

*In the Spirit of
Gabriel & Nan,
Nat Turner,
Solomon Northup,
Madison Washington,
John Brown,
Mary Bowser,
Elizabeth Van Lew,
John Mitchell Jr.,
Barbara Johns,
Oliver Hill & all who
struggle for Justice.*

D The Virginia **DEFENDER**

FREE

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HOW TO STOP THE GUN VIOLENCE?

An Open Letter to the Community from The Virginia Defender

It seems like every day our newspaper gets a police report about another homicide in Richmond. It's almost always a fatal shooting, almost always a young Black man killed by another young Black man, and it almost always takes place in a poverty-stricken Black neighborhood.

It's like there are two Richmonds. The one called "RVA" has great restaurants, craft breweries, safe nightlife and the arts. The other, the old Richmond, has the poverty, shabby housing, failing schools and the ever-present danger of street violence.

A lot of people are trying their best to address the problem of street violence: civic associations, nonprofit service organizations, city agencies, faith-based groups and more.

But one set of voices seems mostly missing: Black men with personal experiences with violence, either as perpetrators or victims.

For this issue of the Defender, we asked four of our Virginia prisoner-com-

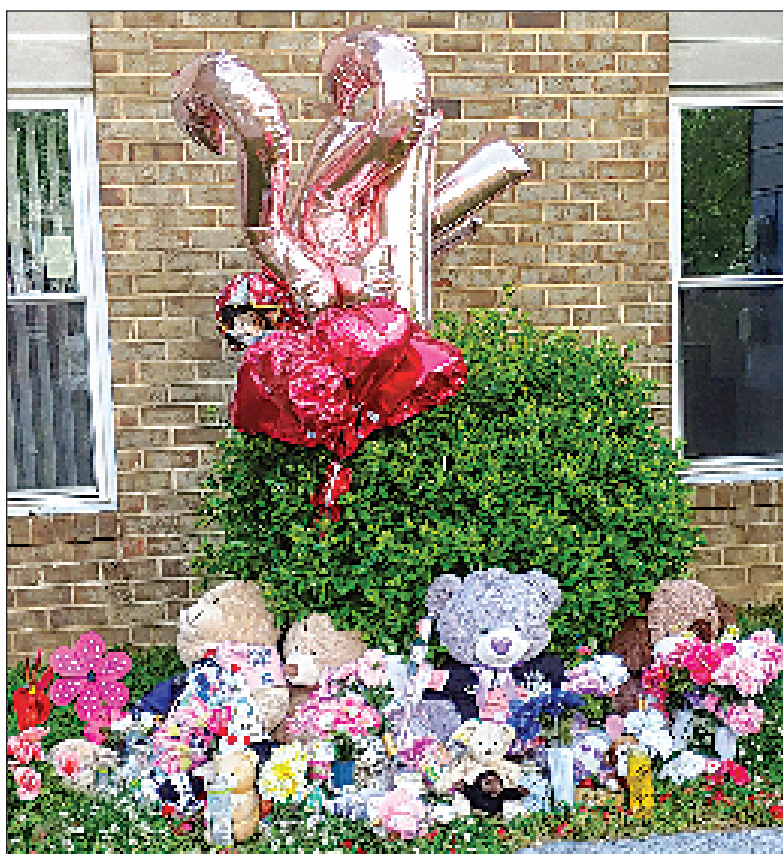


Photo by Phil Wilayto

This display of flowers and stuffed animals was created at Belt Atlantic Apartments on Richmond's South Side. It honors the mother and infant fatally shot there April 27. Three others were wounded. The five, all females, were innocent bystanders in a senseless shooting. Five young men, ages 18 to 23, have been arrested.

rades to write about what they think are the root causes of the problem, and what can be done about it. All four have been incarcerated for decades. And all four spend a lot of time thinking deeply about social problems and what can be done to solve them. We think they have a great deal to say, and urge the community at large to listen.

We also asked the same questions of one of the women who organized the Mothers Day dinner for the residents of Belt Atlantic Apartments, where a young mother and her baby were killed on a beautiful early evening in late April. Three others, two of them teenagers, were wounded. All were female, and all were totally innocent victims of a senseless attack on perceived enemies by a group of young Black men and teenagers.

The five responses are on pages 8 and 9. We believe they make significant contributions to the critical discussion about why there are so many shootings, and how they can be stopped.

In Solidarity,
the Staff of
The Virginia Defender

"A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots." — Marcus Garvey — Aug. 17, 1887 - June 10, 1940

regional & national news

Rise in anti-Semitism in the U.S. a challenge for anti-racists

By Phil Wilayto

Years ago, back in the mid-80s, I attended a pro-Palestinian rally in Washington, D.C. In those days, most events of this kind drew few people outside the Arab-American and Muslim communities. This one was no different.

But then, all of a sudden, two pickup trucks drove up to the rally, stopped, and about a dozen white men - uniformed Nazis - jumped out, obviously intending to join the rally, and mistakenly thinking they would be welcomed.

Before I could blink, a crowd of young Palestinians ran over and physically forced the fascists back into their pickups and sent them on their way - but not before a Jewish comrade of mine extinguished her cigarette on the back of one of the Nazis' necks. The look on his face? Priceless.

Yes, it's possible to be both pro-Palestinian and pro-Jewish; to fight against both Israel's policies against Palestinians and against anti-Semitism.

And it's now becoming more necessary than ever to do both.

As reported by numerous media outlets, there has been a sharp rise in both verbal

and physical attacks against Jews, as well as property damage, during and since the Israeli attacks this spring on Gaza.

According to BBC News, "The Anti-Defamation League (ADL), which tracks incidents of anti-Jewish violence and bias, says they saw a 75 percent increase in anti-Semitism reports to the agency's 25 regional offices after Israeli-Palestinian fighting began. The figure jumped from 127 incidents in the two weeks prior to fighting to 222 in the two weeks after violence broke out."

Of course, the ADL views opposition to Israel as inherently anti-Semitic, so it's hard to tell how many of these incidents were directed at Jews as Jews and how many were simply verbal criticisms of Israel.

But there's no doubt that many of the worst attacks are simply anti-Jewish, such as the murder of 11 people at a Pittsburgh synagogue in 2018. Or the swastikas painted on synagogues or used as hashtags on social media. Or violent attacks on Hasidic Jews who are identifiable by their dress and hair styles.

Here in Virginia, we all know how some 300 fascists marched through the University of Virginia campus in August 2017 chanting "Jews will not replace us!" before surround-

ing and then attacking about 30 anti-fascists. That was the night before the infamous "alt-right" rally that brought hundreds of white-supremacist extremists to the city. (The Defenders are proud to have been among the hundreds of anti-fascists who confronted the racist, fascist, anti-Semitic scum.)

Today, on the streets of the "land of the free and the home of the brave," it can be physically dangerous to be Jewish.

Those of us who both support Palestine and oppose anti-Semitism have a responsibility to step up our work on both fronts.

We must make it crystal clear that there is no place in our ranks for those who attack Jewish people, who equate Judaism with Zionism, who blame all Jewish people for the actions of the Israeli government and the ultra-racist extremists whom the media calls "settlers."

And we must fight against the idea that it is Israel who directs U.S. policy in the Middle East. The tail does not wag the dog.

We must stand uncompromisingly against all forms of racism, including both Zionism and anti-Semitism.

Only in this way can we build a truly progressive movement for Freedom, Justice, Equality and Peace.



Photo by Phil Wilayto

Rabbi David Feldman speaking at the May 19 "We Stand with Palestine!" rally in Richmond. He and other members of Neturei Karta International - Jews United Against Zionism - drove more than 300 miles from New York City to attend the event.

Want to fight for Freedom, Justice & Equality? Then JOIN THE DEFENDERS!

THE VIRGINIA DEFENDERS for Freedom, Justice & Equality

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The Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality is an all-volunteer organization of Virginians working for the survival of our communities through education and social justice projects.

We started out in June 2002. Many of us had relatives in the Richmond City Jail or state prisons and were concerned about the physical conditions of these institutions.

As we worked around these issues, we learned more and more about the connections between jails, jobs, poverty, racism, sexism, class, war and political representation. We began

to organize around these issues as well.

We now sponsor the Virginia Defender quarterly newspaper and the Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project and are affiliated with the Virginia Prison Justice Network, which we co-founded.

