. He asked, "Have any of you ever eaten at a restaurant downtown?" And there was a restaurant called J.J. Newberry's, it was a large five-and-ten store, that's

what we called them. They had a large lunch counter on the first floor with swivel seats and leather booths, but blacks could not sit or eat in that area. Black people had to go up on the fourth floor and eat at a lunch counter. The lunch counter didn't have any chairs, but you could stand up and buy a hot dog and coke for about 27 cents, and I had done that before. He asked, "Okay, you pay 27 cents for yours, how much do you think the people pay who get to sit down and eat?" I thought, "Surely they pay a dollar." He said, "No, they pay the same thing you pay." I thought, "That's not fair."

Rev. Bevel went on and on, giving examples of inequities, and he said, "If you want to do something about this, you can." He said, "Your parents can't, because if your parents get involved in this, they're going to jail. If they go to jail, there's nobody to take care of you, and you really don't have anything to lose because you're getting a second-class education." And that really hurt. I had so much school pride, I thought our school was the best school. Our teachers were so dedicated and interested in us and pushing us, and for him to say that it was second class, it brought a feeling in me that I really did want to do something about it.

So I started attending student nonviolent workshops. In these workshops we saw filmstrips of demonstrations that had occurred in other places. I saw people being spit on, being hit, being snatched off of the lunch counter stools. And Rev. Bevel said, "If you get involved in this movement, some of that might happen to you, but you cannot fight back – this is a nonviolent movement." Not everyone could abide by this philosophy. So some people could not march because they felt like if somebody hit or spit on them they were going to react." So Rev. Bevel would give them something else to do. "You can make a poster that the other kids can carry", he said. And, he told us that we were going to participate in a march that was going to take place the first Thursday in May -- May 2, 1963.

"So, I waited until the bell rang, and I walked out of the school with hundreds of other students. We walked to the downtown church called the 16th Street Baptist Church, and people were everywhere in the street, in the park. They were everywhere, and there were police everywhere, too."

JANICE KELSEY

I remember I woke up that morning with my mind on freedom. I was so excited about what was going to happen. Bevel had told us, "If you get out here and march, you're probably going to jail." That didn't bother me. He said, "Pack your purses. You'll need a toothbrush and a change of underwear. You know, get ready because you're going to be there overnight." I packed my bags. I did not discuss my plans with my mother, but she picked up on something. She knew something was going on, and when I was ready to leave for school, she cautioned me, "Janice, I'm sending you to school. Don't you go anywhere and get yourself in any trouble. I don't have any money to get you out of jail." I said, "Yes, ma'am." That's what she needed to hear, and actually I was going to school, I just wasn't going to stay there.

So I went to my first period class. I asked my teacher, "Suppose some kids walked out of your class today, are they going to fail?" And she said, "If everybody walks, there's nobody to fail." I thought, "They're not going to do anything to us." That gave me the encouragement that I needed.

So, I waited until the bell rang, and I walked out of the school with hundreds of other students. We walked to the downtown church called the 16th Street Baptist Church, and people were everywhere in the street, in the park. They were everywhere, and there were police everywhere, too. Reverend Bevel and one of his colleagues called us to come into the sanctuary and they said some prayers. We sang some songs. And then we lined up in pairs. We walked out of that church singing, "We Shall Overcome."

A monument commemorates the 1963 bombing of 16th St. Baptist Church and the deaths of four children in Birmingham, Alabama.

We didn't' get very far before police officers stopped us. The officer who stopped us was carrying a baton, he was wearing a gun, and he said we were in violation of a city ordinance. He said, "You cannot parade without a permit. Get out of this line and nothing's gonna happen, but if you stay in this line, you're going to jail." Well, I got in line to go to jail but I paused because I wasn't accustomed to disobeying adults, especially an adult who had a stick and a gun, but somebody started singing, "We Are Not Afraid." That gave me enough courage to stay in that line and to be arrested. I had decided previously that when it was time to be arrested, I would lie about my age. Actually I was sixteen but my girlfriend was fifteen (she hadn't had her birthday) and I wanted to go to the same jail that she was in. So, when the officer who arrested us asked for our name and our age, I told him I was fifteen, and so I was arrested and went to the family court.

The family court at that time was a house (that's what it looked like to me) and there were so many people, so many kids being arrested, there wasn't any place to sit. We were standing around the walls and bumping into each other and all that, and asking, "What school are you from?" And it was like a badge of honor. Well, it got so crowded they called for school buses. In Birmingham city schools, we didn't have school buses, if you wanted to ride a bus you had to pay a dime -- it was a city bus and you had to pay to ride it so if I had a dime, I wasn't going to give it to the city bus, I was going to use that for ice cream and cookies. So I had not ridden on the bus going to school, but that day they called for buses to come and pick us up from the family court.

The buses carried us from the family court to the county jail, and county jail is an adult jail, a real jail. Before leaving for the march, we were told, "Don't tell them who your parents were or where they worked because they could lose their jobs, only tell them your name and your age," so that was all we would say. At the county jail, they took our mugshots and fingerprints. We went upstairs to the jail cells, but there were so many of us in a cell, we had to sit on the floor. We sat close to each other and we sang fwreedom songs. I spent the night in the county jail. And the next day, the demonstrations continued.

The next day, that Friday, more people were arrested, more people came into the county jail, and we had a Commissioner of Public Safety, his name was Eugene Bull Connor. He was kind of ignorant. They say he had a third-grade education but he was running for office again and he thought he needed to do something

"It wasn't so much that we were surprised about a bomb, Birmingham was nicknamed "Bombingham" and that was because on a fairly frequent basis we heard somebody's house was being bombed... And so, the surprise wasn't that the church would be bombed, but no one expected a church to be bombed on a Sunday morning."

JANICE KELSEY

to stop these demonstrations. So he called for the firemen to come to the park and to use the water hoses to disperse the crowd. And they weren't' like sprinklers that you would water your grass with. No, these were high powered water hoses, some of them were so intense that somebody had hair sheared off their head. It tore blouses, it knocked people down.

On the other side of the street, there was a large park. Police were there with German Shepherd dogs that were trained to attack. That's exactly what they did, they were snatching clothes off people, and students were running from the dogs. National television captured some of those scenes, and it was shown on the evening news. Government officials were embarrassed. And the demonstrations continued for another week.

Finally, the retailers in downtown Birmingham wanted to come to the table and meet with Dr. King and Reverend Shuttlesworth because they were losing money. Black folks were boycotting downtown, so nobody was shopping. White folks were afraid to go downtown because there were so many black folks down there. So the businessmen met, and the civil rights leaders made demands. "First of all, we want you to remove the signs." There were signs on the water fountains, "white" and "colored." There were signs on the restrooms, "white" and "colored." There were signs on the lunch counters. And the retailers agreed with the requests that were being made. I thought we had overcome.

I tried to go back to school, but I had been expelled because I had been arrested. One of the ministers who worked with Dr. King, his name was Calvin Woods, he had three daughters who had also been arrested and one of them was eight years old. So he petitioned the court to let us all be reinstated. The Birmingham court said "No." Well, he petitioned to the Federal District Court in Atlanta, and that judge overruled the local court and said we could be reinstated and without penalty. So I was able to go back to school before the school year ended in May. I thought, "Wow, we really did overcome."

I remember on television in June, the President, John F. Kennedy, came on the air and congratulated the bravery of the children in the march and he criticized how we had been handled by the local officials. I felt good about that. In August of that year, Dr. King organized this mass demonstration where people went to Washington D.C., to the March on Washington. King gave a famous speech, there were buses that came from all over the country to that demonstration. I thought, "Wow, we are really in it now."

September came. And one of my girlfriends integrated at an all-white school. The kids, the white kids protested. They called her names. Nobody wanted to sit with her in class. She went through a lot of things, but she was brave. She withstood it.

But the devastating thing that happened that year happened on Sunday, September 15. I was at my church. I didn't go to the 16th Street Baptist Church, but the pastor at my church interrupted a speaker who was giving a Bible lesson and he said, "I'm going to dismiss church. Go home and pray. I've been informed that 16th Street Baptist Church has been bombed."And the church went up in big surprise, "Oh no, no, no!" It wasn't so much that we were surprised about a bomb, Birmingham was nicknamed "Bombingham" and that was because on a fairly frequent basis we heard somebody's house was being bombed, dynamite was being thrown in the yard of the home of a preacher or really just about anybody. And so, the surprise wasn't that the church would be bombed, but no one expected a church to be bombed on a Sunday morning.

And then we went home. The television news that morning interrupted the regular television shows and the news anchor led with, "Four little girls were killed in Birmingham in a bombing at 16th Street Baptist Church." That was so heartbreaking for me. They started to identify who those girls were. One of them was Denise McNair, she was about eleven years old. Her father was our milkman, he used to bring milk and juice to our home. Another girl, Carol Robinson, was fourteen. Her

dad was my band teacher in the eighth grade and her mom taught at the same school where my older sister taught.

Cynthia Wesley was also killed that day. Wesley was my last name, and there were nine of us, and all of us had gone to the same school that Cynthia went to. In fact, when Cynthia came to my school as a ninth-grader, I was an eleventh-grader. I was charged with teaching her the ropes: who the mean teachers were, where to hang out at lunch, where did the cute boys hang out. I remember that Friday we hugged and said, "See you on Monday." When they said Cynthia Wesley was among those, I lost it because I thought it was a mistake. She did not leave school. In fact, none of those who were killed left school that day for the march. I thought, "They got the wrong Wesley girl." And so, I lived for a number of years in fear that they would come back and get the right Wesley girl. Me.

It took about 25 years, before someone was prosecuted for the crimes that were done.[1] My understanding is it was known who did it, but they did not bring them to trial for several years. I was encouraged when it finally happened. Doug Jones was the prosecutor who was successful in getting a conviction.

Many years after the Children's March, one of my sister's co-workers who was also a teacher, asked me to come to her school and talk to her students, her twelfth-graders. At that time I was a high school counselor. And I said, "I'll come. What do you want me to talk about – how to get into college? How to take the ACT? What do you want me to discuss?" She said, "I want you to talk about Civil Rights." I had not spoken those words in years. I said, "I don't know anything about Civil Rights. I was a biology major." She said, "Talk about the movement, talk about your arrest." And she gave me a book, and that book had a picture of me sitting on the floor after they transferred us from the county jail to the Alabama state fairgrounds.

And I remembered when I saw that picture, an author from some book publishing company had come into the area to interview the students who had been arrested, and I remembered he asked me, "How do you feel about being in jail?" And there was a commercial on television about Carnation milk, and the commercial said, "Carnation cows are contented, and when he asked me that question, my answer was, "I'm as contented as a Carnation cow." He took my picture. I had never seen that picture until that time. I had not brought that sentence back to my mind anymore, and when I saw the photo I cried. I could not get it together to talk about it, because for me it meant so much pain to have lost people who had done nothing wrong. None of the girls who were killed at the 16th Street Baptists Church had participated in the demonstrations, but I had, and so I think I had survivor's guilt, and I didn't want to talk about it. I wouldn't talk about it.

But many years later, after I retired from the school system, I went to work at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute coordinating a project for kids who were out of school. And there was another teacher there who had a lot of social studies teachers in a workshop, and she came to me and she said,
"Janice, I heard that you were arrested as a teenager." I said, "Yeah." She said, "I want you to share your story with these teachers." I said, "What do you want me to tell them, I went to jail?" She said "Yeah, talk about it."
I said, "Okay." I went in and tried to talk. I was flooded with tears but I got through it, and I got letters back from the teachers. They wanted me to come and visit their schools, they wanted to know about it, and I was just amazed at the response that people wanted to know what happened. I was amazed that they cared.

And the reason I speak publicly now is that if we don't know what it took to get to where we are, we're likely to repeat this history. And I don't want my children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren repeating some of the history that I lived. And looking at things now, I'm concerned, so I tell my story in hopes that it will made a difference to some of you.

FOOTNOTES

1. On the morning of September 15, 1963, a group of Ku Klux Klan members triggered a dynamite bomb beneath the steps of the 16th Street Baptist church, murdering Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Carol Denise McNair and injuring more than 20 church-goers. While the FBI knew the identities of the perpetrators, the files of evidence from the investigation were sealed under FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover's leadership. Robert Chambliss was convicted in 1977 without the evidence from the FBI's classified file. After the government declassified the file, Doug Jones, the U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Alabama, successfully prosecuted Thomas Edwin Blanton Jr. and Bobby Frank Cherry; Herman Frank Cash died before he could be prosecuted. Robert Chambliss, Thomas Edwin Blanton Jr., and Bobby Frank Cherry were sentenced to life in prison. See Becky Little, How Doug Jones Brought KKK Church Bombers to Justice, HISTORY (Dec. 13, 2017), https://www. history.com/articles/how-doug-jones-brought-kkk-church-bombers-to-justice.

QUESTION & ANSWER SESSION

Q: How did you come to write your book, "I Woke Up With My Mind on Freedom?"

MS. KELSEY: I had been approached by several people. I was an educator, a teacher, a counselor, a principal, and as people learned about my experience, they would ask, "Well, are you going to write about it?" I said, "I don't have that much to say to write a book, and one teacher in particular (the one who invited me to speak to her group at the Civil Rights Institute), she said, "I'm going to give you somebody's name, and I'm going to have him to call you." And he did call and talk to me and he asked me some questions, and I answered questions and he recorded what I was saying and he would send me back a written account of what the recording was. And I agreed, "Well, yeah, we'll go and put it together and publish it." So that's how it came about.

Q: What was the conversation like in your home about the Civil Rights Movement when you were a teenager?

MS. KELSEY: It was sheltered. My parents did not allow us to be a part of their adult conversations. I heard about little things but it was not a point of discussion in our home. My mom was somewhat of an activist in her own right in that she was the secretary of the Civic League in our community, and they petitioned the courts to get people registered to vote. But she didn't want her children to be involved because she was afraid of the consequences, so we didn't talk about it at home. We did not talk about what it was and what it would entail. That was a sheltered conversation.

Q: You indicated that your mom told you when you went to school on May 3, 1963 not to be arrested. What happened when you were arrested? Did your parents lose their jobs or were there any repercussions?"

MS. KELSEY: Well, I'm going to start with: I can't quote my mom in here because what she had to say were not Sunday school words. She got me out on that Sunday. I spent three nights in jail. She had been trying to find me. They had kids in jails all around the city, and she knew I was in jail but she didn't know where. So when she finally found out where I was being held, she and my dad came and got me out. She had some pretty choice words for me. And I could not go back to school because I had been expelled. And I also could not go outside because she didn't trust me to be on my own. And most of my friends were in jail too, so I stayed in, under a lot of pressure.

My parents did not lose their jobs because my mom at that point was not working. My dad worked for U.S. Steel so there weren't any repercussions on his job. I know he didn't tell anybody that he had a daughter in jail, and a son too – my brother went to jail as well.

Q: Thank you for your activism. You're an inspiration and hope for all of usWhat advice or potential encouragement would you give young people and student protesters staring down the barrel of a current government administration actively suppressing our rights?

MS. KELSEY: First of all, you have to know and appreciate your history and understand what it took for us to get to where we are, and then you will recognize the attempts to turn back the hands of time now.

I would encourage young people to first of all to investigate what's going on. Read and talk to other people. Think for yourself.

I would encourage young people to get involved. Read and listen and know what's going on before you get wrapped up in something you can't unwrap.

We have some folks in high places that really would like to undo some of the gains that were made in the Sixties and Seventies, and a lot of us have benefited by those gains, not just black people but women in general. It's a pretty strong force out there trying to reverse some of the things that were designed for us to achieve equality. And if we don't know the history, we don't know how to react to what is happening now. So I would suggest that you be mindful listeners of what's going on and evaluate who's saying what because you might not want them to stay in office, and my thought is they don't plan to leave. And it's going to take a lot of organizing to save our democracy. I don't know what it's going to look like.

Q: What would you advise law students to do if they want to be civically engaged?

MS. KELSEY: They can start in their own communities to see what's going on and get involved, attend some of the meetings, meet with the leaders in the community to find out exactly what's going on. Find out where are the missteps,and figure out ways that it can be addressed. And especially lawyers who know what the Constitution says, they know what the Bill of Rights provided, so they would be great resources for young people in knowing what could be done, what paths are available, and where to go with it. I would think a law student would be in an excellent position to be an activist because they've studied the law and they know the limitations and expansiveness of the law, and they know the procedures to get involved in getting a law changed if it needs to be.

Learn all you can while you're in law school because you're going to be challenged and you need to know what paths are available. I don't know what all the paths are that are available to resolve some of the civil rights issues that are facing us today, but you are academically inclined, you're intelligent. So go and do your research and find out what laws are being violated and see what paths have been taken and see what path you can fit in to make this right.

Biography
DR. SYBIL JORDAN HAMPTON

Sybil Jordan Hampton is a life-long educator and social justice foot soldier. Prior to retiring in

2006, Dr. Hampton served as President of the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation (Little Rock, Arkansas) and Contributions Manager of Education and Culture at the GTE Corporate Founda-tion (Stamford, Connecticut). Twenty-three years of her career were spent in academic ad-ministrative positions at Iona College (New Rochelle, NY), the University of Wisconsin (Madi-son, Wisconsin) and Southwest-ern University (Georgetown, Texas).

After completing an undergraduate degree in English Literature at Earlham College (Richmond, Indiana), she earned a Masters of Science in Teaching (the University of Chicago), a Masters of Education and a Doctorate in Higher Education at Columbia University's Teachers College (New York, New York). Southwestern University awarded her the degree of Doctor of Humane Letters (honoris causa).

She has received numerous honors and awards for her work. Following retirement Dr. Hampton served as Interim General Manager of the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra. She continues to work as a consultant and public speaker focusing on issues related to economic, educational and social justice, governance, strategic visioning and planning, as well as academic advising and student developmental support services.

Remarks by DR. SYBIL JORDAN HAMPTON

Reflections on Racial Integration of Schools & The Road Ahead

The Thirteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution may have legally ended slavery in 1865, but the end of slavery did not bring "freedom" for Black people in the United States. In fact, the struggle for civil rights and equality under the law continues well into today's 21st century.

The lack of "freedom" historically experienced by Black Americans is often encapsulated by referencing Jim Crow laws that mandated racial segregation and discrimination in most aspects of public life. Jim Crow laws locked Black Americans out of voting, education, housing, and employment opportunities for several decades. This discriminatory mentality was legitimized by the United States Supreme Court in Plessy v. Ferguson in 1896, when it declared that segregation was consistent with constitutional principles as long as everything was "separate but equal."

In 1954, the United States Supreme Court abandoned the "separate but equal" doctrine in its decision of Brown v. Board of Education. In this case, the Court overruled Plessy and ordered states to desegregate public schools "with all deliberate speed."

In 1957, the governor of Arkansas mobilized the state's National Guard to prevent nine Black students, now known as the "Little Rock Nine," from attending the previously all-white Little Rock Central High School. Most know the famous story of how President Eisenhower then federalized the National Guard and sent troops to escort these brave children to school. This is how Central High was initially desegregated.

