

The Tulsa Race Massacre: Its Significance 100 Years Later and the Connection to the Duluth Lynchings

By Sheri L. Stewart

On June 14, 2021, the FBA co-sponsored an event entitled “Understanding Our Duluth Lynchings: Racial Violence in America and the Road to Justice and Reconciliation.” This article will focus on the portion of the program regarding the Tulsa Massacre of 1921, which was presented by Dr. Duchess Harris, JD/PhD. Dr. Harris is a Professor of American Studies and Political Science at Macalester College in St. Paul.

The Tulsa Massacre occurred on June 1, 1921. In light of its 100-year anniversary, Dr. Harris explained that the 1921 Tulsa Massacre is considered one of the worst incidents of racial violence in the United States, yet the atrocity remains one of the least-known events in American history. The massacre left 300 people dead, 800 injured, and over 10,000 homeless and/or displaced. She emphasized that the 100th anniversary of the massacre is significant in many ways and that at the Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial, President Biden revealed a racial equity plan. Its focal points include addressing racial discrimination in the housing market, creating an agency to address inequity

in home appraisals, and investing in communities of color through the American Jobs Plan.

As Dr. Harris explained, the personal testimony of Viola Ford Fletcher, the oldest living survivor of the massacre, detailed the horror of the event. On May 19, 2021, two weeks after her 107th birthday, Ms. Fletcher testified in front of Congress. She explained she was seven years old at the time of the massacre, which shattered her world. She said the massacre forced her to leave Tulsa and start over. She worked as a service worker most of her life for white families and did not make much money because she did not go to school past the fourth grade.

Based on Dr. Harris’s assessment, property lost from the legacy of “Greenwood” (also known as “Black Wall Street”) totaled \$1.8 million in 1921. In today’s dollars, the loss to the neighborhood likely would be over \$27 million. Dr. Harris focused her presentation on how reparations and/or repair could remedy the economic injustice and injury by funding initiatives that benefit the massacre’s descendants who are still alive today. There is a great push by advocates in this space for changes to the K-12 curriculum to explain

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Highlights from the 2021 Kick-Off Social Event and Golf Tournament

By Pete McElligott and Joe Cassioppi



After a hiatus last year, the golfers of the Minnesota Chapter of the FBA picked up where they left off in 2019 with good cheer, laughter, and plenty of errant shots. Town & Country Club played host to the Kick-Off Social Event and Golf Tournament this year and did not disappoint. Although the greens were slick, a few players (Andrew Leiendecker and Kyle Kroll) flirted with a hole-in-one. While no one qualified for the Ryder Cup team, the weather was fantastic, and the camaraderie was better than Tiger in his prime. Congratulations to the winning team: John Bisanz, Brad Koranda, Jake Kendricks, and Martin Norder, as well as the contest hole winners.

Thank you to all of the participants and sponsors! A tremendous thanks to all those who helped plan and execute the event. If you are interested in serving on the planning

committee for the 2022 event, please contact Pete McElligott (pmcelligott@anthonyostlund.com) or Danielle Mair (danielle_mair@mnd.uscourts.gov). ■

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other racially-motivated violence in Minnesota, including lynchings and state-sponsored executions of Native peoples and Black people. Professor Bessler explained that he grew up in Minnesota but did not learn about the Duluth lynchings in school, a sentiment echoed throughout the day, as multiple speakers emphasized the importance of education in the struggle for racial justice.

Relatedly, attorneys Jerry Blackwell and Corey Gordon presented on their successful work to obtain Minnesota's first-ever posthumous pardon for Max Mason, who was wrongly convicted of the same assault allegations that preceded the lynchings. Mr. Mason was pardoned three days before the 100th anniversary of the lynchings. The speakers highlighted the role pardons can play to shine a light on injustices of the past and correct injustice now. Dr. Rogier Gregoire spoke about the Clayton Jackson McGhie Memorial, a nonprofit organization founded in 2003 in Duluth to commemorate the lives of the three men. He spoke on the importance of utilizing public space to confront modern Americans with a history that is frequently either forgotten or mechanically removed from the story we tell ourselves as a people.

The program extended beyond Minnesota as well. Professor Duchess Harris presented on the Tulsa Race Riot; Judge Richard M. Gergel of the U.S. District Court for the District of South Carolina presented on Sgt. Isaac Woodard, a decorated Black World War II veteran who, on his journey home through the United States in 1946, was arrested, beaten, and blinded by a local chief of police while in police custody. Judge Gergel presented on how this incident, among others, served as a touchpoint for President Truman to form the first presidential commission on civil rights. Judge Gergel also spoke about the judge who oversaw the police chief's trial to acquittal by an all-white jury, Judge J. Waties Waring, Judge of the U.S. District Court

for the Eastern District of South Carolina. Judge Waring, a son of a Confederate veteran, was moved by the brutality Sgt. Woodard faced to become a trailblazing judge to rule in favor of civil rights; Judge Waring is known for handing down an influential 1951 dissenting decision in a school-segregation case that helped lay the groundwork for the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.