If you agree with the principles below and want to work to make these ideals a reality, we invite you to join us. Together, we can make a real difference in the life of our communities.

WHAT WE BELIEVE

We believe in Freedom

We believe that all people must be free to develop to their full potential as human beings. We must be free from hunger, from preventable diseases, from homelessness, from ignorance. We must be free to work and to provide for ourselves and our families. We must be free to pursue our education and to develop ourselves culturally and spiritually. We must be free from fear of the arbitrary use of police power and from the physical and cultural attacks of white-

supremacist organizations. Women must be free from physical, cultural and emotional oppression. Children must be free from dangers like lead poisoning, asthma and sexual exploitation. Our youths must be free both from police harassment and the mindless violence of the streets. We must all be free from unjust wars fought in the interest of the wealthy few at the expense of the struggling many.

We believe in Justice

We believe that every human being has the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. And we believe that these rights are meaningless unless we also have the right to a job at a living wage, to decent housing, to adequate health care, to a meaningful education. We believe that all people have the right to stand equally before the law, to equal and fair treatment by the police, by the court system and in jails and prisons. And we believe that the death penalty is the ultimate exercise in injustice.

We believe in Equality

We live in the richest country in the world.

But it's a country that owes its tremendous wealth to the barbaric oppression of Black labor on a historic scale, the theft of American Indian and Mexican lands, the cruel exploitation of Asian labor and the labor of waves of poor European immigrants.

This country does not belong to the wealthy few who have claimed it for their own. As human beings, we all have an equal right to its resources. As descendants of those whose blood, sweat and tears paid cruelly for its development, we have a right to collective reparations. And as people who struggle every day with ongoing inequality, we have the right to affirmative action.

We believe that for any one of us to be free, we must all be free. We believe that for any one of us to have justice, we must all have justice. We believe that equality for anyone is impossible without equality for everyone.

As members of The Defenders, we pledge ourselves to defend our community, its men, its women and especially its children, from all forms of oppression.

We pledge to fight for a world where all people can live in dignity, freedom and peace.

community news

Black and White Populations in Richmond, Virginia 1860 - 2020

Year	City Population	Change/Time	% Change	Black Population	Black % of Pop	Change/Time	% Change	White Population	White % of Pop	Change/Time	% Change
2020	222,610	18,386	9.01%	91,653	41.17%	-11,689	-11.31%	98,140	44.09%	14,852	17.83%
2010	204,214	6,424	3.25%	103,342	50.60%	-9,766	-8.63%	83,288	40.78%	7,544	9.96%
2000	197,790	-5,266	-2.59%	113,108	57.19%	986	0.88%	75,744	38.30%	-12,284	-13.99%
1990	203,056	-16,158	-7.37%	112,122	55.22%	-304	-0.27%	88,028	43.35%	-16,956	-16.19%
1980	219,214	-30,407	-12.18%	112,426	51.29%	7,660	7.31%	104,984	47.89%	-38,873	-27.02%
1970	249,621	29,663	13.49%	104,766	41.97%	12,794	13.91%	143,857	57.63%	16,230	12.72%
1960	219,958	-10,352	-4.49%	91,972	41.81%	19,976	27.79%	127,627	58.02%	-25,905	-16.87%
1950	230,310	37,268	19.31%	71,996	31.26%	10,745	17.54%	153,532	66.66%	21,826	16.57%
1940	193,042	10,113	5.53%	61,251	31.73%	8,263	15.59%	131,706	68.23%	1,836	1.41%
1930	182,929	11,262	6.56%	52,988	28.97%	-1,053	-1.95%	129,871	71.00%	12,297	10.46%
1920	171,667	44,039	34.51%	54,041	31.48%	7,308	15.64%	117,574	68.49%	36,695	45.37%
1910	127,628	42,578	50.06%	46,733	36.62%	14,503	45.00%	80,879	63.37%	28,081	53.19%
1900	85,050	3,662	4.50%	32,230	37.90%	32,230		52,798	62.08%	52,798	
1890	81,388	17,788	27.97%		0.00%				0.00%		
1880	63,600	12,562	24.51%		0.00%				0.00%		
1870	51,038	13,128	34.53%		0.00%				0.00%		
1860	37,910			14,275	37.65%			23,635	62.35%		

Graphic by Ayame Bryant

Richmond's changing demographics

Staff Report

The results of the 2020 U.S. census are in, and there's one big takeaway for Richmond: Our demographics are changing.

People who identify as white now outnumber

those who identify as Black, for the first time since 1970, when Richmond annexed a largely white part of Chesterfield County in an attempt to dilute the Black vote.

Since 2010, according to the census, the white population has grown by 14,803

people and now makes up 43.3 percent of the city's total population.

Meanwhile, Black folks, who 10 years ago made up 50.6 percent of the city, now represent only 40.5 percent of the total.

And they're the only race that has seen its numbers decline in the last decade. People identifying as

Latino/Latina now number 24,000, or 10.5 percent of all city residents. Back in 2000, they were just 2.6 percent.

So Richmond is still a "majority-minority" city, but no longer majority Black.

However, there's one caveat: self-identification.

It wasn't until the 2000 census that respondents were able to choose more than one ethnic or racial identity and so identify as multiracial. This has tended to lower the number of people identifying solely as Black. And Latino/as can be of any race.

In 2020, nearly 31,000 Richmonders identified either as multiracial or as "other" race.

And remember, Virginia is the state that used to only recognize two racial categories: white or "colored," effectively denying the existence of Indigenous people, Asians, Latino/as and any other race or ethnic group.

That was thanks to Dr. Walter Plecker, the first Virginia State Registrar of Vital Statistics and a rabid eugenicist. Plecker was so racist that he actually gave lectures on race to the German Nazis. Plecker's Racial Integrity Act of 1924, which outlawed interracial marriage and defined as white a person "who has no trace whatsoever of any blood other than Caucasian" remained on the books until 1967, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled it unconstitutional in *Loving v. Virginia*.

One bright spot is that, while Richmond's Black population may be declining - likely due to rising housing costs, the shrinking supply of affordable housing, gentrification of traditionally Black working-class neighborhoods and government schemes to shut down public housing - the numbers are rising in the surrounding counties.

In Henrico, the Black population has grown since 2010 by 1,500.

In Chesterfield, the growth has been 13,860 people.

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community news

Casino update

By Elaine Phillips

The controversial proposal to build a casino in Richmond has been approved by City Council and will head to a referendum for city voters on Nov. 2.

Out of six original proposals, Mayor Levar Stoney recommended Urban One, a Black-owned radio and cable company partnering with Pacific Peninsula Entertainment, which owns Virginia's Colonial Downs and Rosie's Gaming Emporium franchise. Urban One itself has no previous experience opening or running a casino.

The proposed One Casino and Resort would be located on the site of the Philip-Morris Operations Center in Richmond's Southside near the intersection of Walmsley Boulevard and Commerce Road. This is in one of the city's poorest neighborhoods. Casino supporters argue that the project would provide good jobs, as well as increased tax revenue. Opponents maintain that casinos' profits rely on exploiting poor people with gambling addictions.

The selection process itself has not been without controversy. Three of the original six proposals were administratively axed before the public comment period had ended. Two of those were raised by Indigenous groups, including the local Pamunkey Indian Tribe. According to a City media advisory, those proposals were not advanced due to concerns about finances and "organizational experience." The Pamunkey Tribe will soon break ground on a major casino project in Norfolk.

Also, Mayor Stoney's impartiality during the selection process has been called into question. In October 2020, before the process began, an investor with Urban One contributed \$20,000 to Mayor Stoney's re-election campaign fund through the newly-created Black Opportunity Council. Four city council members received smaller contributions.

On its very sparse website, the Black Opportunity Council describes itself as "the primary organization in the Mid-Atlantic region representing Black entrepreneurs, industry leaders, advocates, clergy, and educators committed to social and economic justice."

According to the Richmond Times-Dispatch, the organization was formed in September 2020 by three people, including Greg Cummings, an investor in the Urban One project. Cummings has denied any connection between the council and the casino project. The mayor's spokesperson, Jim Nolan, has said the mayor's decision to recommend Urban One was not influenced by political donations.

As of Aug. 23, the Black Opportunity Council's website listed no members, officers or press releases.