Yet that was not the end of the story. Arkansas' governor closed the state's high schools for the 1958–59 school year rather than allow desegregation efforts to continue. When schools re-opened, five more Black children once again prepared to attend Little Rock Central High.

Dr. Sybil Jordan Hampton was born in 1944 and grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas, under the Jim Crow sys-tem of racial segregation. In 1959, at fifteen years old, she became the only Black student in the tenth grade at Central High School.

Dr. Hampton visited Stetson University College of Law on October 1, 2024, and shared her story at an event honoring the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which

prohibited segregation, and discrimination in public places and employment.2 It was, and remains, the most sweeping civil rights legislation in U.S. history.3

Students, faculty, and community members gathered to hear Dr. Hampton speak about her lived experiences and her hopes for the future.

Learning our history has always been a valuable undertaking, but perhaps it has never been more essential than in this moment, as the profound divisions in the United States grow ever deeper and wider and communities see their hard-fought gains in civil and voting rights stripped away. Dr. Hampton's insights provide guidance for us to pursue a brighter, kinder, and more understanding future, in which "every child and every adult in these United States [has] an opportunity to achieve a personal best."

Dr. Hampton's Story

Good evening. It really is an honor and a privilege to be here with you. I want to thank Prof. Judith Scully, whom I had the opportunity to meet earlier this year and to begin doing some work with. I really have enjoyed that. And I want to thank the Social Justice Advocacy Program and the Black Law Student Association and the St. Petersburg Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation (TRHT) Center for co-sponsoring this event.

I am an ordinary person who had the opportunity to do extraordinary things. And I hope that my story will encourage you to do extraordi-nary things because I think that is how change takes place.

As an ordinary child growing up, nobody ever said to me, "you are going to be a leader." While attending segregated elementary and junior high schools in Little Rock, Arkansas, we were encouraged to take education seriously, to work hard and strive for excellence. We were taught to care for our people and our community. And, in that way, all of us were expected to contribute positively to the world as descendants of conquered or enslaved people. We were a testament to striving, thriving, and excelling under dire and difficult circumstances.

When I was born in 1944, I lived in a city in which Black people rode at the back of the bus, drank from "colored" water fountains, and could only go to the bathroom outside of our home if it was a "colored" bathroom. You could vote if you could afford to pay a poll tax. I grew up and lived in the Jim Crow south. But we had hope, a lot of hope.

None of the hand-me-down books in our public schools had any stories of my people and the many ways our people contributed to making America great. Yet we children were taught at home, in school, at church, at Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, and in our segregated public library and in our community-based newspapers about the history and accomplishments of our people. We knew our history. Therefore, we did understand the powerful legacy of our foremothers and forefathers, who, although they died in slavery, never realizing any of the promises of democracy, believed and taught that one day their descendants would not only be free, but would do more than just barely survive in these United States of America.

Therefore, as a young person I understood that sacrifices needed to be made. **My parents believed that somebody's children would need to be brave and step up when the desegregation of Little Rock Central High School became possible in 1957.** And those of us who desegregated—I never use the word integrated—who desegregated Central High School in the early years stood up to be counted. **We did not know what the choice to apply for admissions to Little Rock Central would bring and we did not know what would happen in the school after we were admitted—if we were admitted. We stepped out on faith because we wanted to demonstrate that the finest public schools in our city, which our parents' taxes supported, were where we belonged.**

I am here to share a brief story of what attending Little Rock Central High School from 1959 to 1962 was like, and what those years actually taught me and continue to teach me.

In 1982, I was living and working in New Rochelle, New York, and I received a letter inviting me to the 20th reunion of the Little Rock Central High School class of 1962. It was quite a surprise because in 20 years since graduation I had never heard anything about any class activities. More importantly, I had no desire to do anything with any of its members

I had done what I had come to do and that was to be a successful student, to stay in school and not get kicked out, but most of all to be a foot soldier who stood proudly on the shoulders of the students who came before me — the Little Rock Nine warriors.

- DR. SYBIL JORDAN HAMPTON

and even less desire to put my foot in that school ever again. It made me feel like I was being invited to return to the scene of a crime.

I was 15 years old, and I was the only Black student in the tenth grade. I remember the first day of high school. My father, who was a postman, stayed home and had breakfast with us. And after breakfast he prayed. He prayed for me to be brave, to be calm, and most of all to remember that the Lord is my shepherd, and he would watch over me. There were times in the past my brother and our friends would walk right past Central High School on our way to our junior high school. And we'd be laughing and talking but that first day of school, Frank Henderson and I, were being driven the six blocks to Little Rock Central High School by his father, we were very quiet. I was quiet because I was wondering, what was going to happen and what would it be like for me to be the only Black student in all of the 10th grade?

When we arrived at the school it was really a great relief to see that there were no crowds and no media. And so, I thought, well, at least we aren't going to have to fight our way into the school today like they did in 1957. And if you have ever seen a picture of Little Rock Central High School, it's a huge, beautiful school. And the steps to get up to the front door are steep These steps were very elegant, leading to the school's front door. And as we walked, I cannot begin to tell you how frazzled I felt. I thought, "Are we going to need somebody to protect us? And if we do, will anybody come to help us?"

We were met at the front door by the Principal, Jess Matthews and the Assistant Principal, Mrs. Huckbee. And only Mrs. Huckbee verbally greeted us; Mr. Matthews just nodded his head. She welcomed us very warmly and took us into her office and she gave us directions for how to make our way through the building, which is on five levels. She gave us our class schedules and then walked me to my homeroom.

My homeroom was on the first floor in the northeast corner of the building, and as we walked, there was no one in the hallways because we were asked to come after everyone had been seated in their homerooms. But when we got near the door of my homeroom, I saw out of the corner of my eye that there was a door to the outside and I made a mental note of that, and I was relieved because I now had an escape route in case I needed to get out of the building. My homeroom teacher was at the door and she pointed me to my seat --the middle seat in the middle row. I was not introduced to anyone in the class; no one spoke to me. It was clear to me that not being introduced meant that my homeroom teacher was not going to be my ally. And that was true—she didn't talk to me.

There was one guy, however, who from that first day and every other day over the next three years, continuously muttered and called me the N-word and other things under his breath. Not loud enough to be punished. But everybody else looked away.

When the bell rang to go to the first class period, I was apprehensive. It would be the first time for me to walk in the hallways with other students and **I was all alone and I was 15 years old.**

My parents had said, "stand up straight, hold your head up high, and remember to be very aware of what's going on around you, while keeping your eyes always focused ahead." As I began to walk, I heard voices saying, "there's a N----- coming," "the N----- is coming" and to my great surprise, the students moved to the side against the walls of the hallway and a pathway opened up in the middle so that I could walk alone, untouched. This went on for a few weeks, and then it stopped. After that **no one spoke to me, no one looked me in the eye, no one smiled at me.** No one positively regarded me. In those three years there were not more than three students who ever spoke to me. During the three years of my homeroom the only time the other students in the homeroom ever heard my voice was when it was my turn to read the Bible after the Pledge of the Allegiance to the class. Each one of us took a turn reading the Bible. I always read Psalm 121: "I will lift my eyes to the hills from whence comes my strength, my strength comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth."

When graduation time rolled around in May 1962, I was truly ecstatic. **I had done what I had come to do and that was to be a successful student, to stay in school and not get kicked out, but most of all to be a foot soldier who stood proudly on the shoulders of the students who came before me --- the Little Rock Nine warriors. The three years that went by were all the same: I was shunned. I had been so alone, I was treated as if I was a ghost. It was as if I was invisible, and I didn't matter at all.** But I was done, and I was thrilled.

My class graduated 544 students, and I remained the only Black student in that class all 3 years. Our graduation took place in Quigley Stadium. A place that I had been in before because all of the Black schools held their sporting events there. I had been there prior to going to Central but had never been there during my Central High time because by law, the Black students could not attend any activi-ties, including athletic activities, could not participate in any clubs or organizations. Police ringed the stadium inside and out and only our parents could attend because there was a fear of violence. As I walked across the stage, I held my head up high, and I smiled because I felt tremendously relieved. As Mr. Matthews handed me my diploma, there was no applauding or cheering, only the silence I was used to. But all of a sudden, some wiseacre yells "there goes Black beauty," and I thought, "insults from beginning to end." As we were seated, people in the class were busy talking about who they were going to miss. I listened as I always did and thought, "not one soul. I am not going to miss anyone. I do not expect to see any of these people ever again in my life and I am not planning to put my foot in that building ever again."

And to my surprise what happened is, over the course of dinner, so many students came to speak to me—for the first time, and some said they regretted not being kind to me, and other students said they thought I was rather brave and congratulated me on coming to a 20th reunion with people who had been unkind to me. And I sat there and thought, "that's really an understatement."

- DR. SYBIL JORDAN HAMPTON

T**hen in 1982, this letter arrives, inviting me to the 20th reunion.** After I reflected on it awhile, I thought, "I really do want to go back to see what, if anything, has changed with my classmates." So, I called my parents and told them that I planned to fly from New York to Little Rock. And I asked my parents to join me at the banquet. I needed them with me because during my three years at Central High School, my parents were never allowed to come into the school; and this time I wanted them to be in the building with me so that they could see this cast of characters that I went to school with.

And so, we went to the banquet. And we were met at the door by this guy from my homeroom, Ron, who had never spoken to me. But I knew him. You know when you are the observer and you are being shunned, you know everyone. You pay attention. And I don't even think Ron ever looked at me when we were in school. But I do remember that when he ran for student body president, his flyer was on my desk, and someone said to him, "why does that N----- have your flyer, are you a N----- lover?" and he came and snatched his flyer off my desk.

So that is how I really remembered him. But he said that he was responsible for my being invited. And I later learned that the reason that he became so committed to my being a part of the class was that after Vietnam, he was in school in Chicago in college and he read *The Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison. And he said he began to cry because he realized that he had worked with others to make me invisible, and he thought he needed to take responsibility to do something different. And they really did make me feel invisible. And when Ron greeted us, he said, "but I need to tell you something." And I am going "mmmmm…" and the "something" was that **nobody else in the class felt comfortable with my being there. And so, nobody would sit at the table with us, and so we would be seated, my parents and I, alone. And Ron said, "I will be seated with you."** And I was, as you can imagine, steaming.

And my parents, but particularly my mother, had this wonderful way of sending messages, and it's called the eye. And she eyed me in a big way because she knew that I was really thinking of turning around, but we proceeded to our table. We sat down.

Awards were given and I received the award for beingmost educated, but I had not really read the invitation carefully and didn't realize that at the end of the evening they had planned a sock hop. My jaws locked and I was trying to prevent my eyes from rolling when my mother gave me the eye again. And then I thought, **"I am here because I am claiming my space and I am taking my place with this class of students."** I also thought, "I know what to do, how to do it and I can probably do it better than they can." And so, I stayed for a while, and it was fun, but I was so fatigued, so we left early.

And as we were driving home, I talked with my parents about how clear it was that **you can pass laws to legis-late social change, and you can pass laws to improve racial and social justice, but laws don't change hearts.** And what we had experienced and witnessed that evening was just how difficult it is for hearts to change. I said to my parents, **"I now recognize that this work of build-ing a more just and equal society is hard, but even so, I am more convinced than ever that I have to con-tinue on the journey. Some days it feels like trying to grow roses in concrete. But that's where my real work lies.**

Thank you.

Lessons and Connection to 2025

Question: How do you remain hopeful in these trying times where it looks like we are losing ground the frontier of civil rights?

Dr. Hampton: As you are here undertaking what is so import-ant in our society, studying to be lawyers, I think it is so important to admit that this is a time of crisis—but just because it is a time of crisis, does not mean it is a time of hopelessness.

I have been running for a long time and have not yet gotten tired. As students you cannot afford to be tired either.

Dr. King gave us this food for thought: "We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." And I think none of us can expect the type of respect for equality and freedom for every individual as we would like to see in our own lifetimes. But that's been true for many, many issues. Look how many years women worked to get to vote and look how much discrimination there still is. But I think it should not be that we are working for something for us, but that we are a part of building the infrastructure for change at some point, not to be known by us, but to hopefully be known by our great grandchildren and their great-great grandchildren.

Over the history of our country we see that laws are passed, yet the enforcement of these laws is just as important as their passage. Voting for candidates at the local and federal level who believe in the rule of law and have the fortitude and commitment to see that enforcement is consistent and rigorous has to be a priority for more of us ordinary folks. Every one of our votes matters. At the local level, so many races are won by a slim number of votes. Those of us who say we believe in democracy, civil and voting rights, or who just complain that the situation is bad at the federal and state level as well as local government levels, must begin to vote ourselves and become involved in "get out the vote" activities. I am a woman who as a 15-year-old high school student took a stand, made unbelievable sacrifices, and went on to lead an extraordinary life. My sacrifices and the sacrifices of many others like me over the past 400-plus years have resulted in change and progress. Have we achieved as much as I expected, hoped for, or dreamed about when I was 15 years old? Heck no! Yet I am not shirking my responsibility to vote, I can assure you. I suffered personally because the Governor of the great state of Arkansas chose to defy the mandate of the Supreme Court's 1954 Brown v. Board decision. The candidate of my choice may not have won the gubernatorial race last year in Arkansas, but I still voted and I plan to vote this year. We have to be in it to win it, and this is a very long-distance race.

Question: Do you think that people really understand that white supremacy is still embedded in our society?

Dr. Hampton: I think most people really don't understand why things are the way they are. Because it depends on where you are getting your information. And I think that in our communities, whether it is in our churches or what-ever, that people are not talking about the underpinnings. We spend a lot of time getting emotional about things. People always say to me, "you really don't care," and I thought, "I do care, but I don't react as if I am seeing something for the first time." That happens to me over and over again. You know, life has not been a crystal stairway. And I don't, every day, get up and think about what that means. What I think about every day is trying to be on top of information that helps me to be a problem solver.

Question: I want to talk a little bit more about "changing hearts." What are some of the other things that you have witnessed in your life that have been effective at changing hearts?

Dr. Hampton: I am a life member of the Arkansas Sympho-ny Orchestra Board, which is really quite an honor. And I am certain that one of the reasons I became a life mem-ber is that the foundation that I headed made a very piv-otal gift that saved the life of the orchestra. But the other piece of it is that I think that people see me as a bridge builder. I think they might have thought that they would be able to get other members of the board who look like me if they brought me on board. And so, when people say to me, "well…" I say to them, "hell no." And they go, "what's wrong, Sybil?" and I say, "the way people are selected for boards are that people bring the people they know. Boards are made up of people nominating people that they know. So this board obviously has people who don't know any people like me, because if I'm the person who's going to have to bring somebody, then that's going to be a problem." And one of the problems is that when I went to my first board meeting as life member, which is an honor, I don't think that more than two people in the room spoke to me. Now they were not hostile to me, but once again, they didn't have a point of reference for acknowledging me. That's a problem in our society, and it is a larger problem for people of color.

I was at the luncheon today, the Federalist Society luncheon, and I was looking around the room to see what happened as different people came in. And some people came in and their group of friends were there. And there were some people who came in, and they really didn't seem to know anybody, and nobody spoke to them. And I thought, "isn't that fascinating." Everybody here really belongs to a very clear community. There is a value in being here, which is that you are going to be lawyers and you will only be as good as your network. But your net-work is not only somebody that can get you a great job; your network is getting to know people who are different from you, so when you are part of a law firm or you are representing clients, that you are not always taking things through your frame of reference, which is too narrow for understanding and problem solving.

I think we learn at mother's breast who is important. And we learn at mother's breast how to treat those people who are not important. You know, because people learn it—children learn these things in the way in which they learn everything: by observation. So when I think of people in law school or medical school, being able to be more thoughtful, more sensitive, I know you learn this from your culture and your environment. You know, every culture that you go into for work and study has rules, spoken and unspoken, formal and informal. And in so many of our institutions, the adults in the institutions don't model anything. So the teaching of it is meaningless if it is not modeled. Because if you don't know it, you have to be in a place where it is modeled, where it's a part of how you are expected to participate and behave and be a good citizen.

I am a child of the Civil Rights era, and people who are part of the Civil Rights era see the world in a very different way, and that is, "I've always worked to be part of a beloved community." I have worked in institutions in which I was the only one in my class. I worked at an Irish Catholic college that became co-ed, and I became the first woman administrator and the first woman of c olor. And parents come in, and they would go to the President and say, "why is that colored woman making decisions about my child," and I am going, "hmmm hmmm, I'm up south, I'm up south." And it's true, in this society it's up south and down south. It's an American problem; it's just not a problem of the south.

But we have not decided as a society that we all have to work together to ensure that every child in America has an opportunity not to have equal opportuni-ty, but to achieve a personal best. That's what I want. You know, I want every child and every adult in these United States to have an opportunity to achieve a personal best, which is about continuously improving. And until we feel that way and take ownership of something other than me, mine, we are going to have these issues. And, until we believe that what happens to someone else matters. You know, most of us don't want to know it, don't want somebody to make us feel guilty about it. I don't feel guilty about anything, but I do feel responsible to be a part of making things better. You know, we are a nation of devout cowards. It takes a tremendous amount of courage to do some of the small things, like my classmate Ron. What was wonderful was that Ron was one of the most popular boys in our class. So for him to stand up and do what he did with me and my parents that night was powerful. **The power of one is that when people are cowards, they will do something different if somebody else leads. And so, I think that there are many times when we need to think, "is this a situation in which I can use the power of one?" And the power of one is not loud and noisy. Many powerful things are very quiet, but they are visible and they resonate. Sometimes for decades.**

It was shocking to me over those three years in high school , and it is still shocking to me, to be in places in which people treat me like a n-----, and I know when it happens. Because it has certainly happened to me enough as I was growing up, and certainly enough at Central

High. And I am stunned because I think I made quite a difference. I bring unique gifts and talents to every place I go. But, people are always trying to figure out if I belong.

I'm in a women's organization and I accidentally became the President. There was this whole thing about who would become President, and I said, "I'll step up to it." And then people started saying to me, "you really did grow in that role." And I wanted to say, "what the hell are you talking about? I brought to the role what I had and who I was. The organization has been vastly improved because of my leadership skills. People could not see my skills and talent in the way that I could and there is often a lack of heart connection between people. They see some of us as other, and not only are you an other, you are an unworthy other. You don't deserve the benefit of t he doubt. I often feel like people think I fell off the back of a turnip truck, as opposed to being a part of a long tradition and history of people doing well under very difficult circumstances.

The majority of my career was spent as an Assistant Dean of Student Academic Affairs where parents and students certainly didn't expect to see me. And I had the opportunity to say to students, "just because I don't look like you, doesn't mean I can't be important to you and facilitate beautiful things for you." I think that it is so important for people to really come to trust and believe that no person is an other, and that we all belong to what is really the most important thing: the human race. You know, that is really the only race; the rest of it is a social construct. And until we come to the place where we really care about other people and that we don't just see people who look like us as the only important people, we are not going to be able to end to discrimination.