The seminar concluded with remarks from Bryan Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative. Mr. Stevenson focused on truth telling and repair as essential tools to furthering the cause of racial justice. He explained that we craft our identity as Americans through the history we tell and accordingly called for an "an era of truth telling" in which we honestly examine America's history of racial genocide against Native peoples, the legacy of slavery and lynchings, and the continuing effects of racial disadvantage in the areas of education, housing, banking, media, entertainment, government, voting, and the legal system.

His remarks also focused on the intergenerational effects of systemic racial injustice. As one example, Mr. Stevenson traced the ineligibility of veterans of color to receive benefits under the post-World War II GI Bill that white veterans have enjoyed to the present day. Mr. Stevenson explained that this type of discrimination is not merely historical, but has led to people of color facing intergenerational challenges transferring wealth, the effects of which persist to this day.

Mr. Stevenson ultimately called upon those in attendance for action, emphasizing that steps toward repair and racial justice must be "local and immediate." He reminded all present that a commitment to law must mean a commitment to justice and that when law does not serve justice, each person has a duty to respond. ■

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the events of the Tulsa Massacre. Still, there have been no reparations paid and no criminal accountability for the actors who participated in this massacre.

Regarding reparations, Dr. Harris explained how many individuals do not understand reparations are not just about money. Reparations also seek to acknowledge past trauma, to repair memories by providing a memorial or commemoration to individuals who have lost their lives, and/or to create monuments to remind people of what happened and that it must never happen again.

Dr. Harris explained how the massacre fits within United States history from the Reconstruction Era to passage of the Civil Rights Act. She described how omitting African Americans from history affects the feeling of belonging, being represented, and receiving equal protection under the law. For example, the American schools' curriculum often omits how

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Black veterans were treated. Black World War II veterans did not benefit from the GI Bill to help them build their homes. So, while homes were for sale in suburbia, Black veterans could not buy those homes to create wealth in their African American communities.

Dr. Harris's book, *The Tulsa Race Riot (Freedom's Promise)*, teaches about the Tulsa Race Riot for K-12 students. She has used her book to educate her college students as well. Public schools in Tulsa, Oklahoma, only started to incorporate the history of the massacre into their curriculum in 2020. Her book also exemplifies how racial discrimination permeates several aspects of society. This interconnection is evident because the racial discrimination in housing that followed the 1921 massacre is directly correlated with the lack of wealth transference among Blacks in Tulsa. The gap between Blacks and whites when it comes to wealth transference is evident in the Black community. Wealth existed in the Black community in Tulsa during the 1900s because oil was discovered and white men who ended up working in oil fields depended on Black businesses to make

sure there was commerce, which created an interdependent relationship. But the Tulsa Massacre disrupted Black wealth transference.

According to Dr. Harris, her mentor Mr. Manning Marable, a now-deceased professor from Columbia University, would call the Tulsa Massacre a "cumulative disadvantage" to the Black community in Tulsa because the businesses were destroyed. More specifically, a cumulative disadvantage means that a sizable income does not equal wealth because there is a lack of wealth passed down from one generation to the next. Essentially, Blacks are being locked out of relationships, contracting, and business opportunities to build generational wealth. She tied in this concept locally by explaining that 70 percent of Black Minnesotans still cannot attain middle-class status.

Ultimately, the government has a huge role to play; it's not all about finances, but also teaching about the Duluth Lynchings as well as the Tulsa Massacre. Doing so will help each respective state move forward while also helping our nation to heal and move forward. ■

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Positive News from the *Pro Se* Project

By Tiffany A. Sanders

In an effort to spread much-needed positive news, I am taking a different approach in this *Pro Se* Project column and sharing feedback I have received during the pandemic from Judges, *Pro Se* Project litigants, and volunteer attorneys about their experiences with, observations of, or involvement in the *Pro Se* Project. Despite the obstacles we have all encountered during this pandemic, attorneys have graciously continued to volunteer through the *Pro Se* Project to help others and improve access to justice in our federal courts. I hope you enjoy reading about the *Pro Se* Project in their words. I anticipate you will be as thankful as I am for the tremendous work of the generous volunteer attorneys who have sustained the *Pro Se* Project during extraordinarily challenging times.

Boulden v. Elasky et al., 19-cv-03032-JRT-DTS

Volunteer attorney: Lindsey Krause (Nichols Kaster, PLLP)*