'How the Monuments Came Down' spurs discussion of race & activism

By Phil Wilayto

"How the Monuments Came Down"
A collaboration between Field Studio,
VPM and the Virginia Film Office
1 hour and 28 minutes

Richmond-based Emmy-winning documentary filmmakers (and married couple) Hannah Ayers and Lance Warren have produced an amazing film about the history of the Confederate statues on Richmond's Monument Avenue. It's been shown locally and online on Virginia Public Media, and will be seen nationally Sept. 8 on PBS.

Using historical footage, photos and stories mostly unknown to the public, Ayers and Warren place the raising of the imposing statues of Generals Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson and J.E.B. Stuart; Admiral Matthew Maury; and Confederate President Jefferson Davis into their proper historical and political context.

By the end of the film, the conclusion that's impossible not to draw is that these monuments were, indeed, shrines to white supremacy. They were meant not only to prettify and glorify the slavery-defending Confederate cause, but to let the Black community know in no uncertain terms that the brief period of Reconstruction was over, the white oligarchy was back in charge and Black folks had best learn to stay in their place. Or else.

"Heritage," my ass.

The filmmakers are both white, but for advisers they used five of the more prominent local Black historians and educators: Christy Coleman, former CEO of the American Civil War Museum; Julian Hayter, his-

torian at the University of Richmond; Enjoli Moon, founder and creative director of the Afrikan Independent Film Festival and co-founder of The JXN Project; Rodney Robinson, Richmond's own 2019 National Teacher of the Year; and Joseph Rogers, activist and Education Programs Manager at the American Civil War Museum. (Full disclosure: Defenders Ana Edwards and I were interviewed for the film, mainly for our work on Shockoe Bottom.)

There were some criticisms of the way the film was made. It's a story about Black history that's produced by two white people who, because of their class and family ties, may have more access to financial resources than local Black filmmakers. And if it was supposed to be the story of how the monuments came down, then the voices of more young Black activists should have been included. In fact, it was really the history about why the monuments went up in the first place.

(This writer was asked by the Style Weekly publication to comment on some of the issues raised by criticism of the film. The resulting opinion piece, "Defining Goals: Some thoughts and theory on race relations among activists," appeared in that newspaper's Aug. 3 edition.)

But watch the film yourself and make up your own mind. Again, it will be showing nationally Sept. 8 on PBS.

p b s .
org/video/
how-the-
monuments-
came-down-
widbkc

A trans victory, thanks to Va. activist

Staff Report

In a case that was finally decided by the U.S. Supreme Court, a former Virginia high school student's long and difficult struggle to simply use a bathroom that conforms to his gender identity has resulted in a change in law that will affect trans people all over the country.

Gavin Grimm, now 22, began transitioning from female to male while a student at Gloucester High School in mostly rural Gloucester County, about 60 miles east of Richmond. At first he was allowed to use the boy's bathroom, but then, after some parents complained, he was told he had to either use the girls' facilities or else a private bathroom.

Instead of accepting defeat and public humiliation, he decided to fight back. With the support of the American Civil Liberties Union, he sued the Gloucester County School Board. He won at the local levels, but the school board, at public expense, appealed the case all the way to the Supreme Court, which in June upheld the lower courts' rulings.

Now the school board has agreed to pay the ACLU for the expenses it incurred in the six-year legal battle.

The cost? \$1.3 million.

That's some expensive bigotry. And the school board isn't saying how much it spent itself on its own legal fees defending its biased policy.

So here's a big public "Thank you!" to Gavin Grimm for courageously taking on this fight that now will benefit so many other trans folks.

A working-class guide for preparing for Big Storms

It's the season of Big Storms again in Virginia, and there's lots of good advice out there on how to prepare. One problem is, some of those ideas are pretty expensive. So last year the Defenders put together a little publication called **"Thunderstorms, Hurricanes & Tornadoes: A working-class guide for preparing for Big Storms."**

We hope it's helpful. You can find it online at:

virginiadefender.files.wordpress.com/2021/01/working-class-guide-to-storms.pdf



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community news

Defenders' political analysis gaining audience

Staff Report

Writings and activities by members of the Virginia Defenders have been attracting some attention lately, both locally and beyond.

Steering Committee members Ana Edwards and Phil Wilayto had an opinion piece published Aug. 14 in the Richmond Times-Dispatch. "Shockoe Bottom will be memorialized — the question is how," was an answer to an op-ed published the previous week by the Rev. Ben Campbell promoting building a \$100 million National Slavery Museum in Shockoe Bottom.

On Aug. 3, Richmond's Style Weekly published an op-ed by Wilayto called "Defining Goals: Some thoughts and theory on race relations among activists." (See the story "How the Monuments Came Down" elsewhere on this page.)

On April 17 Edwards gave tours of Shockoe Bottom for the JXN (Jackson Ward) Project during the Illuminating Legacies: Giles B. Jackson Day. Wilayto gave a Shockoe Bottom tour July 15 to incoming first-year students at the University of Richmond.

Meanwhile, the Defenders' Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project has been invited to participate in a project called Transitional Justice in the U.S., sponsored by the D.C.-based International Coalition of Sites of Conscience.

On another front, Wilayto's essay "Lessons from the attack on the U.S. Capitol" has been translated and published in the Philippines, Italy and Brazil, and has been circulated in English in Hungary and other Eastern European countries and on the online media sites Popular Resistance, MRZine and many smaller left media outlets.

Wilayto also has been asked to be a regular opinions contributor to Iran's PressTV, one of the many foreign news outlets whose U.S.-controlled domain names were seized in June by the Biden administration. The station is now operating again from an alternate platform.

And Wilayto has been invited to participate in an online international forum on Afghanistan to take place Sept. 20-24.

In memorium



iAbdus Luqman - Presente!

By Jacqueline Luqman

Abdus Luqman, D.C. member of the Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality, transitioned from this life suddenly on June 15, 2021.

Abdus was a native of Camden, N.J. and moved to D.C. in 2013 to marry his best friend and soulmate, Jacqueline.

Since then, the two of them founded Luqman Nation Media, their independent radical social media outlet, and worked in and supported several organizations dedicated to the liberation of working-class, poor and oppressed people, especially African and Afro-descended people.

Abdus enthusiastically provided security for the Defenders and enjoyed spending time with Phil and Ana whenever he and Jacquie could.



iJameel Abed - Presente!

By Phil Wilayto

Jameel Jalal Abed, a leader of Richmond's Arab-American community and a proud advocate for Palestinian self-determination, left this world on Aug. 10. Weakened from a lung transplant he received last summer, he succumbed to COVID-19. He was 70.

Born in Jerusalem, Mr. Abed was the owner of the Mediterranean Bakery & Deli in Richmond and a founding member of the Islamic Center of Virginia, where he later served as president and chairman of the board of trustees. He also was a board member of the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy and was a great friend to the Defenders.

Mr. Abed is survived by his loving wife, Saba, with whom he was married 51 years; their three sons, Niddal, Osama and Bassam; four grandchildren, two brothers and two sisters.

COMMUNITY CALENDAR

RICHMOND – ONGOING

WMMT'S CALLS FROM HOME – Every Monday, 7-9 pm, at WMMT Hot 88.7 FM. This radio station records messages for prisoners in Appalachian Kentucky and Virginia state prisons from 7-9 pm and then broadcasts the messages from 9-10 pm. Call 888-396-1208 to leave a message. Information: wmmt.org/callsfromhome.

RICHMOND – EVENTS

Sat., Sept. 11 – **MONTHLY CLEAN-UP IN SHOCKOE BOTTOM** – Sponsored by the Defenders' Sacred Ground Project. We do it to connect with the place and each other. See page 11 for details.

Sun., Sept. 12 – **30th ANNUAL DOWNHOME FAMILY REUNION - A celebration of African American Folklore** - 2-7 pm. Location and details at: EFSINC.ORG - 804-644-3900.

Sat., Oct. 2 - Sun., Oct. 3 – **2nd STREET FESTIVAL** - Annual community event in historic Jackson Ward. This year, The JXN Project will be unveiling honorary street signs. Free. Information: venturerichmond.com.

Fri., Oct. 8 - Sun., Oct. 10 – **RICHMOND FOLK FESTIVAL** - One of Virginia's largest festivals, featuring more than 30 artists from around the country and the world. Free. Information: venturerichmond.com.