Growing up, because of all the teachings and all the parts of my life, I knew how much my people had contributed to this country. I didn't have doubt about whether or not, when opportunities came, there would be the possibility of people like me standing up and doing well. But there is something in the water in this country that really does keep people from being able to believe that. You know, it's very interesting that there is this divide that says, this group of people, really, they are lazy. People tell me I am an affirmative action baby ....but I am the third generation in my family to go to college. So what are they talking about? They say, "but for affirmative action you wouldn't have anything." I think many of these things have to do with the fact that many people don't speak about this situation in the kind of way to uplift everyone's understanding.

What changes hearts is proximity to people who we think are different than us and discovering we are not that different after all?

Question: In Florida public schools, there are lots of limitations on what teachers are allowed to say and what curriculum they are allowed to teach. Do you think we have a responsibility to do something about it?

Dr. Hampton: Yes we have a responsibility to speak out, to vote, to go to the legislature and demand change. The only places in America where people can interact and get to know each other across the fault lines of race, social class, national origin, sexual orientation, religion, or whatever, are on college campuses and profession-al campuses. They are the only places where you really have the opportunity to come together with a shared purpose, with people who can be vastly different from you. And they are the only places where you have an opportunity to learn how to be a part of making what I think is absolutely essential, and that is the beloved community. Most people have no idea that I would not want to have a cup of coffee with them, because I treat people graciously. I make people feel something that I didn't feel during those three years in high school: I make people feel like they matter.

In South Africa, the greeting in the native community is the word "ubuntu" that means "I see you." It emphasizes our interconnectedness as human beings. We all need to feel that we are seen. It means that I see you and acknowledge that you exist. At Central High School, can you imagine what it would have meant to me if people looked me in the eye, or smiled at me? ...One of the young women that I had gotten to know from my class said to me that what startles her is that "not one adult, not a pastor, not my parents, not one person ever asked me, "have you ever thought about what Sybil is experiencing with nobody talking to her?"' She said nobody ever raised that as a ques-tion. Not enough people are willing to ask difficult ques-tions that bridge the gap between our experiences. But I think that tells you why we are in the predicament that we are in now. That is tough stuff and we have to get beyond all of the things that have created a lack of trust, a lack ofrespect, and the lack of willingness to be courageous, and we have to learn to do small things that will make the cultures of the institutions and organizations and communities where we are, better places.

Our Flag Was Still There

BY GABRIELLE D'ESPOSITO

The bombs bursting in air
Or in the streets.
Or a gun in the club.
At the protest.
In an officer's hand and pointed at

Bodies follow in their wake.
We refer to them in numbers
Statistics
They had names
before "collateral damage"
before "wrong place wrong time"
before "resisting"

The rocket's red glare
or is it a flare?
Or is it a taser pointed at

Protesters running.
They take land
They take rights
They take brothers and sisters
And then call them the criminals.

Our flag is still there.
Stars and bars.
Land of the free.

I hear these words echo in a crowded prison
that looks a lot servitude
and sounds a lot like income.
Oh say
can you see?
Can you see?
Will you see?
Please, see?

Red
Stained hands.

White
pressed shirts.

Blue
uniforms,
badges,
tears.

Oh say
can you see?

Gabrielle D'Esposito is an Orlando-resident and Public Criminal Defense attorney at the 9th Judicial Circuit office. She attended Stetson, concentrating in Social Justice Advocacy and participating in Stetson Law Review as the Marketing Editor. She graduated in 2022 earning a Juris Doctorate with Magna Cum Laude distinction. She has three perfect cat companions and a lovely fiancé. She and her fiancé spend their time reading and finding new vegetarian recipes. She plays roller derby (Go Orlando Roller Derby) and loves yoga. She doesn't write as much as she should but is trying to get back into the habit.

Relating To Citizens

BY STEVEN FOX

I wanted to write a poem about a topic pertaining to civils right for you to read.
Maybe one that could inspire you to believe the opposite of what you've seen on your phone, tablet or computer screen.
I searched my soul.
And my mind.
And my notebooks.
I found things that encourage me not only to keep believing but also keep achieving in a way that is civil despite the blatant attacks on my very humanity.
I found things that made me feel right despite all of the times I was told that I was wrong.
I found civility in the illusion of our uncivil society.
I found the wrongs that needed to feel right.
I found rest where there is unrest.

The National Guard is, allegedly, in my hometown at this very moment.
They are policing the exact space where Dr. King was shot in the face on the balcony of the
Lorraine Motel.
Where Ida B. Wells bucked the system.
Where the Memphis Massacre occurred.
Where Echol Cole and Robert Walker died in the back of a sanitation truck in East Memphis.
Where music simultaneously brings diverse groups of people together all while still acknowledging the fact that we still have streets named Auction and Exchange.
The beauty and the pain is real.
Remember that some of our military personnel are unaware of the history and herstory of our places. That they may not know that they are putting their uniforms on in buildings that were erected on the hallowed ground that Andrew Jackson, James Winchester and John Overton purchased for pennies on the dollars just to create a nightmare of the dreams of the natives.
I wrote this poem about a few topics pertaining to civil rights for you to read and process and feel.
I wrote this because I figure you know exactly what to do.
What to say.
How to feel.
And most of all, how to love.
I wrote this because in order for us to truly have our "civil rights", we must acknowledge our "uncivil wrongs".

Aligning the Power of Advocacy

with the Heart of Philanthropy to Create ***Positive Change***

Every community faces challenges, and across the nation, law schools and community organizations are looking for ways to address systemic challenges. In Tampa Bay, **the Alliance for Advocacy and Philanthropy (the Alliance)** was designed to empower future lawyers to be agents of community change.

The Alliance is a collaborative partnership be-tween Stetson University College of Law and the Community Foundation Tampa Bay (CFTB) formed with the intention of aligning the power of advocacy with the heart of philanthropy. Established in the Fall of 2018, the Alliance incorporates the understanding that students need to be given meaningful opportunities to participate in projects that serve community needs. Through learning, listening, and activism, law students can become thoughtful leaders (not just lawyers) in civil society. By introducing law students to the philanthropic values of CFTB and the wide variety of nonprofits in the Tampa Bay area that need technical support and volunteers to assist them in meeting their goals, the Alliance helps future lawyers understand how their knowledge and skills can contribute to making the world a better place.

Both collaborating organizations bring a strong passion and commitment to building a better community in Tampa Bay. CFTB is one of the largest community foundations in the state and has been promoting creative philanthropy, vision, and leadership in this area for 35 years. Stetson University College of Law has received numerous awards in the area of advocacy and has been educating outstanding lawyers, judges, and community leaders for 125 years. Through this Alliance, the two institutions have collaborated to strengthen our impact in advocacy, philanthropy, and volunteerism.

Over the last five years, the Alliance has been led by Stetson Law Professor Judith Scully, Founder and Co-Coordinator of the Social Justice Advocacy Concentration Program and Dr. Jesse Coraggio, Senior Vice President of Community Impact at CFTB.

The Alliance For Advocacy & Philanthropy

(left to right) Dr. Jesse Coraggio, Chief Impact Officer of CFTB; Marlene Spalten, President and CEO of CFTB; Stetson Law School Dean Ben Barrios, and Stetson Law Professor Judith A.M. Scully

The Programs of the Alliance for Advocacy and Philanthropy

The program is comprised of three core initiatives: (1) the Community Fellowship Program; (2) the Community Associates Program (CAP), and (3) the student-led organization Future Lawyers for Advocacy and Philanthropy (FLAP).

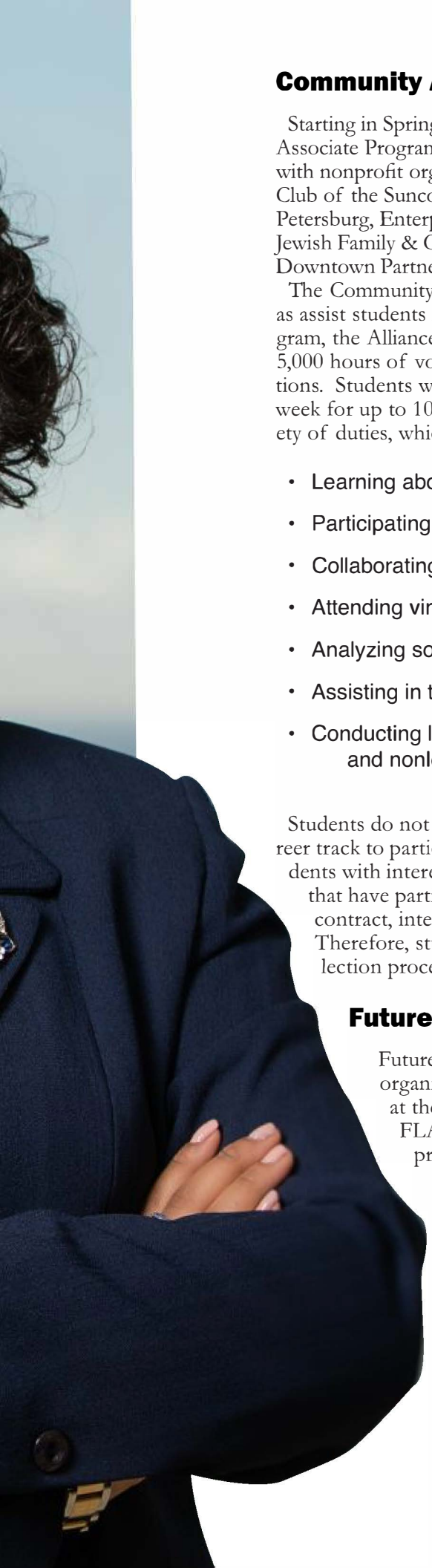
The Alliance Community Fellowship

The Alliance Community Fellowship was created in Spring 2020. It has offered paid fellowships each semester to second- and third-year law students who work as part-time employees at CFTB. As community fellows, Stetson law students gain an in-depth understanding of how community philanthropy works. They are introduced to nonprofit board governance, the grantmaking process, donor development, and funding agreements.

In total, there have been 30 Community Fellows; some of whom have aspirations to run their own nonprofit organizations; some who will continue to contribute their legal expertise and financial resources to nonprofits; and hopefully some who will serve as board members of nonprofit organizations in the future.

ALEXIS DEVEAUX

Stetson alumni, **Alexis Deveaux,** became a board member of Champions for Children immediately after completing the Alliance Fellowship program. She has stated : "My time at Community Foundation Tampa Bay during law school was more than a placement; it was a formative chapter that shaped how I now practice as an attorney. I was not only introduced to the nonprofit landscape, but immersed in the work of local organizations, policy discussions, and governance decisions that revealed the real-world reach of legal training. That experience pushed me beyond theory — into practice, into community, and into responsibility." Alexis exemplifies the intent of building strong ties between future legal professionals and the philanthropic community.



Community Associate Program (CAP)

Starting in Spring 2021, the Alliance expanded its reach through the Community Associate Program (CAP) to provide pro bono opportunities for students to engage with nonprofit organizations. Nonprofit organizations such as the Boys & Girls Club of the Suncoast, Children's Law Center of Bay Area Legal Services, City of St. Petersburg, Enterprising Latinas, Inc., Gasparilla Music Foundation, Gulf Coast Jewish Family & Community Services, Inc., Live Tampa Bay, St Pete Pride, Tampa Downtown Partnership and WellBuilt Cities have participated in the program

The Community Associate Program is intended to serve the community as well as assist students in meeting their pro bono graduation requirements. In this program, the Alliance has hosted over 150 law students who have contributed over 5,000 hours of volunteer service across over 90 Tampa Bay nonprofit organizations. Students who sign up for the CAP work at least three to five hours per week for up to 10 weeks during the semester. These students are assigned a variety of duties, which have included:

- Learning about the nonprofit grantmaking process;
- Participating in virtual networking opportunities with nonprofit executives;
- Collaborating with business executives, lawyers, and philanthropists;
- Attending virtual community meetings;
- Analyzing socio-economic data;
- Assisting in the evaluation of programmatic outcomes; and
- Conducting legal (under the supervision of a lawyer) and nonlegal research and writing.

Students do not need to be committed to a public service or public interest career track to participate as a Community Associate. The Alliance encourages students with interests in all areas of the law to apply. The nonprofit organizations that have participated have had a wide range of needs including real estate, contract, intellectual property, strategic planning, technology, and fundraising. Therefore, students with a wide variety of backgrounds are valued in the selection process.

Future Lawyers for Advocacy and Philanthropy

Future Lawyers f●r Advocacy and Philanthropy (FLAP) is a student organization committed to introducing law students to career options at the intersection of philanthropy and law. The Alliance works with FLAP to assist them in networking with nonprofit executives, and to provide FLAP students with a variety of meaningful legal and nonlegal pro bono opportunities. ●n-campus events have included grant-writing workshops that are hosted by CFTB Community Investment staff; J.D. alternative-career panels with current nonprofit professionals; and co-hosting a pro bono fair with other nonprofits.

Together, these programs demonstrate how collaboration between legal education and community philanthropy can produce measurable community impact while shaping the next generation of socially conscious lawyers. They also reaffirm that lasting change begins when advocacy meets philanthropy — the heart of the Alliance's mission.

The Stetson Social Justice Advocacy (SJA) Concentration Program

Stetson's work with the Alliance for Advocacy and Philanthropy is housed in the SJA Program. SJA alumni work in government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and the private sector, focusing on providing services to members of our community who are often marginalized as a result of their economic, gender, or racial background. Many SJA students and alumni work on law reform projects, public policy initiatives, and are civically engaged throughout their careers.

Through work with the Alliance, SJA students develop an understanding that nonprofit organizations and philanthropic foundations play an important role in providing a safety net for the most vulnerable members of our communities. The program seeks to educate students on the important role that community members, corporate entities, and wealthy donors can play in transforming our society in more equitable ways.

More about Community Foundation Tampa Bay

Community Foundation Tampa Bay was founded on the principle that local generosity, when effectively channeled, can create lasting change. The foundation has grown from an initial $100 investment made by a local schoolteacher to a $1 billion foundation, one of the largest community foundations in the state.

In its early years, the Foundation focused on building relationships with donors and nonprofits to ensure that charitable giving met community needs. As its donor base expanded, so did its ability to provide strategic grants and fund transformative projects. CFTB serves five counties: Citrus, Hernando, Hillsborough, Pasco and Pinellas.

For more than three decades, the Foundation has served as a trusted steward of charitable funds, connecting donors with impactful opportunities to support causes that matter to them. With a deep commitment to collaboration, innovation, and community engagement, CFTB helps individuals, families, and businesses maximize their giving while ensuring sustainable, long-term impact across Tampa Bay's communities.

As a key driver of regional philanthropy, the foundation plays a crucial role in addressing pressing social challenges by funding nonprofit initiatives in areas such as education, economic mobility, environmental resiliency and sustainability, health and wellness, and basic needs.

Since its inception 35 years ago, CFTB has granted over $460 million to nonprofit organizations. In 2025, CFTB granted over $55 million to over 1,200 nonprofit organizations. Following last year's two hurricanes, CFTB provided more than $5.1 million in relief and recovery support to organizations directly affected by the storms or experiencing increased demand for services.

CFTB amplifies the reach of nonprofit organizations and helps strengthen their capacity to serve those in need. The foundation also facilitates donor-advised funds, legacy giving, and other philanthropic vehicles, making it easy for donors to create meaningful and lasting change.

Through its leadership and vision, CFTB remains a powerful force for good, dedicated to building a thriving, inclusive, and resilient community.

The Crucial Role of Nonprofits in Supporting the Community

Nonprofit organizations play one of the most impor-tant roles in creating meaningful change within com-munities. They address pressing social challenges such as homelessness, food insecurity, and mental health, while providing essential services to underserved pop-ulations. Nonprofits also advocate for social change and create opportunities for community members to engage civically in meaningful and transformative ways. Most nonprofits operate with limited resources and as such rely on the support of community volun-teers and donors to carry out their vital work. The role of these volunteers varies, from governance roles as board members to individuals helping to distribute food at pantries. Volunteers bring passion and dedica-tion to their causes. This reliance on human capital not only amplifies the impact of initiatives but also fosters a sense of community ownership and involvement. Donors are also a critical component, providing essen-tial funding that may not be available through govern-ment or for-profit sources.

As nonprofits navigate the complexities of funding, governance, and program delivery, they often face challenges that require innovative solutions and strategic partnerships. When nonprofits are net-worked together with other sectors of society, the ca-pacity to address societal issues dramatically in-creases.

Often at the forefront of social change, nonprofits can use their platforms to conduct research, disseminate information, and mobilize grassroots support. And by doing so, nonprofits can effectively advocate for systemic changes that address root causes of social issues rather than merely treating symptoms.

Looking ahead, the Alliance, in conjunction with the Stetson SJA Program, will encourage students and community members working with nonprofit organizations to harness the power of storytelling and data-informed narratives. The goal is to inspire collective action through a shared-impact model that mirrors the principles guiding much of CFTB's work.

Nonprofits embody the best of this country. They hold up society in times of need. They provide a way for people to work together and transform shared beliefs and hopes into action. They give shape to our boldest dreams, highest ideals, and noblest causes.

Nonprofits feed, heal, shelter, educate, inspire, enlighten, and nurture people of every age, gender, race, and socioeconomic status. They foster civic engagement and leadership, drive economic growth, and strengthen the fabric of our communities every single day.

Through these collective efforts, we envision the Alliance becoming an essential force in advancing social equity and justice—helping build a more inclusive, resilient, and compassionate community for all.

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

In Grants Pass, Oregon

***Johnson v. City of Grants Pass, Oregon*: The U.S. Supreme Court and A Tale of Two Cities for the Housed and the Unhoused**

By Kirsten Anderson[1]

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way. . . [.]"

– Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities

The United States Constitution protects people experiencing homelessness from punishment because they have no choice but to sleep outside. That was the legal theory underpinning the claims brought by individuals experiencing homelessness against the City of Grants Pass, Oregon in one of the most significant cases on homelessness to ever reach the U.S. Supreme Court.[2] In *City of Grants Pass v. Johnson,* the Court rejected this argument and instead held that the Eighth Amendment's cruel and unusual punishments clause did not apply to local ordinances used to punish people experiencing homelessness and sleeping outside.[3]

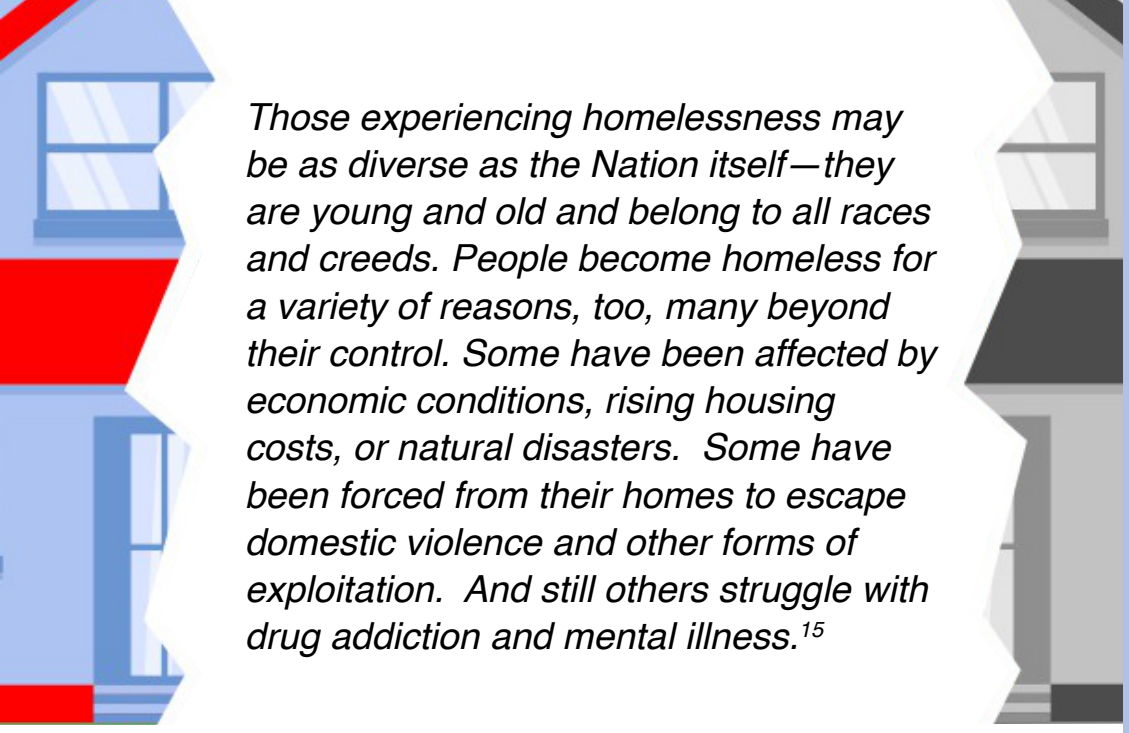
The first sentence of the complaint filed by the plaintiffs who were all persons experiencing homelessness, stated that the City of Grants Pass, Oregon, was "trying to run homeless people out of town."[4] The lawsuit was initiated in 2018,[5] and focused on the city's ordinances which prohibited camping, sleeping in vehicles or sleeping outdoors with minimal coverings such as a blanket to keep warm.[6] Plaintiffs alleged that the City unlawfully punished them for being homeless by criminalizing sleeping or camping when they had no choice but to sleep outside. The case did not challenge the type of punishment imposed (fines, trespass warnings, and arrest for repeated violations), but rather alleged that punishing homeless people for sleeping and sheltering themselves in outdoor places when they have no other alternative is the equivalent of criminalizing the status of homelessness itself.[7]

The legal theory advanced by plaintiffs in this case was grounded in Martin v. Boise, then-binding precedent from the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, that held that a Boise, Idaho ordinance violated the Eighth Amendment by imposing criminal sanctions against homeless individuals for sleeping outdoors when they have no other alternative. The 9th Circuit Court noted that sleeping is something that all human beings are biologically compelled to do to survive.[8] And that forcing a homeless individual to either stay awake or be arrested was unconstitutional. Martin, in turn, relied on Robinson v. California, a U.S. Supreme Court case that held that punishing a person for their status is cruel and unusual punishment.[9]

But the City of Grant's Pass argued (and the U.S. Supreme Court agreed) that this was not about an unconstitutional status crime. According to the city, the complexities of homelessness are a problem that should be solved by the city without any interference from the Court. From the City's perspective, it was not cruel or unusual punishment to subject people experiencing homelessness to penalties for sleeping outside even when no other alternatives were available. During oral argument, the attorney for the city, argued that the camping laws "are essential to public health and safety" and the decision by the Ninth Circuit to stop the city from enforcing them "fueled the spread of encampments while harming those it purports to protect."[10]

The U.S. Supreme Court agreed with the City and refused to extend the Eighth Amendment's prohibition against status crimes to include homeless persons being penalized for violating sleeping/camping ordinances.[11] And, in doing so, it overturned the 9th Circuit Boise case.

The majority opinion in the U.S. Supreme Court's City of Grants Pass case was authored by Justice Gorsuch. Gorsuch's opinion relied extensively on amicus briefs[12] submitted by a bipartisan coalition of local and state government officials and non-profit organizations claiming that retaining the ability to punish people for sleeping outdoors is an essential "'tool in the policy toolbox'" needed to "'tackle the complicated issues of housing and homelessness.'"[13] The opening section of the Supreme Court's decision draws numerous conclusions about the causes and complexities of homelessness.[14] For example, the Court found that:



Those experiencing homelessness may be as diverse as the Nation itself—they are young and old and belong to all races and creeds. People become homeless for a variety of reasons, too, many beyond their control. Some have been affected by economic conditions, rising housing costs, or natural disasters. Some have been forced from their homes to escape domestic violence and other forms of exploitation. And still others struggle with drug addiction and mental illness.[15]

The majority opinion also centered the perspectives of the government and the harms they claimed flowed from their inability to arrest people for sleeping or camping outdoors. For example, the Court found that large encampments are often found in poor neighborhoods, forcing adults and children "to navigate around used needles, human waste, and other hazards to make their way to school, the grocery store of work." the Court focused on issues related to large encampments, [16]even though the regulations at issue applied to as few as one person sleeping or camping outdoors.[17] By contrast, the dissenting opinion, authored by Justice Sonia Sotomayor, and supported by Justices Elena Kagan and Ketanji Brown Jackson, focused on the impact these ordinances have on homeless people, observing that "[t]he ordinances are enforced exactly as intended: to criminalize the status of being homeless."[18]

What emerged from the competing views of the majority and the dissent were contradictory perspectives on what was really happening in the City of Grants Pass, Oregon—a veritable tale of two cities. On the one side is the Grants Pass government, in a city that is home to roughly 38,000 people. On the other side, among the city's residents, are 600 individuals who experience homelessness on any given day.[19] What is striking about these narratives is that there is not even an agreement as to what is at issue and who needs protection from the Court.

For the majority, the Court was called upon by states and cities to protect them from court rulings that barred them from addressing "encampments" and impeded their ability to "eliminate" homelessness that was unleashing devastation across the "American west."[20] The crisis of homelessness was, for the majority, a crisis of unpleasant and unsightly encampments that needed to be eliminated in order to control diseases, drug use and the setting of fires. As the dissent argued, "the majority's framing of the problem as one involving drugs, diseases, and fires instead of one involving people trying to keep warm outside with a blanket just provides the Court with cover to permit the criminalization of homeless people."[21] The dissent critiqued this view of the case, stating that "This account, however, fails to engage seriously with the precipitating causes of homelessness, the damaging effects of criminalization, and the myriad legitimate reasons people may lack or decline shelter."[22]

This represents the tale of two cities. On the side of the City of Grants Pass, Oregon, the issue was "Does the U.S. Constitution grant federal judges the authority to oversee local homelessness policy?" For the plaintiffs, the issue was "Can a local government penalize homeless individuals for sleeping in public

[1]Kirsten Anderson is the Deputy Legal Director of Economic Justice at the Southern Poverty Law Center. She is an experienced social justice litigator whose cases have set precedents advancing legal protections of persons experiencing homelessness and poverty. Anderson currently serves on the American Bar Association Commission on Homelessness & Poverty, and she is a founding member of the national Housing, Not Handcuffs campaign. Anderson co-authored an amicus brief to the Supreme Court in support of Gloria Johnson and the plaintiffs in City of Grants Pass v. Johnson.

[2] City of Grants Pass v. Johnson, 603 U.S. 520 (2024).

[3] Id. at 560 ("The Constitution's Eighth Amendment serves many important functions, but it does not authorize federal judges to wrest those rights and responsibilities from the American people and in their place dictate this Nation's homelessness policy."). The Court decision was 6-3, split along ideological lines with the six conservative justices in the majority.

[4]City of Grants Pass v. Johnson, Case No. 23-175, Pet. App. 35a ¶ 1.

[5] Id.

[6] Grants Pass, 603 U.S. at 537; see also id. at 563-564 (Sotomayor, J., dissenting).

[7] Id. at 544-47.

[8] Martin v. Boise, 920 F.3d 584 (9th Cir. 2019), abrogated by Grants Pass, 603 U.S. 520.

[9] Id. at 615-617 (applying Robinson, 370 U.S. 660 (1962)). Martin held that Robinson "compels the conclusion that the Eighth Amendment prohibits the imposition of criminal penalties for sitting, sleeping, or lying outside on public property for homeless individuals who cannot obtain shelter." Id. at 616. Martin reasoned that Robinson, which prohibited the state from punishing people for the status of being addicted to narcotics, also applied to prohibit the state from punishing an involuntary act or condition if it is the unavoidable consequence of one's status or being. Id. Just as the state may not criminalize the status of homelessness, it may not criminalize conduct like sleep that is an unavoidable consequence of being homeless. Id.

[10] Grants Pass Tr. 4:14-15, 5:24-25. The Court adopted this position, spending the beginning pages of its opinion discussing the "homelessness crisis" faced by cities "across the American West." Grants Pass, 603 U.S. at 525. Relying primarily on briefs from amici and from government reports, the Court detailed the harm caused by encampments that it suggested were harming both the general public and the unsheltered homeless individuals who resided in them. Id. at 526-533 (detailing alleged issues with drugs, diseases due to lack of water and sanitation, and rejection of offers of shelter and services by residents of those encampments).

when shelter beds are unavailable and there is no where else to go but the streets?" At the base of these issues is a question of what takes priority---- authorization of governmental power or a concern for treating homeless people with dignity. The U.S. Supreme Court focused on the issue of power, finding that the Eighth Amendment placed no substantive limits on the police power to criminalize sleep for people who were experiencing homelessness.[23] The dissent contested this view of power, stating that "no one contests the power of local governments to address homelessness."[24] However, when exercising those powers, the dissent argued for a view of the Eighth Amendment that protected homeless people from criminal sanctions for sleeping outdoors when no alternative was available to them.[25] The dissent's view of government power yielded to the ""individual liberties secured by the Constitution.""[26]

Although the Court acknowledged up front that people become homeless for a variety of reasons, many beyond their control, it also suggested that the issue of whether a person is "involuntarily homeless" was beyond the Court's capacity to decide. It acknowledged that "the plaintiffs and the dissent insist, laws like these seek to regulate actions that are in some sense 'involuntary,' for some homeless persons cannot help but do what the law forbids." This, the Court declared, was the fundamental problem underpinning the application of Martin v. Boise, "Under Martin, cities must allow public camping by those who are 'involuntarily' homeless. But how are city officials and law enforcement officers to know what it means to be 'involuntarily homeless, or whether any particular person meets the standard?"[27] The dissent pushed back on this statement, saying that these are "not metaphysical questions but factual ones" that of the kind that courts answer every day.[28]

The Eighth Amendment argument basically boiled down to a dispute over whether the City's camping ordinances criminalized status instead of conduct.[29] The attorney for the City of Grants Pass argued that the Court's decision in Robinson didn't apply to this case because that case "held only that states cannot outlaw the status of drug addiction," while making it "clear that they can prohibit conduct like drug use." [30] The plaintiffs' attorney countered that the ordinances in this case are not like laws that prohibit conduct like drug use, because for a human being sleep is as essential to life as breathing. The plaintiff's attorney stated, "The only question under Robinson is whether there's any meaningful difference between a law that says being homeless is punishable and a law that says being homeless while breathing or sleeping or blinking is punishable."[31] The line-drawing of conduct versus status was ultimately more of a theoretical exercise. As the dissent put it, the ordinances criminalize status because they "criminalize conduct (sleeping) that defines a particular status (homelessness)."[32]

Ultimately, the ideological fight at issue—one that has come into sharp relief in the year since this decision—centers around the causes and solutions of homelessness.[33] The majority and the dissent both uplift affordability of housing and economic conditions as causes of homelessness. But they disagree about the solutions. Do camping ordinances have a role to play in deterring homelessness and moving people off the streets?[34] or do these laws simply create "a situation where homeless people necessarily break the law just by existing." [35]

The only proper legal question before the court is whether the Eighth Amendment places limits on a government's power to punish homelessness as a crime by prohibiting sleeping outdoors when there are no alternatives. The Supreme Court said no, based on the legal claim presented to it and the facts that it considered. But the underlying policy question—how to address the reasons why so many people have no choice but to sleep outdoors in our communities—remains. This decision also didn't resolve the many other legal issues presented by this case, namely whether other provisions of the Constitution are implicated when cities enforce their ordinances against persons

[11] Grants Pass, 603 U.S. at 560.
[12] In support of the City's petition for writ of certiorari, 25 amicus briefs were filed by a variety of primarily west coast cities, counties, governors, states, and other interested associations and organizations. By the time the case reached the merits phase, the amicus briefs filed on both parties continued to exponentially increase. An additional 41 briefs were filed either in support of the City or in support of neither party. The Department of Justice submitted its own brief in support of neither party. And the plaintiffs, who were individuals experiencing homelessness in the City of Grants Pass, garnered support from 40 amicus briefs filed on behalf of more than 1,000 organizations and public leaders.
[13] Id. at 533; see also id. at 535 (San Francisco's amicus brief asserts that the enforcement of laws prohibiting camping is "not to criminalize homelessness, but 'as one important tool among others to encourage individuals experiencing homelessness to accept services and to help ensure safe and accessible sidewalks and public spaces.'").
[14] Id. at 525-533.
[15] Id. at 528-529
[16] Id. at 528-532.
[17] Id. at 577 (Sotomayor, J., dissenting) (describing issues presented by lawsuit as not having to do with conduct or behavior associated with encampments—i.e. tents or fires—but rather to status as people without any form of shelter). The dissent goes on to suggest that much of the alleged harms detailed by the majority in its hypotheticals (violent crime, drug overdoses, disease, fires, and hazardous waste) are not implicated in this case. Id. at 584.
[18] Id. at 579 (Sotomayor, J., dissenting); see also id. at 578 ("Criminalizing homelessness can cause a destabilizing cascade of harm.").
[19] Id. at 537.
[20] See, e.g., id. at 533, 534, 540, 553, 555.
[21] Id.
[22] Id.; see also id. at 583. The lack of affordable housing is the primary cause of homelessness. And homeless service organizations do not have enough shelter, housing, and services to meet the needs. Soucy, D., Hall A., Moses J., State of Homelessness: 2025 Edition (Sept. 4, 2025), National Alliance to End Homelessness, available at https://endhomelessness.org/state-of-homelessness/#low_incomes_a_lack_of_affordable_housing_and_weak_safety_nets_drive_record_high_homelessness (last accessed Oct. 14, 2025).
[23] Grants Pass, 603 U.S. at 546-47.
[24] Id. at 581 (Sotomayor, J., dissenting)
[25] Id.
[26] Id.
[27] Id. at 552.
[28] Id. at 583-84 (Sotomayor, J., dissenting). The dissent explained that

experiencing homelessness. Grants Pass will not have the final word on these important policy and legal issues. And there will be more days in court ahead.

Does the U.S. Constitution Protect All People Or Only Housed People?

In many ways, this is a narrow ruling that has limited impact on Eighth Amendment jurisprudence and on constitutional jurisprudence more broadly. It focuses solely on the applicability of the cruel and unusual punishments clause to sleeping/camping ordinances, but it does not address the constitutionality of those types of ordinances under other constitutional provisions such as the Fifth Amendment due process clause or the Fourteenth Amendment equal protection clause.[36] Most significantly, the Supreme Court found that the ordinances at issue were "generally applicable."[37] This meant that the Court believed that the ordinances applied not just to homeless people but to anyone who was sleeping in public. This is key to understanding the Court's decision. The dissenting Justices, on the other hand stated "The Ordinances are enforced exactly as intended: to criminalize the status of being homeless."[38] In the majority's view, even if the dissent were correct about the facts, it did not implicate the Eighth Amendment and "if anything, it may implicate due process and our precedents regarding selective prosecution."[39] The majority noted that "no claim like that is before us in this case."[40]

Despite its narrow applicability the decision has been taken as a green light by state, local, and federal officials to evict and displace homeless persons from encampments and to criminalize sleeping or camping in public places. **In a nation-wide study by the ACLU, in the year since the Grants Pass decision "cities across the country have introduced over 320 bills criminalizing unhoused people, nearly 220 of which have passed."**[41] In California, since Grants Pass, at least three counties and 50 cities have passed new anti-camping ordinances and others expanded or amended their ordinances after the decision.[42] Like so many cases that reach the Supreme Court, the decision as to whether the Constitution protects a particular group of people from government overreach has real and immediate impacts on people's lives. In the wake of this decision, the "tool in the policy toolbox" has become a hammer and every person experiencing homelessness is the nail.

Despite this reality, there are still legal questions to be explored. Are there any other constitutional provisions that protect homeless persons from punishment when they have no choice but to find sleep and shelter in public places? According to Justice Gorsuch, writing for the majority, there may be. Justice Gorsuch remarked that "many substantive legal protections and provisions of the Constitution may have important roles to play when States and cities seek to enforce their laws against the homeless."[43] He specifically identified the First, Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Amendments of the U.S. Constitution as other potential constitutional sources of limitations "on what governments in this country may determine to be criminal behavior and how they may go about enforcing their criminal laws."[44]

Justice Sotomayor elaborated on this point, writing for the dissent, "The Ordinances might also implicate other legal issues … It is quite possible, indeed likely, that these and similar ordinances will face more days in court."[45] In this one important aspect of the opinion, the majority and the dissent are aligned. This was a narrow opinion based solely on the cruel or unusual punishments clause of the Eighth Amendment. But there are many substantive legal provisions, beyond the cruel or unusual punishments clause of the Eighth Amendment, that have roles to play when states and cities (and the federal government) seek to enforce their laws against persons experiencing homelessness. As Justice Sotomayor put it, ""The Constitution provides a baseline of rights for all Americans rich and poor, housed and unhoused. This Court must safeguard those rights even when, and perhaps especially when, doing so is uncomfortable or unpopular."[46]

Just as important as what was decided in this case, is what was not at issue before

homelessness is defined under federal law, referencing 42 U.S.C. 11302 and 24 C.F.R. 582.5 (defining "[a]n individual or family who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence."). Id. at 584. The question of whether someone was involuntarily homeless with "no place to go" was answered by the Martin Court as occurring when there is a greater number of homeless individuals than the available number of beds (not including individuals who have access to temporary shelters). Id. at 583.

[29] Grants Pass, 603 U.S. at 547-49 (discussing Powell v. Texas, 392 U.S. 514 (1968), where the Supreme Court declined to extend Robinson's rule "beyond laws addressing mere status to laws addressing actions that, even if undertaken with the requisite mens rea, might in some sense qualify as involuntary") (internal quotations omitted).