Sun., Oct. 10 – **19TH ANNUAL GABRIEL GATHERING** - Come and honor the sacrifices of the ancestors and rededicate ourselves to the struggles of today. Shockoe Bottom African Burial Ground. Sponsored by the Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project. Details will be posted at: sacredgroundproject.net.

Sun., Oct. 17 – **VIOLINS OF HOPE** - A concert by the Richmond Symphony Orchestra, using violins that date to the Holocaust. Congregation Beth Ahabah, 1121 W. Franklin St. Information: violinsof-hoperva.com/community-concerts.

VA PrideFest cancelled, again

For the second year in a row, VA PrideFest has been canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The event, which draws tens of thousands, had been planned for Saturday, Sept. 25. Instead, several smaller events are being planned throughout September, with mandatory vaccinations or masks.

For more information, see:

www.vapride.org



*Wesley Memorial
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no hay fronteras en la lucha de los obreros/as

Editor's note: Tucked away on a side street on Richmond's South Side, across from Sacred Heart Catholic Church, is a red brick building that in many ways functions as the heartbeat of the city's Spanish-speaking community. And despite the continuing pandemic, Centro Sagrado Corazón, or Sacred Heart Center is now serving some 25,000 people a year with a wide range of community programs.

Virginia Defender editor Phil Wilayto recently sat down to speak with the center's director, Tanya Gonzalez, a Mexican-American woman who previously managed the City of Richmond's Office of Multicultural Affairs. Ms. Gonzalez began her association with Sacred Heart Center as a friend and partner before assuming the chief leadership role five years ago.

So what is Centro Sagrado Corazón?

It's a comprehensive community center that connects Latino families with the tools to thrive and flourish. Even more important, it's a place where people belong. I have heard many people describe it like that over the years. This is a space that makes a recently arrived immigrant feel at home. It speaks to community, a sense of belonging, something we all need. And underneath that, programs, education and social services. And we work in collaboration with the parish, as a sister organization, so there's a spiritual side for those who want to share that part. But we serve everyone, regardless of religious affiliation or no faith affiliation.

When was the center founded?

As a nonprofit, in 1990, by the Jesuits and the Catholic Diocese. It is considered a Jesuit mission. Our board president is Father Shay, a Jesuit priest. It's had several iterations or focuses over the years; however, it has always served marginalized and vulnerable populations, but it's changed as Southside has changed.

How large is the staff?

We have 35 staff members; about 20 are full time. And there are 100 to 200 active volunteers.

How many are Spanish-speaking?

The majority.

And how many programs are there?

Seventeen. Our core work is in three areas: adult education; youth and children; and community initiatives that serve the entire family.

The largest program is adult English classes. These are usually full, because the community wants to learn English. Before the pandemic, we had 200 adult students in this program per semester.

The next largest program, prior to the pandemic, is our collaboration with consulate offices. The consulates come to the campus to issue passports, help people get their IDs, which can then be used for many different services



Photo courtesy of Centro Sagrado Corazón

Centro Sagrado Corazón Un centro de la comunidad

for the family, such as children's benefits. And now the driving privilege card, and registering children for school.

And third, during non-pandemic times, we have Kids of the Corazón – the name is in Spanglish – during evening classes for adults. We provide homework help, arts and crafts, different activities. It's mitigating the child-care barrier so the adults can attend classes. We usually serve about 75 kids total during the program year.

And there's the summer camp for kids. We had 50 children this year. We pick them up and bring them here for day camp.

And you have a food bank?

Yes. During the non-pandemic times, we would see maybe 500 people a month. Now with the expanded food pantry, since April of 2020, we've been serving 800 to 1,000 people a week. There's a very low barrier to participate. We're not asking people to provide any documents. But it's been very intense. The staff is tired. There are times when the shelves are bare. It's moment to moment, in and out. We're looking to grow collaborations with Feed More [a food distribution service] and others.

Another important program is financial assistance with housing costs – we have been fortunate to be able to secure private dollars to help families. Since April 2020, when we started the emergency relief program, we have served over 1,000 families with \$1 million in rent, mortgage, mobile homes, renting a room, some utility help. It's a key part of our crisis response, and the money goes right in and back out into the community.

And you have a radio program?

We have a radio show on two local Spanish-language stations: Radio Poder at 1380 AM, Wednesdays at 11:30 a.m.; and Ultra Radio Richmond on 94.1 FM, Fridays at 10 a.m.

We explain the center's programs, but also provide pandemic information. Before, official information wasn't being translated into Spanish immediately, so we verbally informed people of the latest orders and correct information to get out the basic information as soon as possible. Starting around February, we shifted to vaccine messages, bringing in Spanish-speaking doctors and nurses to explain what's in the vaccine and why they're important.

How many people does the center serve in a year?

Pre-pandemic, 11,000, with about 1,000 in ongoing educational programs. In the last fiscal year, about 19,000. This year, I think close to 25,000. The bigger numbers are because of the expanded food assistance, along with the other programs. The education programs have moved online, so those numbers are smaller, but they continue to operate, which is a testament to the desire of our community to learn.

And what is your target audience?

Our mission speaks to serving Latino families, but a lot of programs are open to anyone who wants to participate. The English classes and the food pantry don't exclude anyone, but the target audience is Spanish speakers.

How many countries are represented among the community members

who use the center?

There are more than 20 Latin American countries, and we probably have representation from all of them.

Are any distinctions made between documented and undocumented?

No. We don't ask. When we work with a Medicaid navigator, the person may have to show certain documentation, but Sacred Heart Center doesn't ask.

How is the center funded?

With a wide variety of grants, mainly from local foundations, individuals and the faith community. We're always looking for more people who feel an alignment with our mission to get involved.

How has COVID-19 affected the work?

It's been a very difficult year, overall as an organization and for our team and our community, which has been devastated by this pandemic. People have been lost. The difficult economy has hit our community hard. And we're also thinking about who is back home in our countries of origin and not getting access to vaccines, so it's a transnational experience. Our in-person programs have been cut back, but we're now serving more people. The team has been flexible, as when we maybe ask an in-person staff member to switch to work with another program. There have been no layoffs, and the staff has actually grown.

Does the center provide vaccines or information about vaccines?

There's a weekly clinic that began last March with the Bon Secours Care-A-Van mobile unit. They offer vaccines. The Richmond Health Department has held two pop-up clinics and is planning a second dose. So far, about 1,000 people have gotten the second dose. We'll continue those efforts as long as we can.

Is there a way that people outside the community can help?

Time, talent and treasure!

We always welcome volunteers. And they don't have to speak Spanish. If people are able to go on our website, there's a volunteer interest form. Then the volunteer coordinator will do an interview, to discuss the person's interests and talents.

With the food pantry, it's helpful to speak Spanish, but it's not required. There's a high need for ESL instructors, and they don't need to speak Spanish. Depending on the pandemic situation, there are opportunities for in-person instruction and for people who do speak Spanish.

Another way people could help would be to do a food drive in their neighborhood. We accept donations on Tuesdays and Thursdays. There's more information on our website.

**Centro Sagrado Corazón -
Sacred Heart Center**

1400 Perry St., Richmond, VA 23224
Ph: 804-230-4399

our working lives

Henrico bakery workers join national strike

By Kat McNeal

On a normal day, the workers at the sprawling industrial Mondelez bakery in Henrico County would be turning out Oreo and Chips Ahoy! cookies, Ritz crackers and other snacks.

But these aren't normal days. Instead, the workers are staffing picket lines 24/7 outside the plant at 6002 S. Laburnum Ave. The 436 employees have organized themselves into eight-hour shifts, marching back and forth across the driveway entrance or standing in the punishing summer heat, holding signs for the passing vehicles.

The striking workers have pavilions set to the side of the shoulderless highway, covering tables with supplies of coolers, cases of water, donated food and signs. On the lawn separating the bakery from the road, hired security guards sit under tents improvised out of blue tarps, filming the strikers. Periodically, one will speed a rented van of "replacement workers" into or out of the main driveway.

Darlene Carpenter, Local 358's business agent, suspects the replacements are only able to clean the facility, as they lack the skills to operate the plant's nine production lines.