[30] Grants Pass Tr. 5:5-6.

[31] Grants Pass Tr. 132:1-6; see also Grants Pass, 603 U.S. at 578 (Sotomayor, J., dissenting) ("The best the majority can muster is the following tautology: The Ordinances criminalize conduct, not pure status, because they apply to conduct, not status. The flaw in this conclusion is evident. The majority countenances the criminalization of status as long as the City tacks on an essential bodily function—blinking, sleeping, eating, or breathing. That is just another way to ban the person.").

[32] Id. at 585 (Sotomayor, J., dissenting).

[33] Compare id. at 529 (economic conditions, rising housing costs, natural disasters, domestic violence, drug addiction, and mental illness) with 564 (Sotomayor, J., dissenting) ("They experience homelessness due to complex and interconnected issues, including crippling debt and stagnant wages; domestic and sexual abuse; physical and psychiatric disabilities; and rising housing costs coupled with declining affordable housing options.").

[34] Id. at 533 ("According to the National League of Cities (a group that represents more than 19,000 American cities and towns), the National Association of Counties (which represents the Nation's 3,069 counties) and others across the American West, these public-camping regulations are not usually deployed as a front-line response 'to criminalize homelessness.' Instead, they are used to provide city employees with the legal authority to address 'encampments that pose significant health and safety risks' and to encourage their inhabitants to accept other alternatives like shelters, drug treatment programs, and mental-health facilities."); compare with id. at 565 (Sotomayor, J., dissenting) ("This account, however, fails to engage seriously with the precipitating causes of homelessness, the damaging effects of criminalization, and the myriad legitimate reasons people may lack or decline shelter.")

[35] Id. at 577 (Sotomayor, J.,

the court. Justice Sotomayor explained in detail other types of claims that were not foreclosed by the court's decision. For example, the Court did not decide plaintiffs' other claims arising from the Eighth Amendment's excessive fines clause. The district court held that the fines served "'no remedial purpose'" but rather are 'intended to deter homeless individuals from residing in Grants Pass.'"[47] The fines at issue were "grossly disproportionate to the gravity of the offense" and thus excessive.[48] Plaintiffs prevailed on this issue at the district court and the city did not appeal; therefore, it did not form the basis of the Court's opinion.[49]

The Court did not decide whether the ordinances violate the Due Process Clauses of the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments. [50]

Other potential issues arising under the Due Process Clause include vagueness, which has been used to strike down vagrancy laws[51] or other laws that "'make criminal an innocent act.'"[52] Other challenges arising under Due Process may include the right to travel, to the extent that the purpose of the ordinances is to inhibit the ability of persons who are indigent and without housing to travel into the community.[53] There are also Fourth Amendment protections for property, limiting seizure and destruction of property in an encampment.[54]

Although this was the most significant case on homelessness to reach the Supreme Court in decades, the issues it purported to resolve are far from settled. The majority and the dissent seem to agree that there is a baseline of rights that protects everyone, housed or unhoused. However, they diverged on whether the Eighth Amendment's prohibition against status crimes was part of that baseline of rights. The City argued—and the Court accepted as true—that it needed to be able to arrest people who were choosing to sleep outside. However, if people are not choosing to sleep outside and the issue is the lack of available services, as the research indicates[55], do any provisions of the constitution protect them from arrest?

The question left for another day is whether the rest of the Constitution still holds? **Is punishing people for being** homeless antithetical to the rule of law? Or do we have a Constitution that allows people to be punished for their economic and housing status? Those questions remain unanswered, but will continue to be contested on our streets, in our legislative bodies, and ultimately in the courts. Even in Grants Pass, people with disabilities experiencing homelessness sued and successfully obtained an injunction under state law related to the city's enforcement of its camping regulations.[56]

CONCLUSION

The constitution protects people experiencing homelessness from punishment because they have no choice but to sleep outside. This argument may not have won the day under the Eighth Amendment's cruel or unusual punishments clause, but basic notions of fairness, due process, and equal protection promise a constitution that must include all of us. Otherwise, it protects none of us.

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dissenting).
[36] Id. at 557 ("the dissent accuses us of extending to local governments an 'unfettered freedom to punish,' and stripping away any protections 'the Constitution' has against 'criminalizing sleeping[.]' 'Either stay awake,' the dissent warns, 'or be arrested.' That is gravely mistaken. We hold nothing of the sort… The only question we face is whether one specific provision of the Constitution—the Cruel and Unusual Punishments Clause of the Eighth Amendment—prohibits the enforcement of public-camping laws.")
[37] Id. at 547 ("Under the city's laws, it makes no difference whether the charged defendant is homeless, a backpacker on vacation passing through town, or a student who abandons his dorm room to camp out in protest on the lawn of a municipal building."). The majority critiques the dissent's characterization of the evidence as being discriminatorily enacted and enforced against persons experiencing homelessness. Id. at 548 fn. 1, 546 fn. 5.
[38] Id. at 579 (Sotomayor, J., dissenting).
[39] Id. at 546 fn. 5 (stating that no claim is presented to the Court that laws like Grants Pass apply only to the homeless, but that if a city was selectively enforcing their public-camping laws only against homeless persons it does not implicate the Eighth Amendment but rather due process and precedents regarding selective prosecution).
[40] Id.
[41] ACLU, One Year Since Grants Pass: Tracking the Criminalization of Homelessness, available at https://www.aclu.org/one-year-since-grants-pass-tracking-the-criminalization-of-homelessness (last accessed July 30, 2025).
[42] Riley, L. et al., The State of Homelessness Criminalization in California after Grants Pass v. Johnson (May 16, 2025), available at https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=5257640
[43] Id. at 557.
[44] Id. at 541.
[45] Id. at 591 (J. Sotomayor, dissenting).
[46] Id. at 564.
[47] Id. at 589.
[48] Id.
[49] Id.
[50] Id. at 589-90 (Sotomayor, J., dissenting); see also id. at 551-52.
[51] Id. at 590.
[52] Id.; see also Brf. Of Criminal Law and Punishment Scholars as Amici Curiae in support of Respondents, No. 23-175, at 4 ("Perhaps the most fundamental limit on criminal punishment is that it cannot be imposed on innocent conduct.").
[53] Id.
[54] Id. at 591.
[55] Soucy et al., supra n.22.
[56] Disability Rights Oregon et al. v. City of Grants Pass, Case No. 25cv05989 (Jo. County Cir. Ct., Oregon PI order Mar. 28, 2025).

Alabaster Jar

As a tiny sparrow fluttered cheerfully through Central Park

Her angelic songs filled the streets with a healing echo

A woman with no fixed abode, asleep inside a burnt cardboard box, roughly awoke from a downcast sleep

She began to feel and heal and dance

Her rotund shadow was dancing ever-so-lightly behind her

Looking on with favor, a wrongdoer, a sinister man appeared and offered the woman a mucky, smear-stained token

Regular as clockwork, she declined

As the tiny Sparrow sang jubilantly over a Central Park cedar tree, a yellow-powdery, soft dust fell to the ground and uplifted the lofty flowers

"Hitherto, I have never heard such a beautiful sound," she says as she relaxes on a small park bench under the Cedar tree

The dancing woman takes a mirror from her treasured corduroy bag

As she begins to brush her messy-muddled hair into nice-looking corkscrew locks

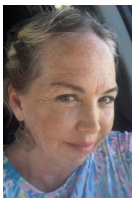
Appears the tiny sparrow sitting upon the bench singing merrily

The dancing woman careening her head to the sky, speaks to God for the first time

She prays,

"If only, I could clutch this moment in an alabaster jar to keep forevermore"

— Kelly Taylor



Kelly Taylor has Pensacola roots. Her youth was greatly influenced by the music and art scene. While attending Escambia high school, she was able to contribute a poem to the yearbook, this happenstance left a positive impact in her life. She is a Substitute Teacher, a military veteran, an alumni of Excelsior College, and Nana to her sweet Grandson. Her poetry has been published in many journals. You can find some of her poetry on Instagram at "acupofcoffeepoetry"

I Give You Myself

I give you myself
Whole and incomplete
Devastated and journeyed
All of me
Black oil - - coal - - mineral Earth - me
Blood stain batons
Soak ancestral grounds
It is the staff of the wicked
Forced into hands of peace
Conditioned my brothers to betray me - - "Comply!"
Echoes deep
My will is Light, I cannot comply I speak
And the Warrior rises in me - - it is my Dance
Rhythmically, pounding out protest
"No justice, No peace"
And the drum beats
Coded - Cross continents - through me
"Whack" of the hand on the skinned djembe
"Whack" of the hand my adversary lays
This ain't the tutelage of The Mother
Black | Brown bodies hanged - for all to see
"I Can't Breathe"
Yet still I give you me
Rich fertile earth - - I am - - dirt - - dark damp nutrient rich - me
I cannot return to a foreign land
I must stand my ground
This bloodied America
Is my people's people's land
And the weapons you have formed against me - - systemically
Shall not prosper
My body dragged cross concrete jungles
Maunders over slain slaves shot systematically
And the tribes fall
I am numb to my blackness
Trapped
In time space continuum
Afro punk futurism
I am the quantum state of self
unbeknownst to my very existence
forgotten
prepared
strangled
You chose not to hear - - me
Begging you please I'll give you me
Cacao tree - - coco butter - - bitter chocolate - - black sand - me
I am rage
Politely excusing itself during service
In supplication - - Hands up
And the drum beats grow
And the chaos festers
Chickens have come home to roost
And time has come
manifested
a woken moment of change
The war is waged…
Remember, I tried to give you me
Universe - - black sapphire - - chocolate diamond - - ebony - - black sea - me

— Erica Sutherlin

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Ms. Sutherlin directed Lifetime Network's hit movie, Kirk Franklin's A Gospel Christmas, and has directed numerous plays and musicals during her 20+ year career. As a poet and essayist, Ms. Sutherlin has contributed content to Building Womanist Coalitions: Writing and Teaching in the Spirit of Love and Hooked on the Art of Love: bell hooks and My Calling for Soul-Work.

Costly Consequences

The Financial and Racial Fallout of School Discipline

BY **SARAH JOYNER, ZENEA JOHNSON** AND **SOPHIA TUCZINSKI**[1]

Introduction

Racial discrimination, poverty, and education are deeply interconnected forces that have shaped the American social and legal landscape. From the nation's founding, the denial of education to Black Americans served as a deliberate strategy of disenfranchisement, reinforcing a cyclical relationship between racism, poverty, and systemic exclusion.[2] Slaveholders, fearing that literacy would empower enslaved people to resist subjugation, criminalized and even executed those who sought to teach African Americans to read or write. This deliberate suppression of education was not merely an act of control, but a calculated means of maintaining racial and economic hierarchies—a legacy that continues to reverberate through modern institutions.[3]

To understand contemporary disciplinary practices and their consequences, it is necessary to trace this historical arc to the present. One modern mechanism of exclusion is the imposition of monetary penalties and civil citations against students for relatively minor school-based conduct. While these practices are often framed as neutral administrative measures, in practice they function as tools of social sorting—reproducing economic hardship and exposing students and families to municipal legal processes that few can navigate or afford. The Illinois school-ticketing case study examined in this essay offers an especially stark example. Investigative reporting, law-student advocacy, and legislative inquiry have revealed a system where municipal fines and police-issued citations within schools have produced measurable, racially disparate impacts on students' education and family stability.[4]

Although formal laws prohibiting the education of Black Americans have been abolished, racial inequality in education remains deeply entrenched. Persistent segregation, inequitable school funding, and disproportionate disciplinary practices continue to sustain structural barriers for students of color.[5] These disparities are not isolated incidents but manifestations of systemic racism that perpetuate cycles of poverty and marginalization across generations. Research consistently shows that Black and Latinx students continue to be overrepresented in under-resourced schools, face higher rates of suspension, and have fewer opportunities to enroll in advanced coursework that will make them eligible for continued success in higher education.[6]

The effects of these disparities are tangible. Lower graduation rates, advanced course enrollment, standardized testing, and—most relevant to this essay ---higher disciplinary contacts that remove students from instructional time, all contribute to long-term inequities. The connection between missed instruction and diminished economic opportunity is well documented. Students who are suspended or required to appear in court are less likely to graduate, more likely to enter the juvenile system, and more likely to face limited employment prospects.[7] These educational disruptions are not random; they are mediated by race and poverty.[8]

This article examines how the American education system has historically and contemporaneously functioned as a mechanism of social control, linking the denial of education to broader patterns of criminalization and economic disenfranchisement. Using Illinois as a case study, this paper highlights how the intersection of education, race, and poverty continues to impact, financially punish and criminalize students for minor misbehavior.

Part I reviews the historical struggle for African Americans' right to education and how educational institutions have been weaponized to sustain inequality. Part II explores the criminalization of poverty and its intersection with educational disparities. Part III analyzes the expansion of the school-to-prison pipeline, tracing its evolution from school-based discipline to civil and criminal penalties that disproportionately affect youth of color. Finally, Part IV concludes by considering potential policy and legal reforms necessary to dismantle these enduring systems of oppression.

Historical Foundations: Education and the Fight for Civil Rights

The education system has long been a battle ground for the fight against civil injustice. Black children have historically encountered, and continue to encounter, substantial discrimination in education. This discrimination manifests through achievement gaps, lower high school graduation rates, higher suspension and expulsion rates, and diminished access to post-secondary education.[9] Structural inequities such as unequal funding, teacher shortages, and inadequate facilities contribute directly to these disparities.[10]

The causal relationship between educational resource allocation and life outcomes has been established across multiple disciplines. School funding (largely determined by local property taxes), teacher experience, curriculum rigor, and cohort stability reliably shape student achievement.[11] Where funding and resources are concentrated in wealthier, predominantly white districts, concentrated funding yields better-qualified teachers, richer curricula, and more stable learning environments. In contrast, underfunded majority-Black districts face resource shortages that heighten vulnerability to social stressors which results in teachers and administrators using punitive discipline as their default management strategy.[12]

The historical trajectory of educational inequity begins with explicit prohibitions on teaching enslaved people. Even after emancipation, Jim Crow-era segregation ensured that Black students received inferior schooling. [13] The Supreme Court's decision in Cumming v. Board of Education (1899), following Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), upheld the "separate but equal" doctrine in public education, sanctioning widespread inequality. [14]

Across the nation, even as the number of Black schools increased, disparities persisted in curriculum quality, teacher credentials, and access to extracurricular programs.[15] Brown v. Board of Education (1954) recognized the psychological and social harms of segregation and declared that separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.[16] Yet the implementation of Brown met massive resistance. Southern states closed schools, established private academies, and delayed integration, while northern districts maintained segregation through housing patterns, zoning laws, and inequitable funding.[17]

In the post-Brown era, exclusionary practices evolved rather than disappeared. Tracking, disproportionate discipline, and differential access to special education emerged as subtler mechanisms of segregation.[18] These practices, often guided by racialized assumptions about behavior and potential, reinforced cycles of diminished expectation, opportunity, and surveillance of Black students.[19]

De facto segregation persists today.[20] Urban and Midwestern districts continue to be racially and economically divided, leaving Black and Latinx students concentrated in under-resourced schools.[21] These inequities extend beyond infrastructure to disciplinary practices that disproportionately affect marginalized youth. A notable modern example is Illinois, where school-based policing and ticketing programs have been used as tools of punitive discipline.[22] Students, in Black or low-income communities, are cited and fined for minor infractions such as hallway disrup-tions, dress code violations, or tardiness.[23] The resulting financial and legal burdens create educational disparities, pushing students out of classrooms and into debt and/or the court system.[24]

Municipal ordinances authorize civil citations for conduct occurring on school grounds. These citations, adjudicated in municipal rather than juvenile courts, can result in collections actions against the juveniles' family.[25] The practical result is a rapid escalation from a school discipline issue to a civic-debt crisis for families without the means to pay.

Investigative journalism has illuminated the scope of this problem. Between 2019 and 2024, Illinois school districts issued thousands of citations to students, over half to Black students, who represented less than 20% of the student body.[26] Students unable to pay face additional fees, court appearances, and even warrants, further disrupting their education and increasing the likelihood of long-term engagement with the justice system.[27] Advocates like Yale Law School graduate Zoe Li have drawn legislative attention to these disparities and catalyzed reform efforts.[28]

ProPublica's data show that in affected districts, citation issuance surged after 2018 as municipal enforcement expanded into schools.[29] Families described receiving unexplained court notices, with students having to miss

school in order to attend hearings, and their families struggling with repayment plans that drained household resources.[30] Seemingly minor fines—sometimes as little as $50—accumulated with administrative fees to create crushing financial burdens.[31]

II. The Criminalization of Poverty and Its Impact on Education

The criminalization of poverty in the United States has deep historical roots. Laws and policies have long been used to punish low-income individuals, often along racial lines.[32] Historical and contemporary evidence demonstrates that these systems perpetuate economic and racial disparities, selecting certain acts to criminalize in ways that disproportionately affect the poor.

Illinois' school-based ticketing system provides a vivid example of how educational spaces have become entangled with mechanisms of economic punishment. Investigations by ProPublica, the Chicago Sun-Times, and Teen Vogue found that from 2019 to 2024, school districts across Illinois issued thousands of tickets to students for minor misbehavior such as "disruption," "truancy," or "disrespect.[33] In many cases, fines ranging from $50 to $500 were instituted for actions that were previously handled by teachers or administrators.[34] Families unable to pay the fines faced escalating costs, missed school due to court appearances, and risked involvement in municipal enforcement actions.[35] These practices exemplify the broader pattern of punishing poverty and restricting access to education.

Beyond financial harm, these practices entangle families in municipal legal systems that offer minimal procedural protection. Municipal courts often lack appointed counsel, and many defendants face default judgments for nonappearance or misunderstanding.[36] For families whose first language is not English or who have limited familiarity with the civil-court process, the administrative hurdle is especially punitive.[37]

Empirical research confirms the educational impact of financial penalties. Ticketed students miss school, fall behind academically, and face heightened dropout risk.[38] Stress and anxiety associated with financial insecurity compounds these harms, reducing engagement and academic performance.[39] Black and low-income students disproportionately bear these burdens, reflecting systemic inequities embedded in both the educational and juvenile legal systems.[40]

Longitudinal data link early disruptions—such as missed instruction for court appearances or mandated community service—to lower standardized-test scores, delayed grade progression, and reduced college eligibility.[41] These educational setbacks compound: lower academic attainment reduces college eligibility, limits workforce options, and perpetuates intergenerational

poverty.[42] Thus, criminalizing poverty in school discipline has measurable social costs that go far beyond the immediate goal of enforcing order.

Reform efforts in states such as Louisiana, Washington, and Utah, which have reduced or eliminated juvenile fines and fees, show measurable improvements in attendance and disciplinary outcomes.[43] At Yale Law School, Zoe Li and other graduate students worked with Illinois legislators to develop systems to replace fine-only incarceration with restorative or educational interventions, demonstrating practical approaches to reform.[44,45] In Illinois, advocacy efforts have sought legislative limits on school-based ticketing and expansion of due process protections for students. These reforms demonstrate the power of research and advocacy in making changes to the law.