In addition to the Henrico plant, the other five U.S. Mondelez plants are also out on strike.

"It's not about more money," said Christeen Brown, a packing technician who has worked at the Henrico bakery for 21 years. "We're fighting to keep what we've already worked hard for."

This labor struggle began in May, when the Chicago-based Mondelez food and beverage corporation came to the bargaining table with the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers International Union



Photo by Kat McNeal

Braving the intense summer heat, union bakery workers maintain a lively picket line outside the Mondelez bakery plant in Henrico County. They are asking for support.

(BCTGM) with these offers:

- longer hours for less pay, at the company's discretion;
- higher health-care costs;
- a dual system of health-care coverage in which present workers would keep the mostly-unmodified health-care plan they had sacrificed so much for, but new hires would receive a different plan.

And the union members were asked to make these concessions with no guarantee that their workplaces would even stay open long-term. Two other U.S. Mondelez plants have already closed this year, putting 1,000 people out of work. The workers suspect the jobs are headed to the food giant's facility in Nuevo León, Mexico, where the workers are paid far less than in the states.

Predictably, despite BCTGM's efforts to get a workable offer out of the snack giant, an agreement was not reached, and the contract lapsed at the end of May. On Aug. 10, some 200

workers represented by Local 364 at the Mondelez-subsidary Nabisco factory in Portland, Ore., walked out, beginning the strike. A sales distribution center in Aurora, Colo., was next.

Then, on Monday, Aug. 16, at the 100-acre Mondelez plant in Henrico County, BCTGM Local 358 joined the strike.

The strikers' demands are simple: they want a new contract with no concessions, and some promise that their workplaces will not be shuttered so that Mondelez can offshore their jobs.

BCTGM Local 358 is inviting supporters to join the picket at any time, and to bring donations of money for the strike fund, food, beverages or ice.

The national union is also encouraging people to boycott Mondelez products that are made in Mexico.

For further updates on the strike, check in at: virginiadefender.org.

For more information, check out <http://locals.ueunion.org/111> or reach out to us at VBcityworkers@ueunion.org or 757-632-7866.

Charles Brown is an organizer with UE in the Tidewater area.

City workers organize in Tidewater

By Charles Brown

Aug. 19 marked the one-year anniversary of the Virginia Beach Waste Management work stoppage and the beginning of the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America's (UE) union campaign to organize municipal workers in the Tidewater area.

In Virginia Beach, workers in the Public Works, Public Utilities, Parks and Recreation and Human Services departments have been organizing a union for the first time in the city's history. Effective May 1, a state law written in the Jim Crow era was overturned to allow local government workers the right to collectively bargain a union contract, once that action is approved by local governments.

In the past year, city workers have won some major victories, even without a formal union or collective bargaining agreement. One victory was helping to reverse a new state law effective July 1 that took away workers' ability to earn comp time. This was absolutely a result of numerous calls and visits made to members of the General Assembly. Some thought that we could not take on the state government and WIN, but this shows we can!

Also, the Virginia Beach city manager had proposed a meager 3 percent raise, but, after pressuring city council, city workers won a 4.5 percent raise, in addition to other gains.

Workers are building a statewide movement of city workers that is historic for Virginia. Local government workers in Fairfax and Loudoun counties, as well as in Alexandria, have won local resolutions allowing collective bargaining. City workers in Norfolk and Newport News are also currently organizing, in addition to those in Virginia Beach.

Volvo workers ratify contract, end strike

Staff Report

It began in April, when thousands of workers at a heavy truck plant in southwest Virginia went out on strike, rejecting the contract offer by the Volvo corporation. In mid-July, the blue-collar workers at the plant narrowly ratified the company's third contract offer by a vote of 1,147 to 1,130. They since have returned to work.

The plant in Dublin employs about 2,900 workers, represented by the United Auto Workers union.

The workers had previously rejected three tentative contract agreements agreed to by their local union negotiators, including the same contract that was finally ratified.

According to the union, the six-year agreement provides protections around shift scheduling; eliminates a second, lower tier of wages; and includes a "major signing bonus and aggressive annual wage improvements."

The ratified contract states that workers with one year of experience will start at \$20.60 per hour, rising to a top wage of \$30.92 when the contract expires in 2026.

Just before the final vote, Volvo said it would put the third contract offer into effect, and called on workers to cross the union's picket lines and return to work. The union said only a few workers crossed the lines.

Meanwhile, the much smaller number of salaried union workers at the plant rejected the contract, by a vote of 45-40. UAW President Ray Curry said the union has an established process to address concerns about the salary agreement.

Meanwhile, Volvo should weather the wage increases just fine. In the first quarter of 2021, the Sweden-based company reported a net income of about \$1 billion, or 52 cents per share, compared with \$560 million, or 27 cents per share, a year earlier.

VCU union update

By Kat McNeal

Union organizing at Virginia Commonwealth University has been steadily expanding since its launch on April 26, when 100 members and supporters of VCU Adjuncts Organizing for Fair Pay rallied at Richmond's Monroe Park to press their fight for higher pay, health care and better working conditions.

At the rally, AOFPP announced the launch of the VCU chapter of United Campus Workers, a union that is organizing under the auspices of

the Communications Workers of America. At that time, UCW at VCU had 50 members. By the end of August, there were 138. AOFPP is now the Adjunct Committee of UCW at VCU.

UCW steering committee member Rose Szabo explained that all VCU employees and student workers, including those hired through contractors, are eligible to join the union. The only exceptions are administrators at the assistant dean level or higher and police officers, who have their own associations.

On Sept. 25, the union's statewide local plans to hold an online interest meeting for campus workers anywhere in Virginia. For information:

<http://bit.ly/interest4UCWVA>

HOW TO STOP THE GUN VIOLENCE?

Editor's note: After the horrific mass shooting at Belt Atlantic Apartments on Richmond's Southside, many people came forward to try and support the affected community. One of these was Nyiaka James, who runs a catering service. She decided to help provide a meal for the mothers at Belt Atlantic. The Virginia Defender interviewed Ms. James at the Mothers Day dinner and asked why she thought the shootings were happening and what could be done about it.

These are her thoughts.



NYIAKA JAMES
Founder & Owner,
Shy's Island Cuisine, Richmond

I don't think anybody can really say why it's happening. I can't say it's not home training. I can't say that. Here's why: Because a mama can raise her child, a father can raise his child, to the best of their ability, right? They can do everything they can possibly do, have them in the best schools, have them in the best neighborhood, and if they want to choose to go the other path, whether they're influenced by this friend, that music, this person, that person, it's gonna happen. So I can't say lack of home training, because you can have it and still go the wrong way.

Honestly, I think it's a lack of respect for self. Lack of respect for your community. Lack of respect for your home base. That's really what it is.

So with that being said, what can be done to change it? This can be done to change it: If the community comes together, you know,

there are grandmamas and granddaddies and moms and things of that nature that can say, "Hey, your baby's doing something wrong, I'ma call home."

You know, 'cause again, if you see my baby do something wrong, call me. You see my child? Do something, call me. Whoop his ass -- excuse my language -- whoop his butt, and then call me. Cause again, that's how it used to be back in the day. Back in the day it used to be I can talk to you, I can talk to you, I can talk to you, my child is safe going to your house, your house, your house.

I met these ladies last week, but I guarantee you, I would be able to say, "Hey, boo, you watch them kids for me? I'ma go ahead and go to work," and vice versa. You know what I mean? It's about bringing community base back to the community, that's how we're going to make a change.

Violence is a thing, right? But how can we reduce it, is bringing home base, bringing family back to the picture. So once again, as everything happened out here, if there was a grandad or a grandmom saying, "Hey young man, nah ah ah - not around here," maybe that girl wouldn't have lost her life. Maybe her baby wouldn't have lost her life. Maybe those families wouldn't have got shot that day. You know what I mean?

So again, it's about bringing families back together, it's about bringing the community back together, so we can actually see a change.

I'm Jamaican, that's where I was born, and I had that type of great-grandma that raised this one and that one. And my great-grandmother used to say, "We got one banana, we got bunch of banana, we gonna feed everybody." You know what I mean? So if we've got one banana, we're gonna split it amongst everybody. We got a bunch of bananas, we're gonna feed everybody. So you might not have what you want, but you have what you need.