Successful reforms in this arena share key features: eliminating monetary penalties as default responses; prioritizing school-based restorative practices; increasing transparency through public reporting of law-enforcement interactions; and guaranteeing legal representation when municipal enforcement is used.[46] Together, these measures reduce collateral consequences and keep students in classrooms.[47]

The imposition of fines and fees in schools reflects a broader pattern of criminalizing poverty.[48] For some municipalities, citation revenue has become a budgetary tool, incentivizing aggressive enforcement in marginalized communities —including schools.[49] In this way, the criminalization of poverty is both ideological and fiscal, blending governance needs with punitive practice to entrench inequality.[50]

III. The Expansion of the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Schools increasingly mirror the criminal justice system, where poverty, race, and perceived misbehavior intersect to produce punitive outcomes. School Resource Officers (SROs), zero-tolerance policies, and punitive financial penalties all contribute to this dynamic. In Illinois, ticketing programs transformed minor misbehavior into legal and financial consequences, disproportionately affecting students of color.[51]

Data reveal that ticketed students are more likely to miss school, fall behind academically, and face juvenile court involvement.[52] Black students are cited at higher rates than white students even when controlling for socioeconomic and behavioral variables, replicating historic racial exclusion that reinforces structural inequities, limit opportunity and perpetuate poverty.[53]

Empirical studies demonstrate that the presence of SROs and the practice of issuing civil citations correlate with higher rates of school-based criminal referrals—especially in districts with racially concentrated poverty.[54] A multi-district analysis indicates that schools with more pronounced law-enforcement presence are more likely to convert disciplinary matters into tickets or arrests, irrespective of the severity of behavior.[55] In Illinois, these practices have been mapped to show geographic clustering in lower-income neighborhoods, compounding the educational disadvantages of community disinvestment.[56]

The transformation of schools into punitive spaces re-flects the deep entanglement of education and the criminal legal system in the United States.Once designed Once designed to nurture civic and

intellectual development, schools in-creasingly function as sites of surveillance and punish-ment, particularly for low-income students of color.[57] This shift has produced a generation of students more likely to encounter law enforcement than educational support, highlighting the institutionalized pathways through which poverty and racial bias intersect to limit opportunity and reinforce systemic inequality.[58]

Psychological research adds another layer and shows that sustained surveillance and frequent contact with law enforcement in formative years can alter students' perceptions of school as a safe, communal environment and instead foster alienation, distrust, and disengagement.[59] Disengaged students are more likely to withdraw academically, to internalize low expectations, and to seek alternative (often risky) peer networks—conditions that further increase the odds of the juvenile becoming involved in the criminal legal system.[60]

The school-to-prison pipeline emerged from the broader "tough-on-crime" policies of the 1980s and 1990s, when fear-based narratives about youth violence reshaped educational discipline.[61] During this period, zero-tolerance policies became widespread, mandating harsh consequences for behaviors that were previously addressed with warnings, counseling, or parental notification.[62] Students who were suspended or expelled face a higher likelihood of dropping out and entering the juvenile or criminal legal systems.[63] Studies show that students who are suspended even once in middle school are more likely to repeat a grade or fail to graduate, illustrating the academic consequences of exclusionary discipline.[64]

Because school discipline policies are typically implemented locally, their design often reflects local politics rather than a consistent evidence base. This decentralization creates variation—and inequality—across districts: some adopt restorative and therapeutic models while others rely heavily on exclusionary and punitive sanctions.[65] The Illinois case highlights this patchwork: where a district adopts ticketing or heavy law-enforcement presence, students face substantially different disciplinary regimes than peers in neighboring districts, entrenching disparities across small geographic scales.[66]

The presence of School Resource Officers (SROs) further blurred the line between education and law enforcement. In many districts, SROs handle routine disciplinary matters, leading to the criminalization of typical adolescent behavior.[67] Research indicates that schools with SROs report higher rates of student arrests, disproportionately affecting Black and Latinx students, even when controlling for socioeconomic factors and school size.[68] These policies are applied unevenly, with schools in low-income and predominantly minority neighborhoods more likely to employ zero-tolerance discipline and school-based policing than wealthier districts.[69]

Historical narratives, such as the so-called "super-predator" myth of the 1990s, influenced public perception and policy during this era.[70] Although juvenile crime rates were declining, fear-driven rhetoric contributed to the expansion of zero-tolerance measures and policing in

schools. Its legacy persists in the disproportionate rates of suspension, expulsion, and school-based arrests for students of color today. The myth's influence shaped policy decisions that continue to affect discipline and policing in schools, even decades later.

Recent policy analyses emphasize the need for data transparency to identify disparate impacts: mandatory reporting of school-based citations, disaggregated by race and offense, allows researchers and policymakers to see patterns that would otherwise remain obscured.[71] Illinois' reporting gap—where many citations occurred without public accounting—hampered early detection of the problem and allowed ticketing to grow without sufficient oversight.[72]

Efforts to reform these practices have begun in some jurisdictions. States like Louisiana, Washington, and Utah have reduced juvenile fines and fees, while certain school districts have adopted restorative justice approaches that emphasize repairing harm rather than punitive exclusion.[73] Restorative programs have been associated with reductions in suspensions, improved school climate, and higher engagement among students of color.[74] While these reforms are promising, they remain limited and unevenly implemented. Comprehensive change requires dismantling the structural inequities in both education and policing that maintain the pipeline.

A multi-pronged reform agenda is required to address the pipeline: (1) eliminate or strictly limit fine-based discipline in schools; (2) remove or curtail law-enforcement authority over non-criminal school behavior; (3) fund restorative and wraparound services (counselors, social workers, and mental-health support) at levels comparable to SRO and security budgets; (4) mandate state-level reporting and auditing of school discipline data; and (5) ensure access to counsel or legal assistance when students are funneled into municipal systems.[75] Early evidence from districts that implemented several of these elements shows declines in arrests, improved attendance, and narrower racial disparities in discipline.[76]

Ultimately, the school-to-prison pipeline is a modern manifestation of historical denial of educational opportunity. Where enslaved African Americans were once denied literacy, today marginalized youth are excluded from educational spaces through punitive policies that limit their potential and channel them into the justice system. The intersection of poverty, race, and institutionalized discipline ensures that the cycle of disadvantage persists across generations.

IV. Conclusion: Whose job is it to fight the battle?

Over the past two decades, the struggle for educational equity has evolved from demanding access to schools to defending the right to remain in classrooms without being criminalized. The historical denial of education, the criminalization of poverty, and ongoing systemic inequities have created barriers extending far

beyond education, shaping life trajectories across generations. Fines, zero-tolerance policies, and the presence of law enforcement in schools continue to link economic disadvantage with punishment, reinforcing cycles of exclusion.

Addressing these challenges requires coordinated action across government and civil society. Legislatures should prohibit municipal ticketing for noncriminal school conduct—or at minimum, require adjudication in juvenile courts with notice and counsel protections. They should fund restorative practices, require race-disaggregated reporting of school–law enforcement interactions, and provide targeted support to historically under-resourced districts.[77] School boards must prioritize de-escalation, mental health, and family engagement over financial sanctions. Legal aid organizations and law schools should expand clinics that advise families on municipal citation processes and advocate for the elimination of punitive fines.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that integrates educational reform, social policy, and legal protection. Eliminating punitive monetary penalties, implementing restorative justice practices, and adequately funding schools in low-income and minority communities are critical steps toward dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline. Beyond policy changes, there is a need to confront and transform the underlying societal attitudes that criminalize poverty and stigmatize marginalized students.

In Illinois, the policy debate has moved from awareness to reform. Legislators have introduced bills to restrict ticketing, require reporting, and reaffirm that school discipline is an educational—not criminal—matter.[78] Advocacy groups and student activists continue to press for a temporary suspension on ticketing until oversight mechanisms are implemented.[79] These combined efforts illustrate a practical template: investigative journalism exposes harm, legal advocates translate it into policy, and lawmakers enact structural protections.[80]

Ensuring educational equity is not merely a matter of access. It is a matter of protecting the fundamental right to learn, grow, and participate fully in civic life without fear of being penalized for one's socioeconomic status or racial identity. The fight for education today is inseparable from the broader struggle for justice, equity, and opportunity in American society, demanding sustained advocacy and systemic change to break the cycle of dis-

[1] All three authors are either Stetson Social Justice Advocacy Concentration students or alumni--- Sarah Joyner (Class of 2027); Zenea Johnson (Class of 2025); Sophia Tuczynski (Class of 2026).

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[6] Id.

[7] David J. Armor & David E. Kirkland, Education and the Economy: Impacts of School Disruption on Long-Term Earnings, (Nat'l Bureau of Econ. Research working papers) (2018).

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[11] See Jonathan Kozol, Savage Inequalities (1991).

[12] See James D. Anderson, The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935 (1988).

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[24] See Cohen, supra note 20.

[25] Id.; Yale Law School, supra note 21.

[26] See Cohen, supra note 20.

[27] Yale Law School, supra note 21.

[28] Id.

[29] Cohen, supra note 20.

[30] Id.

[31] See Richards, supra note 22.

[32] Heather Andrea Williams, Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom 3–6 (Univ. of N.C. Press 2005).

[33] Cohen, supra note 20; Li, supra note 22; Cohen & Richards, supra note 24.

[34] Id.

[35] Id.

[36] Alexandra Natapoff, Criminal Municipal Courts,

134 Harv. L. Rev. 3 837 (2021) (describing how municipal courts operate with limited procedural protections and minimal counsel).

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[43] See State reform summaries, e.g., La. H.B. 216 (2021) (repealing juvenile fees); Wash. Rev. Code § (various juvenile fee reforms); Utah statutes (fee reforms).

[44] Yale Law School, supra note 21; Ines Chomnalez, Graduate Students Develop System to Reduce Fine-Only Incarceration (2023), https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2023/04/05/graduate-students-develop-system-to-reduce-fine-only-incarceration/ (last visited Nov. 9, 2025).

[45] See Yale Law School, supra note 21.

[46] Emily Morgan, Nina Salomon, Martha Plotkin & Rebecca Cohen, School Discipline Consensus Report: Strategies From the Field To Keep Students Engaged in School and Out of the Juvenile Justice System, Office of Justice Programs (July 2014).

[47] Derek W. Black, Reforming School Discipline, 111 Northwestern Univ. L. Rev. 1 (2016).

[48] Fines & Fees Justice Ctr., supra note 38; Cohen, supra note 20.

[49] Dick M. Carpenter II et al., Municipal Fines and Fees: A 50-State Survey of State Laws 1 (Inst. for Justice Apr. 30, 2020) (noting that "cities and towns nationwide use their power to enforce … ordinances to raise revenue rather than solely to protect the public," and that the structure of state laws gives municipalities "ample incentive and means to engage in taxation by citation" by relying on fines and fees for city revenue).

[50] Carrie Manning, Implications of the Reliance on Fines and Fees, in Taxing Democracy: Local Taxation and the Social Contract in America 91, 94-95 (2023) (explaining that policing and citation fines have become a mechanism for revenue generation that relies disproportionately on racially and economically marginalized communities, reflecting how fiscal incentives can perpetuate punitive practices and exclusion).

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[52] Id.

[53] *I*d.; Li, supra note 21.

[54] Denise C. Gottfredson et al., Effects of School Resource Officers on School Crime and Responses to School Crime, U.S. Dep't of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, NCJ 255104, at 5-7 (2020) (demonstrating that the presence of SROs and the practice of issuing civil citations correlate with higher rates of school-based criminal referrals). (ojp.gov).

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[56] Illinois Juvenile Justice Commission, Racial Justice Statement & Recommendations, at 2-3 (June 2020) (mapping SRO and enforcement practices in Illinois to show clustering in lower-income neighborhoods, compounding educational disadvantages). (ijjc.illinois.gov).

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[62] Id.

[63] Advancement Project, supra note 3.

[64] Russell J. Skiba et al., Suspension and Expulsion: Rethinking the Paradigm for Elementary and Secondary Schools, 2 Theory Into Practice 12 (2014).

[65] Cohen, supra note 20.

[66] Id.; Li, supra note 22.

[67] Kim, Losen & Hewitt, supra note 11.

[68] U.S. Dep't of Educ., supra note 4.

[69] Id.

[70] John J. Dilulio, The Coming of the Super-Predators (1995); see also Kim, Losen & Hewitt, supra note 11.

[71] U.S. Dep't of Educ., Office of Safe and Supportive Schools, Addressing the Root Causes of Disparities in School Discipline: A Guide to Data and Policy 3-4 (2015) (recommending collection and public reporting of school discipline data disaggregated by race, gender, and disability to uncover patterns of disparity that would otherwise be obscured).

[72] Jodi S. Cohen & Jennifer Smith Richards, The Price Kids Pay: Schools and Police Punish Students With Costly Tickets for Minor Misbehavior, ProPublica (Apr. 28, 2022), https://www.propublica.org/article/illinois-school-police-tickets-fines (last visited Feb. 13, 2026).

[73] Anne Gregory & Kathleen Clawson, The Potential of Restorative Practices to Reduce Discipline Disparities, 26 Peabody J. Educ. 25 (2018).

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[76] See Cohen, supra note 20; see Li, supra note 22.

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Be Like Glue

Teacher with an upside down smile

will you remember me

I couldn't read very fast

you yelled at me for an eternity

Kind teacher who gave out pencils

I remember you

you taught me how to read

you stuck to me like glue

— Kelly Taylor

Kelly Taylor has Pensacola roots. Her youth was greatly influenced by the music and art scene. While attending Escambia high school, she was able to contribute a poem to the yearbook, this happenstance left a positive impact in her life. She is a Substitute Teacher, a military veteran, an alumni of Excelsior College, and Nana to her sweet Grandson. Her poetry has been published in many journals. You can find some of her poetry on Instagram at "acupofcoffeepoetry"

Sixty Years, Still Counting

For Mrs. Clara M. Nettles

The ink dried in '65, they swear,
but I have seen ballots bleed,
a fresh wound in a cardboard box,
the key rusted shut in a sheriff's pocket.
The air smells of mildew and gun oil.

Before light, Clara M. Nettles dresses.
Blue Magic slicks her silver hair,
pulled tight until her skin sings,
her scalp a remembered map of stitches.
Her Keds are split, soles flapping.
She stuffs them with cardboard
against the gravel's teeth.

She walks the two-lane blacktop,
asphalt still humming with old hoofbeats.
Her knees count the years in creaks and pops.
She names the dead: Jimmie Lee. Viola. Reeb.
Their ghosts swing in her voice,
a cracked bell tolling.

At the polls, they demand her life on paper.
She offers a scar,
a purple river delta over her ear,
the heat of a light bill in her fist.
Her smile is a cotton field:
soft on the surface, roots clenched on shale.
"Take your time," she says.
"My feet are patient."

In an Atlanta twilight, a screen glows.
A boy watches a sister wrenched from her car,
her breath a white cloud in the halogen glare.
Hashtags bloom in real time, a bruise spreading:
#StillSelma. The past is not past. It is livestreamed.

They build new walls from old bones,
purge names, draw lines with surgical spite.
But every barred door births a choir.
In shadowed kitchens, fists rise like bread.
Grandmothers teach the muscle-memory of
freedom,
how to dot the i with a fingertip's blood.

So this is not a relic. It is the present tense,
raw as a blister, sacred as a scar.
It is Clara's breath fogging the ballot,
her hymn held against the dark,
the highway humming an off-key freedom song.

Let no one say the fight is over.
The ink may dry, but the blood remembers.
Count the years, sixty, and the count goes on,
until her Keds dissolve to dust,
and her bare bones march the unbroken line
where history becomes heartbeat,
heartbeat becomes vote,
vote becomes this visceral vow:

We are not yet free,
but we are still free enough
to count,
out loud,
together.

— Ramon Carty

Ramon Carty is a Toronto-based multi-genre writer, spoken-word artist, and manuscript editor of Jamaican-Maroon-Akan heritage whose work oscillates between visceral political testimony, dark satire, and unflinching personal narrative. Whether confronting voter suppression and colonial violence or dissecting intimacy and loss through experimental forms, he performs as Ramrock Speaks. Author of the debut collection *This Heart Has Eyes*, he moves fluidly from grassroots activism to lyrical introspection, mentoring emerging poets across diasporic, digital, and print landscapes.

Black Joy Is Critical to Resisting Systemic Racism

BY SOMMER BROKAW[1]

Sommer Brokaw, Esq., (J.D. 2025) was a member of the Social Justice Advocacy Concentration Program. She currently works as a legal aid advocate. Prior to law school, Sommer worked as a journalist, covering stories on racial and social injustices. She developed her love of writing from her mom who was a journalist and her passion for Black joy as resistance from her father who taught her not to let the struggles in life steal her joy.

"Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave. I rise."

— Maya Angelou[2]

This article highlights how Black joy exists in the face of systemic racism[3] in the United States. Black joy affirms Black Americans' humanity, reducing stress, and providing hope. From Negro spirituals[4] on the Underground Railroad, to Freedom Songs[5] during the 1960's civil rights movement, to dancing at Black Lives Matter protests,[6] Black joy has been as critical to uplifting the spirits of Black Americans as helium is to a balloon to prevent its deflation. • This article is divided into three main sections followed by a conclusion. The first section describes how Black joy has countered the dehumanizing racial stereotypes[7] of Black Americans from slavery to segregation laws to more contemporary times. The second section focuses on artists and racial justice groups using themes of Black joy in pride, hope, and self-care as a form of resistance. The paper concludes that Black joy is an indispensable weapon that is needed to affirm Black humanity and our desire for freedom.

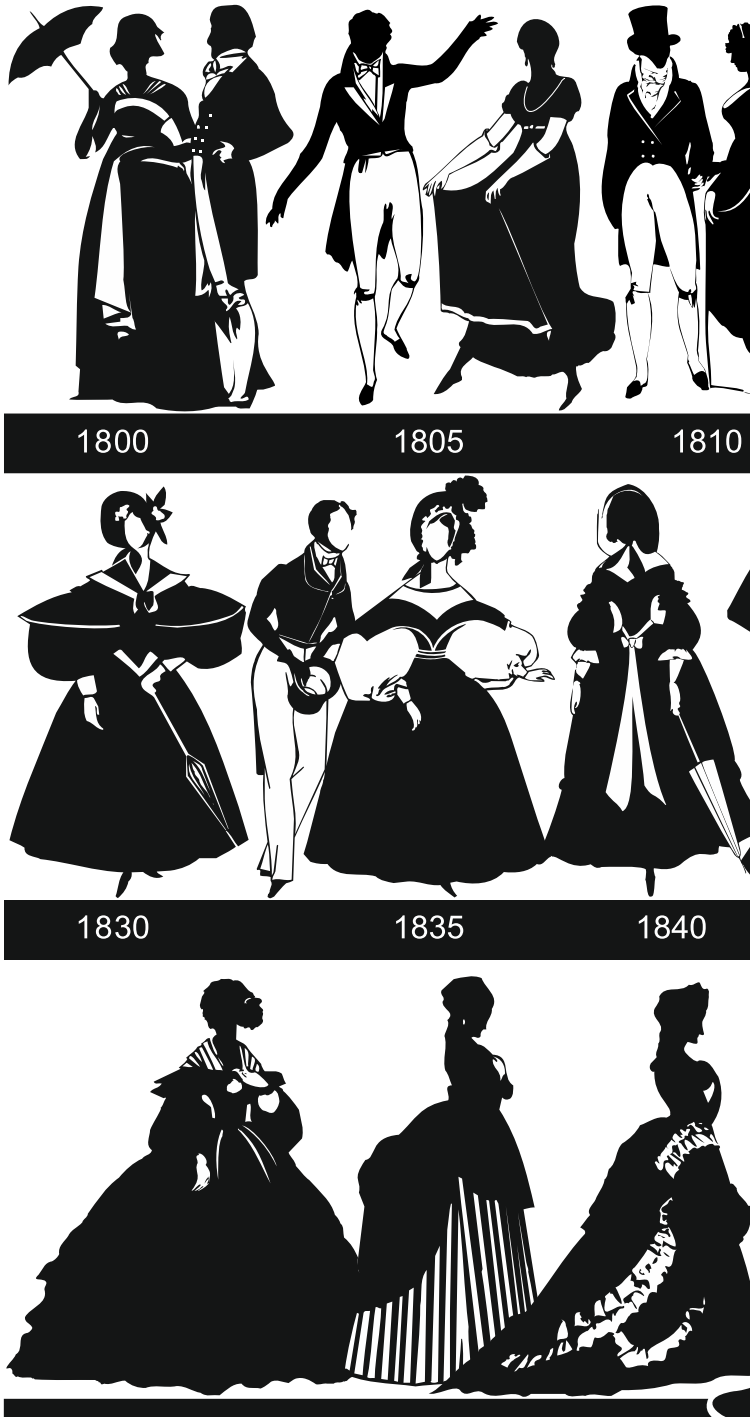
THE JOY OF FREEDOM FROM SLAVERY

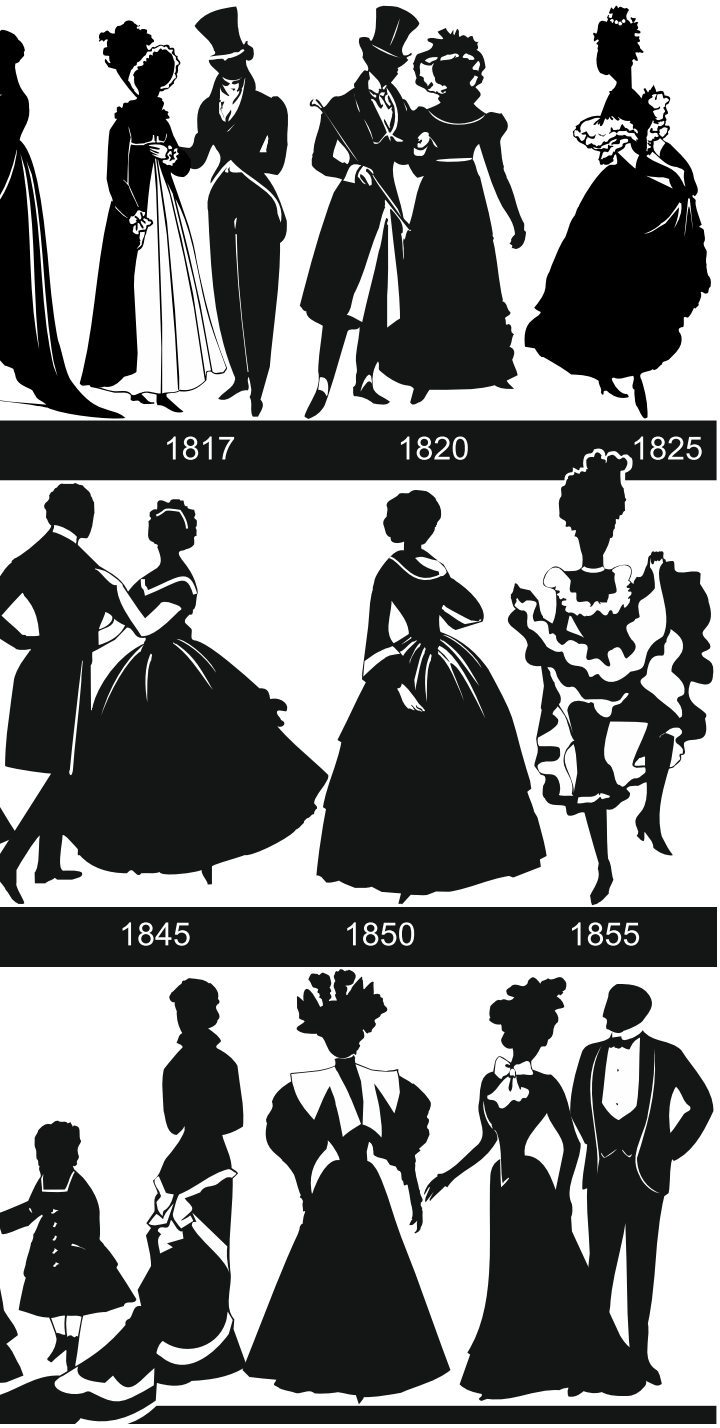
"Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung," Poet Phillis Wheatley wrote in a poem.[8] "I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate / Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat; / What pangs excruciatingly must molest, / What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?" the poem answered. The poem refers to Ms. Wheatley's horrific experience being sold into slavery as a child and shows that she held onto memories of her mother's love and happiness in her homeland.[9] Wheatley was named Phillis after the slave ship[10] that she was packed into like a caged animal in a circus without a soul. Her basic human needs and human dignity, along with 95 other Africans on board, callously disregarded.[11] She was one of 76 Africans who survived the perilous journey.[12] Due to her "age or physical frailty,"[13] she was spared being worked to death on plantation fields where the average lifespan was seven years.[14] She was auctioned[15] into slavery to a family in Boston, Massachusetts for domestic work. The family, the Wheatleys, who enslaved her, taught her to read and write, which was rare at the time for any woman yet alone an enslaved woman,[16] but she longed for "freedom" after being seized from "Afric's fancy'd happy'd seat,"[17] and she eventually was able to write her way out of slavery.[18]

THE RIGHT TO PURSUE JOY, FREDOM AND HAPPINESS

Slavery cast a dark shadow over America. At America's founding, most of the white men who signed the Declaration of Independence held they had the basic right to not only freedom, but also the "pursuit of happiness"[19]. These men, however, owned slaves and deprived them of the same rights. The "pursuit of happiness" is named as one of the "unalienable rights", but antebellum laws treated Black people not only as inferior, but as property unworthy of the autonomy, love, and joy. Still, in the aftermath of the Revolutionary War, an enslaved woman in Massachusetts, known as Mum Bett, sued for her freedom and won.[20] The report cited the following words of the new Massachusetts Constitution of 1780: "All men are born free and equal, and have certain natural, essential and unalienable rights; among which may be reckoned the right of enjoying and defending their lives and liberties." Mum Bett used those words to her advantage and was declared a free woman, who changed her name to Elizabeth Freeman in honor of her new status, New York Times Magazine reported. "If one minute's freedom had been offered to me, and I had been told I must die at the end of that minute, I would have taken it," Bett said.

Slavery was not the only institutionalized form of dehumanization of Black Americans in the United States. Legal cases, such as Dred Scott v. Sandford,[21] and In re Ah Yup,[22] show how American society used the legal system to design a racial hierarchy based on the myth of white supremacy. This hierarchy denied the freedom of citizenship rights to Black people and other individuals deemed to be "nonwhite". Black people appear in various shades, some with lighter skin from love affairs when such marriages were legally forbidden in several states under anti-miscegenation laws,[23] and some whose heredity traces back to enslaved women who were repeatedly raped. Yet,





all were legally deemed Black under the "one drop rule"[24] that declared that anyone with a drop of Black blood was Black. And to be Black, was to be considered less than human.

Throughout history, dehumanizing stereotypes have ridiculed Black joy and fueled discriminatory laws. One stereotype is the "Mammy" caricature, portrayed as an obese, dark-skin Black woman, who wears a head scarf and works as domestic servant, the Jim Crow Museum website on this caricature,[25] which adds context to explain the history of stereotypes and racist imagery, shows. The "Mammy" was portrayed commercially on pancake boxes as Aunt Jemima, according to the website. Moreover, white men dressed in minstrel Black face portrayed "Mammy" as happy with slavery and caring for white children more than her own. The stereotype traces back to slavery when enslaved Black women served as wetnurses[26] for white babies.

Another stereotype, the Strong Black Women, also has roots in slavery as a means of distinguishing Black women from white women considered too precious for the back-breaking field work that Black women endured alongside Black men.[27] This stereotype has led to a belief that Black women do not feel pain: "They were stronger creatures; they didn't feel pain in childbirth; they didn't have tear ducts," said Gloria Naylor in an essay tracing the stereotype back to slavery.[28]

The "Sapphire," or Angry Black Women stereotype, similarly traces back to slavery when enslaved Black women were seen as "uncivilized," because back-breaking work in the fields forced them to be "loud, tough and resilient" and White women in contrast were seen as "respectable."[29] The Sapphire caricature also sprang out of the "Sassy Mammies," depicted as leading "their own homes with iron fists, including berating black husbands and children," and this stereotypical image was part of popular culture from the 19th to the mid-20th century.[30]

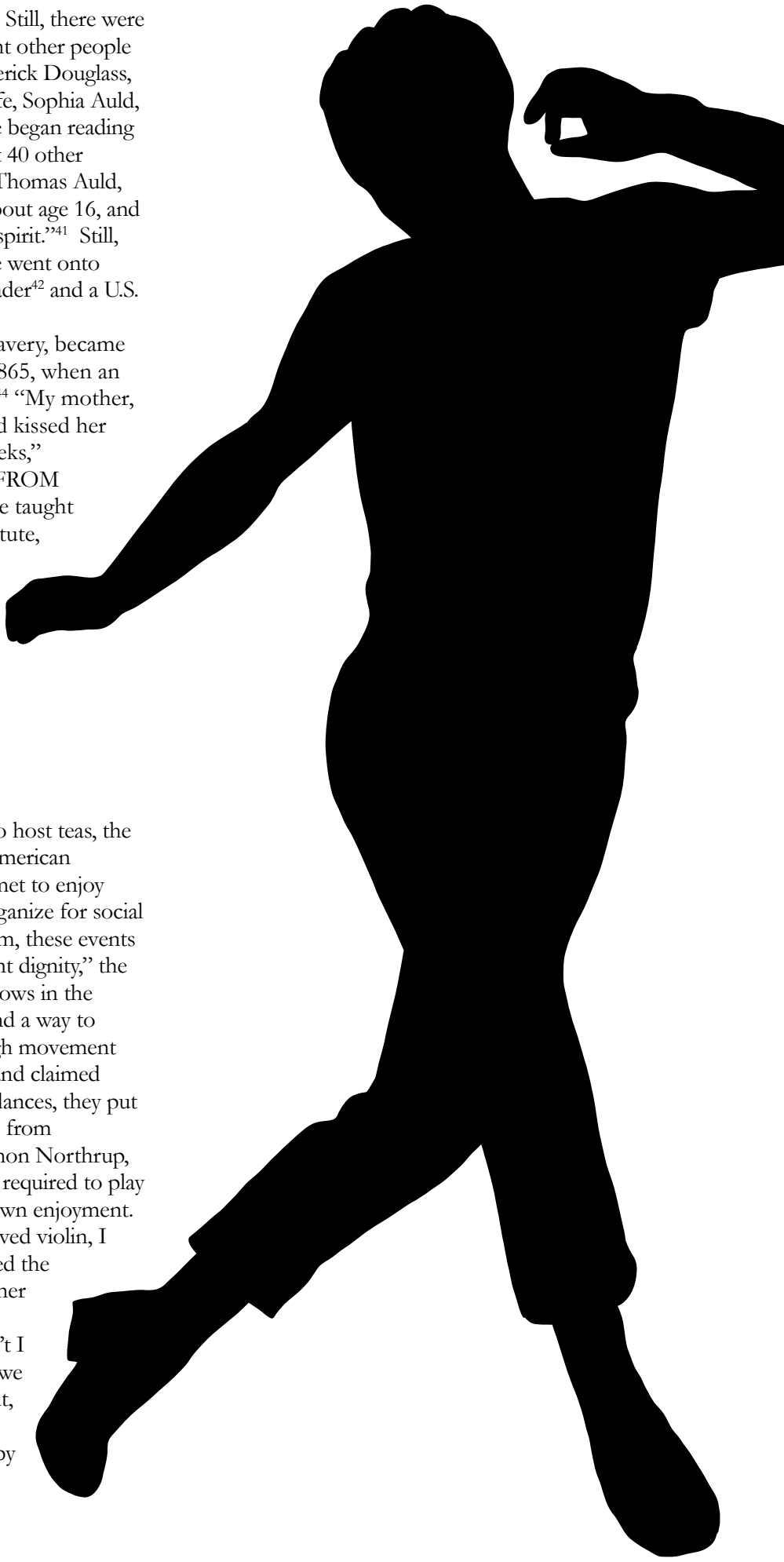
Another stereotype adding to the disdain of Black women was the Jezebel, portraying Black women as "innately promiscuous,"[31] and predatory, in contrast to virtuous white women. The Jezebel stereotype was also used to help justify no consequences for white men raping enslaved Black women.[32] Meanwhile, lynching avenged the rape of white woman, fueled by the stereotypical "Brute caricature" portraying Black men as "innately savage, animalistic, destructive, and criminal – deserving punishment, maybe death," for targeting white women.[33]

Even Black children faced stereotypes as "Picaninnies" who "had bulging eyes, unkempt hair, red lips, and wide mouths into which they stuffed huge slices of watermelon. They were themselves conceived of as just tasty morsels for alligators."[34] Overall, the dehumanization promoted oppression of Black people that restricted their joy of bodily autonomy and escaping abuse. Still, Black people bravely fled, using their own coded language to escape bondage. It is widely believed that Harriet Tubman and others sang "Wade in the Water" as coded language[35] to tell fugitive slaves to get into the water to escape detection from the bloodhounds chasing after them.[36]

Many slave states passed anti-literacy laws,[37] which arose out of fear that enslaved people could forge[38] documents to help them escape. For the enslaved, literacy was a means to freedom, intellectually, if not actually, but there were "severe punishment(s) for the crime of literacy from savage

beatings to amputations of fingers and toes."[39] Still, there were enslaved people who learned to read and taught other people despite the grave risk. Among them was Frederick Douglass, who learned the alphabet from his master's wife, Sophia Auld, who secretly taught him, and as he grew up, he began reading newspapers and books.[40] Douglass also taught 40 other enslaved people to read, but when his owner, Thomas Auld, found out, he sold him to a brutal owner, at about age 16, and he said that he felt "broken in body, soul, and spirit."[41] Still, his knowledge could not be taken away, and he went onto became a prolific public speaker, civil rights leader[42] and a U.S. diplomat.[43]

Booker T. Washington who was born in slavery, became free after the end of the Civil War, in April 1865, when an officer read the Emancipation Proclamation.[44] "My mother, who was standing by my side, leaned over and kissed her children, while tears of joy ran down her cheeks," Washington wrote in his autobiography, UP FROM SLAVERY.[45] His autobiography shows that he taught himself to read, later founded Tuskegee Institute, and implies that he found joy in overcoming adversity. "I have learned that success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed," he wrote.



THE JOY IN GATHERING TOGETHER WITH MUSIC AND DANCING

Free Black families would gather together to host teas, the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture has documented. "They met to enjoy each other's company, conduct business, or organize for social justice. In a society determined to demean them, these events provided an occasion to celebrate their inherent dignity," the museum's website states.[46] The website also shows in the following quote that enslaved people also found a way to gather and dance despite restrictions: "Through movement they expressed traditions of their homelands and claimed their bodies for themselves. Arranging secret dances, they put on their best clothes and displayed a spirit free from bondage." The website also cites author Solomon Northrup, author of "12 Years a Slave," who said he was required to play the violin for enslavers, but he played for his own enjoyment. Northrup said: "[H]ad it not been for my beloved violin, I scarcely can conceive how I could have endured the long years of bondage." The words of Sojourner Truth, who escaped slavery with her infant daughter[47] and famously gave the speech, "Ain't I A Woman?," also show joy and resilience. "If we laugh and sing a little as we fight the good fight, it makes it all go easier," Truth said, adding: "I will not allow my life's light to be determined by the darkness around me."[48]

JOY IN POST-EMANCIPATION DESPITE SYSTEMIC RACISM AND TERROR

After Emancipation, there was more than a hundred years of Jim Crow era segregation laws subjugating Blacks.[49] Former slaves also faced assault, lynchings, and assassinations for attempting to assert labor rights and citizenship rights in the South.[50] Millions of Black people fled[51] the South for better opportunities in the North, but faced risky economic exploitation by some companies only hiring them as strike breakers.[52] The Federal Housing Authority supported white families with subsidies that allowed them to move to the newly created suburbs. Such government support, however, was denied to Black people.[53] Redlining, a practice where lenders would "redline" Black neighborhoods as ineligible for credit,[54] stripped Black communities of wealth.[55] Meanwhile, white families received unemployment and social security benefits largely denied to Black families.[56] Harlem Renaissance Jazz Poet Langston Hughes wrote in a poem that oppression during that era had tried to make him: "Stop laughin', stop lovin', stop livin- / But I don't care! / I'm still here."[57]

Hughes once referred to A'Lelia Walker, the daughter of the first self-made female millionaire, Madam C.J. Walker, who founded a haircare empire as "the joy goddess of Harlem,"[58] writer, feminist activist and award-winning podcaster Jamia Wilson reported.[59] Walker would host gatherings of artists, intellectuals, and activists known as "literary salons," and "lavish parties," in a "four-story double townhome" in Harlem, Wilson wrote.[60] Prominent scholar W.E.B. DuBois, Author Zora Neal Hurston, and actor Paul Robeson, were among the attendees, Wilson's article showed. "Within the gold-colored walls of Walker's velvet-appointed home, no detail was overlooked," Wilson wrote in the article. "[F]rom the sky-blue Victrola record player to the rose-colored piano and napkins inscribed with the name of her greatest passion – the premier artistic salon she established and hosted, christened The Dark Tower after a poem by Countee Cullen," she added. Poet Cullen wrote, "we were not made eternally to weep."[61] He continued: "The night whose sable breast relieves the stark / White stars is no less lovely being dark, / And there are buds that cannot bloom at all / In light, but crumple, piteous, and fall; / So in the dark we hide the heart that bleeds / And wait, and tend our agonizing seeds."[62] Wilson wrote The Dark Tower "fostered joyful resistance and a sense of sanctuary from racial terror in the form of economic injustice, and riots springing up in multiple cities spurred by widespread lynchings and racial aggression."[63]

In defiance of Jim Crow era stereotypes, segregation laws, and racial terror, Black people would also assert their right to joyful pride in human dignity in the courts. In the landmark Brown v. Board of Education Of Topeka[64] decision in 1954, the court found that separating Black children "solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone." The decision overturned[65] Plessy v. Ferguson[66] to desegregate public schools. Civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer and other activists later courageously sang "This Little Light of Mine, I'm gonna let it shine,"[67] in protest and their light shined through as the Civil Rights Act[68] and the Voting Rights Act[69] would later be passed.