So if the community got back to that type of home base - if I have enough for you, and you and you and you, there wouldn't be a poverty. There wouldn't be a - I need, I need, I need, because at the end of the day, we're gonna give you what you need.

So at the end of the day, it took a lot of people in the community to make this happen. A lot of people donated, a lot of people are out here. Different restaurants, the DJ, families, everything. So at the end of the day, we're all waiting for everybody to come together, we're gonna break bread together, we're gonna make



Photos by Phil Wilayto

Responding to the tragic events of April 27, community members came together May 8 to host a Mothers Day dinner for Belt Atlantic residents on Richmond's Southside.

it happen together, you know what I mean? If we can get out of that selfish phase, where you're just thinking about you and what you need and how you feel at the moment, it could be a whole lot better. That's just what it comes down to. Home base has to be protected.

Editor's note: The Defenders do a lot of work with Virginia prisoners, and we know that many of them have a lot to say. We asked four of our comrades, all of them with decades in the system, to give us their thoughts on the causes and possible solutions to street violence. This is what they told us:

ASKARI LUMUMBA River North Correctional Center

About Community Violence:

Truth is, it's really a complex issue that requires a comprehensive approach to solving.

First, we know that the conditions produce individual despair and a pestilent culture. And of course, there's a historical context to our literal marginalization (social) through discriminatory practices, from housing to employment to education.

So I get that, but now it's morphed into this complex phenomenon that's multifaceted!! This shyt is a mental health issue, gun control issue, economic justice issue, racial justice issue and a criminal justice issue.

Here's where I differ from most: I believe community terrorists need to be imprisoned. Particularly at this stage of the workers' struggle. We don't have the institutions to manage community violence solely in the community right now. Bourgeois values still permeate the community and even the so-called "grassroots" orgs. So yes, we need to confine these dudes.

Now, once confined, cats need re-education!! That's a political re-education first! My salvation came from prison. I became a Rvltary in prison. On the street I was a thugged-

out social criminal and community terrorist! A damn nuisance! Some of these cats can barely read, use drugs all day, are heavily armed and suffer from some type of mental illness (PTSD, Anxiety, Depress, etc.)

And then there's the pestilent culture that's reinforced and exacerbated by Hip Hop! These dudes will kill a radical quicker than they will a pig! Without the means & power, we can't defend ourselves or the community without breaking the law. For us, building a security force is a crime! So we must get these cats out of the community where we can potentially reach them.

Now, imprisonment has to be coupled with Anti-Violence work in the community, which involves conflict resolution programs, G**g prevention & intervention programs, jobs training, GED & High School Diploma tutoring, Mentorship, Youth Athletics, Economic investment, Construction of dignified Affordable Housing Units, Cultural & Political education, Mental Health services, and so much more.

Community Violence is a problem in here, too. I just watched a dude be nearly killed about three weeks ago. He was stabbed in the chest and, while chasing a guy, fell and lay unconscious. They medevaced him to the hospital where he was treated and revived after several days. Word!

So I've been thinking about this issue for years because Black Men kill each other in huge numbers. I'm more likely to be killed by another black man than I am the police. That's why we can't afford to ignore the issue of community violence.

LANCE JENKINS Greensville Correctional Center

I believe that there are two deciding factors that play a role in the occurrence of violence in, quote-unquote, "Black Society." These factors are Culture and Conformity.

First, we must understand exactly what Culture is. Culture consists of physical objects,



Over the summer, many organizations and city agencies have provided counseling and other services to the Belt Atlantic residents. Security is said to have been improved.

such as clothing, and patterns of thinking, feeling or behaviors that are passed down from generation to generation among members of a society.

Now that we understand what Culture is, let's identify some of the elements of Black Culture. Substandard living conditions. Inadequate schooling. The prevalent availability of drugs, alcohol and guns, coupled with the media's propagation that committing acts of violence is exciting and a means to settle disputes.

The overgeneralization of Blacks by the police department only furthers things by clearly drawing a line in the sand. Since they are a direct representation of establishment, many become anti-establishment, whether it is done consciously or unconsciously. Placing all of these elements in one environment creates a perfect storm, especially within the underdeveloped minds of the youth. By the time those same youths become adults, they are already imprinted with a deformed image of what life is, so this is what they bestow upon the following generation.

Eventually, these distorted images of society become social norms. Norms are rules that define appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Drugs, alcohol, incarceration, oppression, guns and acts of violence became appropriate for every occasion. An appropriate means to hide psychological and physiological scars. An appropriate means for financial gain. An appropriate means to gain social status/respect.

We took all of the things that the "powers that be" created and fashioned a makeshift Culture to call our own, because that is the only thing that wasn't destroyed by "them."

Any species will utilize what is available in their environment as a means of survival. Their mental processes will also slowly alter to better adapt to any prolonged set of circumstances. Psychologists explain this as the Evolutionary Approach. This Approach studies how evolutionary ideas, such as adaptation and natural selection, explain human behavior and mental processes.

It goes on further to say, "research has examined how evolution influences a variety

of behaviors, such as aggression, ... fears, depression and decision making." Natural Selection, in terms of the evolution of the human brain, explains that genes are developed that produce traits or characteristics that help an organism survive. As sad as it sounds, many of us in the Black community conform to this unnatural Culture, on a physical and mental level, as a means to make it, even if we don't necessarily agree with it.

As humans, we will always adapt to our environment. Any attempt to remove violence from the Black community will have to start with changing the Culture. People are more willing to accept change if it is beneficial to them. Living with morals and principles is always beneficial in the long run. Black business owners as opposed to Black drug dealers are more beneficial to the individual as well as the community in the long run. Nonviolence is obviously more beneficial. No one wants to be murdered, or get incarcerated for murder.

We must create in-school and after-school programs that will keep them occupied while promoting physical, mental and educational wellbeing, as well as preparing them for professional careers. This will be most effective if it comes from those who have prestige in the neighborhood, because they have been through similar circumstances.

BRANDON SEWARD Greensville Correctional Center

"Just say No!"

I am talking to you. The same one who turns their head to empowerment/encouragement. To put the brand over reality. To put the dead prez who owned slaves over reality. I want us to say no to crime, cuz criminality breeds imprisonment. U may harbor feelings of anger/ may lash out in beef. Yet if one was to ask u Y u do what u do, couldn't even answer Y.

This weekend was another bloody one. Full of merciful killing\$. As innocent bystanders were gunned down. Some 15 years old, some 10, some 21. We serve our masters as mercenaries.

Please look that word up. "One who fights in a militia for a foreign country/concept."

What is a concept? An idea/notion. Put in our heads as being right. Well, as they say, right on! This is wrongful. How is hurting someone while killing yourself right? Any one of us could be genetically related. The auction block was a separation of Blk/Afrikan families. As the merchandise was named after his/her ownership. The same way a dog wears tags. The only difference, the dog was treated better.

Now I sit in prison for accidentally playing with a gun & killed an innocent bystander. I got 23 yrs. ... This is exactly Y I am writing this, cuz u should just say no! To not put our youth/old in the same exact situations. I wouldn't wish this hell on anybody. Hence we can't scream blm, alm, brwlm, or any minority lives matter if we can gun down, rape, rob our own. These r things historically our opp used to do. Now we do it to ourselves. Over what? Ego, pride, jealousy, envy, hate, peer pressure, wanting to belong, fashion, materialism, etc.

All I am saying is, if we live in a society driven off \$ & vendors charge 8-10\$ for a free telephone call and 1\$ for 15¢ ramen soup, Y would I say u no what? "We going to let some brothers & sisters go." Hell no, u r cutting into my hustle. Plus, it too much of the right thing to do. Just like in learning history, y? so u & I r not to repeat it.

Now back then, the reason they were doing these things was becuz we were Afrikan (Blk) descent. Now if the same genocide is going on, is there not room for change? U can beat a dead horse but so much, but when u take them man-made shutters off, he can see can't he?

We can't keep looking at things metaphorical. ... We have seeds to plant & gardens to fertilize. Breaking down the walls is a hard thing. I once didn't believe in unity/elevation/aspiration/progress. Yet I admit being that dead horse. I have done violent things to my own kind, but I now regret it.