Still, changing the law is not enough. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said in a speech at Western Michigan University:[70] "You've got to change the heart and you can't change the heart through legislation." But in the same speech, he also said: "It may be true that the law cannot make a man love me but it can keep him from lynching me, and I think that is pretty important, also."

FINDING BLACK JOY IN OUR HOPE & PRIDE

Individual artists and activist groups have celebrated Black joy in hope, pride, and self-care that enduring racial stereotypes and racial oppression have attempted to take away. For example, The Five Stairsteps emphasized hope by singing, "Ooh-oo child / Things are gonna get easier / Ooh-oo child / Things'll get brighter."[71] The rise of mass incarceration of Black men that began in the 1960s,[72] resulting in more single-parent households, accelerated in the 1970s[73] when the above song was released. The song helped people stay hopeful because "things are gonna get easier."[74]

Unfortunately, things did not get easier. Mass incarceration increased,[75] along with discrimination in social welfare,[76] and the racial wealth gap has since grown to a $240,120[77] difference between the median Black household and median White household. Still, Nikki Giovanni (1943-2024) a world-renown poet and activist,[78] who grew up poor, illustrated Black joy as resistance in her poem, Nikki-Rosa. "[A]nd I really hope no white person ever has cause / to write about me / because they never understand /Black love is Black wealth and they'll / probably talk about my hard childhood / and never understand that / all the while I was quite happy," the poem reads.[79]

Discrimination against Black women in social welfare was spurred on by Ronald Reagan reviving the Jezebel stereotype against Black women in the form of the promiscuous, deceptive, Welfare Queen, getting rich off of laying back and cheating the system.[80] The "Welfare Queen" stereotype caught the nation's attention at the same time the "War on Drugs" escalated with the 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act[81] establishing the 100-to-1 ratio

between crack and powder cocaine sentences.[82] A key difference being that Blacks were more likely to use the crack form and whites were more likely to use the powder cocaine.[83] The focus on crack cocaine also re-fueled stereotypes of Black women as "bad mothers."[84] Later, crime coverage in the media increased and popularized the myth of the black child as the "superpredator,"[85] worsening mass incarceration. But meanwhile, the following lyrics[86] from Rapper Queen Latifah countered negative stereotypes of Black women with joyful pride: "Some think we can't flow (Can't flow) / Stereotypes, they got to go (Got to go) / I'ma mess around and flip the scene into reverse / With what? With a little touch of "Ladies First."'

In her song, *Golden*,[87] Jill Scott similarly expresses Black pride and joy, by singing: "I'm holding onto my freedom, can't take it from me / I was born into it, It comes naturally." It appears Scott celebrates joy that comes from being born free while paying respect to her ancestors who ensured our freedom by continuing to fight for it. Scott also indicates Black joy as resistance in Golden, singing: "I'll be high-steppin,' y'all, letting the joy unfold." The reference to "high-steppin" is a global symbol of joy and protest. For instance, the "toyi-toyi" dance in South Africa, is a "high-kneed" dance that may be performed joyously at times in protest and resistance to oppression.[88] The joy Scott expresses is radiant and contagious. Singer-songwriter Sug Daniels said about the song: "I feel like as Black women, sometimes we don't think about happiness, we think about survival. So to hear a Black woman being like, 'I'm taking my freedom,' it really hit me. It really touches me."[89]

Kleaver Cruz, the New York City-based creator of the Black Joy Project, a book featuring colorful photos and essays on Black Joy,[90] explains in the following quote: "Black joy isn't about erasing the difficulties of the Black experience, but showing the whole truth by creating balance."[91] For example, Singer India.Arie (born India Arie Simpson) wrote *Better Way*[92] in protest[93] to the response after Black and poor people were disproportionately seen stranded[94] at the Louisiana Superdome in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, balancing her rage with hope of change for the better. She made a biblical reference in the song, "Let my people go,"[95] that has been used in civil rights[96] movements. "Leavin' a hundred thousand people in water that high / Just struggling for their lives," she sang.[97] "I know there's got to be a better way / And we gotta find it," she added.[98]

Bryan Stevenson, who founded the Equal Justice Initiative that has freed many wrongfully convicted people, and who also founded a museum documenting lynchings for racial healing and reckoning, said that hope is key to his work.[99] While he had heard the family story of his great-grandfather, learning to read while enslaved in Caroline County, Va., he said on the podcast that he did not think about the hope required to do that right away. "But I just started thinking about the kind of hope, the kind of vision it took to believe that one day, you're going to be free, even when nothing around you indicates that freedom is likely for enslaved Black people in Virginia in the 1850s," he said on the podcast.[100] Stevenson also said on the podcast he remembered it rained at the museum opening. "It sounded like tears being shed by the thousands of Black people whose lives have never been honored, whose names have never been mentioned, and it sounded like they were shedding tears of joy that there was this moment of reckoning," he said.

The police murder of George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on May 25, 2020,[101] was decried as a "modern day lynching."[102] Earlier the same year, there was a racially motivated murder of Ahmaud Arbery, a 25-year-old Black male, after being chased down by white residents while jogging in a South Georgia neighborhood.[103] In between these two high-profile murders, Breonna Taylor, a Black female, who was licensed as an Emergency Medical Technician, was fatally shot during a night raid of her home with a no-knock warrant.[104] Amid Black Lives Matter protests, the American Public Health Association called racism "a public health crisis." [105]

Black Twitter, a modern version of The Dark Tower of the Harlem Renaissance, as far as being a collective space on social media for Black artists, intellectuals, and political activists to shine and spread Black joy, creativity, and political activism kicked into action with #BlackLivesMatter posts.[106] Black Lives Matter dance protests broke out worldwide against racism and disproportionate police brutality of Black people.[107] Community organizer and activist Miracle Jones joined the protests. "We hoped that despite everything that something would be different this time around, so we took to the streets with our drums, our voices, our bodies, our dances," Jones said.[108] "[E]xisting and thriving in a world that was predicated upon your destruction is in itself is a reason to celebrate. So, we take up space, as ours has been stolen and gentrified from us. We dance in the middle of the street, as we show up for each other," she added.[109] "There is this indescribable joy that comes from being able to live and thrive despite all of the obstacles and barriers that come with living in anti-Blackness. Part of it is a hope that things will soon get better, and part of it is a celebration of still being around, still being here," Jones also said.[110] Our resilience, and hope is a reason to be joyful.

Amid the protests, a remix of Johnniqua singing, "You About to Lose Yo Job,"[111] to a cop she said

detained her for no reason while twerking with her hands handcuffed, showed her asserting her rights despite a climate of fear based on disproportionate police brutality. The video was a "weapon of Black joy," Lonnae O' Neal wrote for ESPN's Andscape:[112] "It's all part of a tradition of resistance that goes way back. Control of the black body is the highest aspiration of white supremacy, so black history is filled with finger rolls, hip twists and covert performative signifiers."

There is not only room for Black joy in hope and pride in activism to achieve racial justice, but also a demand for it. "In its mission to advance the promise of equality and justice for all, LDF's work could not be 'visionary' without finding joy in the hope of tomorrow – a transformative imagination of what a reality outside of what currently exists could look like," the NAACP Legal Defense Fund [LDF] website states.[113] The NAACP Legal Defense Fund's website also highlights stories of Black joy from pride in expressing oneself. As a civil rights law firm, it has argued against discrimination of Black children who wear natural hairstyles, such as Afros, braids, and locs.[114] It has advocated in favor of the CROWN Act,[115] which prohibits hair discrimination. Singer Kelly Rowland addresses the issue in her song, *Crown*,[116] calling her hair her "crown."

Community organizer and activist Jones has also emphasized the importance of pride in authentic expression of joy. "Joy is so controversial for us because for so long, Black and brown people were reduced to tropes of trauma and pain," Jones said, adding the pertinent question: **"Do you know how radical and revolutionary joy is as a Black person living in America?"**[117]

A smiling Gianna Floyd, who was unaware of the details of her father's murder, but aware of his impact on the world, is more than her trauma and pain. She sat on the shoulders of Stephen Jackson, a friend of her late father, smiling with pride and screaming with arms stretched out: "Daddy Changed the World,"[118] amid worldwide protests against racially disproportionate police brutality. And he did. There was movement towards racial reckoning and healing through heightened awareness and educational programming[119] and activism, but there has been backlash from conservative state legislatures.[120] For instance, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis signed a bill into law, known as the "Stop W.O.K.E. Act,"[121] on April 2022, which amended Florida law[122] to censor classroom instruction promoting concepts involving "race or sex consciousness."[123] The Stop W.O.K.E. Act attacks views in favor of affirmative action and Critical Race Theory.[124] A savings clause[125] allows professors to discuss racism, as long as they don't make students feel bad.[126] It led the NAACP to issue a travel advisory, warning people that the State of Florida "devalues

"Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare"

– Poet Lorde

and marginalizes the contributions of, and challenges faced by African Americans and other communities of color."[127] Civil rights lawyer Ben Crump said that we need to "arm our children" with education so they are "more intelligent than those who will seek to oppress them."[128]

Education and reading have been a source of Black pride and joy especially considering that it was once banned by law. LeVar Burton, a Black man, who starred in the iconic miniseries Roots that exposed the horrors of slavery to many American families,[129] also hosted a show, The Reading Rainbow, encouraging all kids to find joy in reading.[130] The song lyrics depicted the joy in reading: "I can go anywhere / Friends to Know, and ways to grow / A Reading Rainbow!"[131] This joy and pride from reading about Black history is being threatened by the Stop W.O.K.E. Act and book bans.[132] Poet Audre Lorde shows why we must preserve our story in the following quote. "[I]f I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive."[133]

BLACK JOY IS ALSO NECESSARY TO DE-STRESS, [134] FOR SELF-CARE, AND SELF-PRESERVATION.

Current data shows that Black people disproportionately suffer asthma,[135] and this disparity has been linked to the impact of the historically racist practice of redlining[136] that has led to a persistent pattern of environmental and health inequality. Other forms of systemic racism, such as police brutality, and disparities in the criminal justice system, lead to chronic stress, especially stress-related illness, like heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, liver and kidney disease.[137] University of Michigan Professor Arline Geronomis explained the affect this chronic stress has in her "weathering hypothesis" which states "that Blacks experience early health deterioration as a consequence of the cumulative impact of repeated experience with social or economic adversity and political marginalization,"[138] in comparison to whites. Geronimus blamed the "accelerated cellular aging" that Blacks experience on the stress of "living

in a race-conscious society that stigmatizes and disadvantages Blacks." [139]

While the resilience of the Strong Black Woman may be a coping mechanism against systemic racism, the negative effects outweigh the benefits[140] because it fails to leave room for the full spectrum of emotion, vulnerability, and self-care. Black women also suffer higher rates of maternal and infant mortality than white women and their babies.[141] This Black infant and maternal mortality crisis is exacerbated by the weathering effect[142] and stereotypical perceptions that they are strong black women who do not feel pain,[143] which may lead doctors to ignore medical concerns.[144]

The Brute male stereotype of criminality dating back to slavery has continued to haunt Black men with ongoing racial profiling based on biased perceptions of criminality regardless of their socioeconomic status. For example, Otis Brawley, a doctor and senior investigator at the National Cancer Institute, put on some casual clothes to clean his garage and a police officer who saw him assumed he was a criminal in his own house. He was handcuffed and forced to the ground. "This is the price of being Black in America," Brawley, MD, said.[145] In some incidents, the price is fatal, and in other incidents, there is a toll on health

Health disparities exacerbated by chronic stress highlight joy as revolutionary self-care. "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare," Poet Lorde wrote.[146] Another poet, Lucille Clifton, expands on the theme of Black joy from pride in resilient survival in her poem, "won't you celebrate with me," in the lines, "come celebrate / with me that every day / something has tried to kill me / and has failed."[147]

In tribute to Tubman's walk on the Underground Railroad,[148] GirlTrek formed a massive health justice movement focused on self-care of Black women, joy, and reducing health dispairites. The grassroot health justice effort led by Vanessa Garrison and Morgan Dixon successfully enrolled[149] over a million Black women in a movement that emphasizes Black women walking outside at least 30 minutes a day, five days a week, which has been associated with health benefits.[150] GirlTrek also promotes walking outside in nature, meditation walks, and Black history podcast[151] to take pride and joy in Black brilliance and accomplishment despite discrimination.

The Black Feminist Project[152] similarly addresses health justice. Founder and Executive Director Tanya Denise Fields said in a YouTube video[153] about the project that they "use the intersections of food justice and reproductive justice to create economic and community development projects for Black women and marginalized genders and their children." The YouTube video focused on the project's community garden, called the Black Joy Farm, a 5,400 square foot lot in the Bronx, NY, with fresh food, including chicken harvesting, sunflowers and fresh vegetables. "When I started doing this work, I was really, yes, thinking about food disparities and public health and all that good stuff, but really what I was thinking about is how do we give low-income and poor Black women and their children what they need to have happy lives?" Fields also said in the video.

Programs have also targeted Black joy for Black men, who face some unique challenges. For instance, a Pew Research Center poll found that Black men are far more likely than Black women to say they have been unfairly stopped by police.[154] Also, the suicide rate for Black men is four times higher than it is for Black women.[155] Black Men Smile started in September 2014, a month after police shot and killed 18-year-old Michael Brown, in Ferguson, Missouri, in response to "painful images of Michael Brown's death," to counter images of death from disproportionate police brutality with images of life, a video and words on the lifestyle brand's website shows.[156] In response, Carlton Mackey posted a picture on Instagram labeled #blackmensmile. The hashtag provoked Black men to reflect on the question: What Makes You Smile? It led to an archive of more than 100,000 images showing Black joy and over 100,000 followers on Instagram, the website shows.[157]

Conclusion: *Black Joy Is an Indispensable "Weapon" Against Oppression*

Black Joy is a "weapon" that is "powerful and all-encompassing and necessary."[158] Black Joy affirms humanity that stereotypes and discrimination have negated for far too long. Black Joy unveils the mask too many Black Americans have been wearing to conceal their emotions,[159] and the emotional, physical, spiritual cost of the mask has been too high.[160] Black Joy is an indispensable weapon against oppression.[161] The enslavers could not take away Wheatley's memories of "Afric's fancy'd happy seat,"[162] her compassionate cry that every human being yearns to experience the joy of freedom.[163] The ongoing struggle against white supremacy, could not take away the significance of King's dream, Tubman's journeys for freedom, the Harlem Renaissance's creation of joyful gatherings, or Black Lives Matter activists dancing in the streets. **There is always radical hope in Black joy. Gospel Singer Shirley Caeser said it best. "This joy that I have, the world didn't give it to me oh oh . . . The world didn't give it and the world can't take it away oh oh yeah."**[164]

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BY KIRSTEN ANDERSON

The civil rights act we write today for tomorrow

Our generation hands us the sign
that is ours to hold,
The protest that is ours to join,
The chants on our lips.

Whether your sign reads Jim Crow must go,
Or end Apartheid now,
Or I can't breathe:

We are all,
every one of us,
marching in rhythm.

Whether your protest is at Stonewall,
To March for our Lives,
Or for Black Lives Matter:

We are all,
every one of us,
chanting in unison.

Say his name. George Floyd!
Say his name. Trayvon Martin!
Say her name. Breonna Taylor!

We are all,
every one of us,
holding the same sign.

No human is illegal
Not your body, not your choice
Protect trans kids

Love is love.

We are all,
every one of us,
marching for the same peace.

For Vietnam,
In Iraq,
For Gaza.

Same war, same fight, all the people must unite!
Same war, same fight, all the people must unite!
Same war, same fight, all the people must unite!

Sometimes it is dark and darker,
Sometimes we lose our prophets,
Sometimes the dreamers are assassinated.

And yet—

Sometimes we do
something triumphant
like passing the civil rights act.

And yet—

Sometimes we backslide,
forget where we started from,
Where we are going.

No justice, No peace!
No justice, No peace!
No justice, No peace!

Liberation is the
ordinary work
that is ours to do.

What does your sign say?
Where will you march?
What words will you chant?

We are all,
every one of us,
called in to the race.

Send reinforcements
Take the baton
Find your lane

This is your inheritance:
The future is ringing,
Answer the call.

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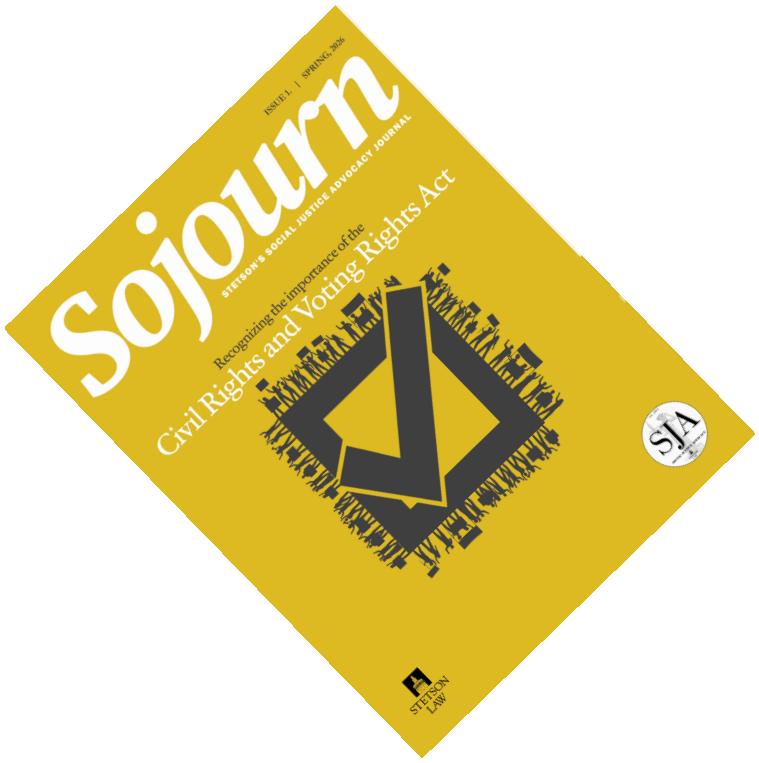

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