I listen to our music, but once the headphones go off, that is it. It's entertainment. Something to feel. Listening to a story. Not let me follow in the footsteps. Unless u on some Nip Hussle/Meek Mills/J. Cole/Nas/Jay Z shit, etc. Don't b a pet/byproduct. They want us to leave/hate our country. But let me take the trillions of dollars accumulated from the slave complex home to Afrika. Being our people built Amerika. Or give us 25 states & free your slaves. Let me educate them about theirselves. Being they only can celebrate their self 28 days plus MLK day, plus Juneteenth. Yes, I just said that. So how many days do your rulers/conquerors get? Whose face is on the his story books?

HASSAN RAAHANN SHABAZZ Dillwyn Correctional Center

When it comes to the state of affairs in the Black Community, one of the most hurtful issues that have plagued us since our days on

the Slave Master's plantation is Black-on-Black violence, which was not unusual to see. The truth is that we cannot explore the subject without understanding the psychology that evolved from that horrific crime against humanity.

The reason why it is so easy for young Black men to pick up a gun and senselessly murder those that look like themselves is rooted in White Supremacy and European Imperialism. Whereas we are not only victims of such but we have become actual perpetrators of these ideologies.

Psychologically, the damage done to Black Men, Women and Children for centuries upon plantations cannot be overstated. Blacks were bred specifically for the purpose of labor and were taught that they were nothing, worthless, that their dark skin was a curse, that they were not human and that they were born to be subservient to another people.

Black men were not allowed to be men. They were not allowed to be husbands, to be fathers, nor to be the sons of fathers. Not allowed to be brothers, uncles and nephews. The business of slavery was based upon the total destruction of the Black family, of which the Black man as the head and protector was a central target.

This culture of abnormality caused Black men to hate themselves for everything they were not. But, as stated by the famed Black psychologist Dr. Amos N. Wilson, self-hatred is not only an individual reaction. It becomes a part of a social system, because the person who hates himself hates others that remind him of himself. And therefore, when he looks out at his sisters and brothers, he also looks at himself. And if he questions the adequacy and competency of himself, he questions the adequacy and competency of his sisters and brothers.

So then the experience of failure and the experience of not achieving in society not only becomes an individual experience; it becomes a social experience and a social disease. This disease we see in the form of violence within our communities; no fathers in our communities; no leadership in our communities. We see an ideology of individualism where we operate with a "you do you, I do me" mentality, which reflects a total disregard for the community as a whole. Therefore this philosophy and ideology of individualism is not an ideology that attacks the individual, it is an ideology that attacks the whole of a community.

The violence in our communities is but a symptom of a greater disease of alienation within a society and culture not meant for the oppressed. The overcoming of alienation through the discovery and reclamation of their true identity and consciousness by all oppressed Afrikans portends the clattering downfall of White Supremacy. In this way, we are able to replace violence with love and destruction with rebuilding and thus take our place amongst all of the civilized people upon the planet earth. This is the only solution to the problems we face. Peace.

cops, courts & prisons



Photo courtesy Freedom Over Everything

Members and supporters of the prisoner-led organization Freedom Over Everything gather for a group photo at their Richmond rally to bring back parole.

From behind the walls, prisoners organize rally to bring back parole

By Elaine Phillips

Since parole in Virginia was abolished in January 1995, people convicted of felonies must serve a minimum of 85 percent of their sentences. The prisoner-led organization Freedom Over Everything, founded by three men incarcerated at Buckingham Correctional Center, is bringing awareness about this issue to the public.

On Aug. 15, FOE held a rally at Chimborazo Park in Richmond's East End, bringing together speakers, advocacy and wellness groups committed to addressing prison injustice issues. The event was organized with support from the outside.

More than 150 people gathered on the hot summer day, milling around tables with information or listening to a range of speakers, including State Sen. Joe Morrissey, who reported on crimi-

nal justice reform work in the General Assembly, including legislative work to restore parole. Virginia Prison Justice Network steering committee member Hassan Shabazz addressed the crowd by phone from Augusta Correctional Center.

Among the advocacy organizations present was Bridging the Gap in Virginia, an ex-prisoner-led organization that has restored civil rights to more than 6,000 ex-prisoners convicted of felonies. The activist group Community Unity in Action was there to discuss its organizing work. Also, with a literature table, were members of the Virginia Defenders, who distributed copies of The Virginia Defender newspaper and connected visitors to the Virginia Prison Justice Network.

FOE is now engaged in organizing "pop-up" events around Richmond to promote parole reform.

Fluvanna women speak out on COVID

Back in January, the Virginia Defender received a collection of letters from prisoners at the Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women in Troy, Va. The letters detail the relentless struggles of being incarcerated during the spread of COVID-19, particularly before vaccines were made available to prisoners.

The women said a lack of cleaning supplies, masks, soap and relevant COVID information made for constant frustrations. With social distancing nearly impossible in a prison setting, the women said they feared for their personal safety. At the same time, visitations were shut down

and access to video visits was limited, further increasing anxiety and feelings of isolation.

As of Aug. 27, the Virginia Department of Corrections was reporting that there had been a total of 655 cases of COVID-19 at Fluvanna, with no deaths, current cases or hospitalizations.

According to The Virginia Mercury, a new court-appointed monitor suggested in July that the state wasn't close to meeting the terms of a 5-year-old legal settlement over poor health care and a spate of inmate deaths at Fluvanna.

The Fluvanna women's letters are posted at: <http://virginiadefender.org>. E.P.

After 8 years waiting for an answer, Jermaine Doss is denied pardon

By Phil Wilayto

After waiting nearly eight years, Jermaine Doss finally has received a response to his request for a governor's pardon: "We are writing to let you know that your petition for executive clemency has been denied."

The letter, from the Pardons Department Office of the Secretary of the Commonwealth, stated that Jermaine could submit another petition - in three years.

"At the time I filed for my petition," Jermaine told the Defender, "it was a one or two years waiting period to file another request for clemency. But now they are telling me that I have to wait three years?"

Jermaine Doss, now incarcerated at Greens-

ville Correctional Center, was convicted more than 20 years ago of murder in the death of James Webb, a white Norfolk businessman. Jermaine was originally charged with murder-for-hire, but was convicted of murder, even though he was not present at the time of the crime.

The actual confessed murderer, Nathaniel McGee, testified that Jermaine had hired him to kill Webb, but later recanted that testimony, saying in an affidavit and subsequent court testimony that prosecutors had threatened him with the death penalty if he didn't testify against Jermaine.

Jermaine has always maintained his innocence, insisting he was set up by a crooked cop - former Norfolk Detective Robert Glenn Ford, after refusing Ford's demand for a large sum of money. Ford is now in prison for extorting defendants in other criminal cases.

There is one bright spot in the story: Jermaine is one of the so-called "Fishback" prisoners and so is eligible for parole. He had his second now-annual parole hearing Aug. 26. His family is scheduled to meet with the parole board Sept. 16.

Information about FOE can be found at:

PHONE: 804-668-6330

EMAIL: freedomovereverything@gmail.com

TWITTER: #ParoleinVaNow

FACEBOOK: F.O.E +3

INSTAGRAM: FreedomOverEverything_3board



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reclaiming our sacred ground

About the City proposal for Shockoe Bottom

By Ana Edwards

When the “Shockoe Small Area Plan Draft” was released for public review and comment on July 19, the City’s press release stated that “The proposed Heritage Campus, dedicated to telling the complete history of the neighborhood, will serve as a catalyst for equitable growth.”

Shockoe Bottom was once the epicenter of the massive U.S. domestic slave trade.

The 10-block Heritage Campus includes the community-generated proposal for a nine-acre Shockoe Bottom Memorial Park that would include the Shockoe Bottom African Burial Ground, the Devil’s Half-Acre (site of Lumpkin’s jail) and two blocks east of the CSX railroad tracks where other slave jails, trader offices and supporting businesses once stood. The Defenders and our allies have been championing this memorial park since it was developed in a series of open community meetings in 2015.

In our opinion, this draft plan is a good one for this stage of the overall planning for Shock-

oe Bottom. The plan is also groundbreaking in that it represents the first time Richmond has openly made the region’s Black history the thematic centerpiece for urban development.

The planning process begun in 2017 by Mayor Levar Stoney was intended to make the city ready to commemorate its 300th anniversary in 2037. If the Heritage Campus plan is implemented, the significance of Richmond’s history in Shockoe Bottom will have a major role to play throughout that anniversary.

In 2018, the mayor launched the Shockoe Alliance to fulfill part of the Rose Fellowship recommendation to create a “shared vision” for Shockoe Bottom by bringing together community, resident, business, developer and neighborhood interest organizations to develop a plan that considered a full range of community goals for the area. The Sacred Ground Project, Preservation Virginia, Community Unity in Action and RVA Archaeology have been non-City representatives serving on the alliance.

Earlier, in 2017, Mayor Stoney launched

a citywide strategic planning process called “Richmond 300: A Guide for Growth” to follow through on the Pulse Corridor transit-oriented development zoning plan that also started the reorganization of the city’s bus transit system.

Local considerations join state and federal projects that will transform Shockoe Bottom, such as the Shockoe Valley Streets Improvement Project, which will impact streets north and south of Broad Street from I-95 east to 18th Street and Franklin north to Venable; renovations to the Main Street Station; and the addition of railroad tracks in Shockoe Valley for the DC2RVA “high speed rail” that will impact the footprint of both the Heritage Campus and the Shockoe Hill African Burying Ground. In addition, the City has plans to re-engineer the city’s stormwater and sewage management systems in Shockoe Valley.

While the small area plan does represent progress, there are also some important things that are not included that will need public attention going forward:

- A city archaeology policy
- Protective zoning for the historic and cultural resources
- Criteria for selection of design and construction team
- Determining who will own and manage the Memorial Park area
- What structure will be established to ensure the Black/descendant community voice is part of the planning and governance of the Heritage Campus?
- How will the development and operation of the Heritage Campus financially benefit the Black/descendant community?

With all these infrastructure changes coming, both the vision and the implementation of the Memorial Park will continue to need champions. The formal public comment period for the small area plan is now over. However, we encourage you to continue to review the plan and send your thoughts to the Department of Economic Development via the links on the city webpage. (<https://www.rva.gov>)

NOTE: If the city webpage will no longer accept your comments, please send them to sacredgroundproject@gmail.com. And be sure to copy your city councilperson. (<https://www.rva.gov/richmond-city-council/council-contacts>) We will forward them to the appropriate person in the Economic Development department and mayor’s office.

Ana Edwards, a descendant of people sold out of Richmond in the 1840s, chairs the Defenders’ Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project, founded in 2004 to promote the reclamation and proper memorialization of Shockoe Bottom.

Shockoe Hill African Burying Ground submitted for state registration

By Ana Edwards

According to descendant-advocate Lenora McQueen, “The nomination for the Shockoe Hill Burying Ground Historic District has been completed. It was submitted to [the Department of Historic Resources] and is under review. If all goes well, it is expected that the nomination will be presented to the State Review Board on December 9, 2021.”

In 1816, the same year that Richmond’s Shockoe Bottom African Burial Ground was closed after just 16 years operation, the town council authorized the use of two acres at what then was the north end of the city, on Shockoe Hill, as the “Grave Yard for Free Persons of Color, and Slaves.”

By the time it closed in 1879, the graveyard had grown to more than 31 acres and held the burials of more than 22,000 Black Richmonders, including Kitty Cary, fourth great-grandmother of Ms. McQueen.

Today, only 1.3 acres remain that can be memorialized, and as with the Memorial Park footprint in Shockoe Bottom, there are state and federal projects that could threaten the area with further damage.

The nomination was co-authored by archaeologist Steve Thompson; Ryan K. Smith, historian and author of “Death and Rebirth in a Southern City: Richmond’s Historic Cemeteries,” and primary author, retired Professor L. Daniel Mouer, who was the lead archaeologist at Virginia Commonwealth University in 1994 tasked with the recovery from an early 19th-century well of human remains that turned out to have been used in anatomical studies.

Records show that many bodies procured for use by the Medical College of Virginia at that time were robbed from the Shockoe Hill African Burying Ground. Ms. McQueen also has secured the support of Preservation Virginia, RVA Archaeology, Historic Richmond LLC, the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project.

This nomination is the second step in the process for approval for the site to be listed on the Virginia Landmarks Register and the National Register of Historic Places.

The document can be viewed at: <https://www.richmondcemeteries.org/wp-content/uploads/ShockoeHill-nominationpublicreview.pdf>



Defenders mark Liberation Day with launch of monthly clean-up in Shockoe Bottom

This past April 3 marked the 146th anniversary of the day Union troops, led by Black soldiers of the USCT, marched into the capital of the Confederacy, broke open the slave jails and liberated Richmond.

This year, the Defenders observed the day by launching a now-monthly clean-up of the Shockoe Bottom African Burial Ground and Devil’s Half-Acre (Lumpkin’s jail site).

On Aug. 22, the Defenders emailed

Richmond Parks and Rec and asked the department to at least provide trash receptacles at the two sites. As of Aug. 30, we have not received a response.

The next clean-up is scheduled for 11 a.m., Saturday, Sept. 11. We meet at the Devil’s Half-Acre, just south of East Broad Street behind the Main Street Station.

You’re welcome to join us! Bring your own gloves and we’ll provide the trash bags. See you there?

In our opinion

Democracy & Democrats

OK, it's one thing when Princess Blanding, candidate for governor on the newly-formed Liberation Party ticket, gets excluded from all the gubernatorial candidate debates. The Dems can always blame that on the debate organizers. Of course, they don't object, but, hey, it's not their show, right?

But when Ms. Blanding gets left out of the polls conducted by Christopher Newport University and the VCU L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs - state institutions in a state controlled by the Democratic Party, then it starts to smell like a conspiracy.

On Nov. 2, Princess Blanding will be the first Black woman to ever make it onto the ballot for governor in Virginia. Ever. And she'll be the only person of color on the ballot for governor. And the only woman. And the only member of the LGBTQ community. And the only single, working mother. And by far the only left-of-center candidate.

But the two wealthy, white, male candidates, representing parties that are different on social issues but ultimately controlled by the same corporate interests (can anyone say "Dominion"?), are just fine with Ms. Blanding being excluded from both the debates and the polls.

That certainly works to the advantage of Democrat Terry McAuliffe. The polls say it's a close race, and a vote for Ms. Blanding would likely be seen as taking one away from McAuliffe - the same argument used against every third-party candidate or even left-of-center Democrat, like Bernie Sanders. You know. "Don't throw your vote away - by voting for someone you'd actually like to see win."

But you would think that Republican Glenn Youngkin would want to see a progressive third-party candidate in the mix, figuring that might work to his advantage. But no, he's as silent as McAuliffe.

And so we see the limits of bourgeois democracy. Princess Blanding's fierce activism and progressive politics are a threat to the two-party system that has worked so well for the banks and corporations, no matter which of the two parties is in office. So why take a chance of upsetting a perfectly good system?

Why? No good reason - unless you're a worker yourself, a person of color or a white person who stands in solidarity with the Black, Brown, Asian and Indigenous communities. Or you're a woman. Or a member of the LGBTQ community, or someone really concerned about the environment or maybe just a decent person who'd like to believe we have a real democracy.

Come Nov. 2, let's have the courage to vote for something we want, even if we don't get it, rather than vote for something we don't want and get stuck with it.

On Nov. 2, vote Princess Blanding for governor!

Letters to the Editor

Looking for authors

A Message To My Brothers and Sisters - Be relentless in what you aspire to do. I am standing and speaking with you. I've been writing Governors, Senators and Delegates for over 15 years. Fighting for parole, good time, Fishback etc I've been to over 12 prisons in VA D.O.C. (21 years). My name is Courtney "Free" Henson and I am the CEO of The Unity Group Publishing L.L.C. I speak for you in every one of my books! I put my life on the line in my books. I am looking for writers to do the same.

These are the books I currently have on Amazon: 1. Redemption Is Never Satisfied. 2. Wake Up America. 3. Fathers Initiative Training. 4. Life Is so You Know.

I write for you and I speak for us without compromise. Do Not Limit Yourself! I thank Phil greatly for this time. Get a book and get ready!

Courtney "Free" Henson
Lawrenceville Correctional Center
LAWRENCEVILLE

P.S.: Writers who are ready to be great, contact us at: **The Unity Group - Publishing@gmail.com.**

Buckingham problems

Buckingham Correctional Center and other Virginia Department of Corrections prisons have restricted flushes on the inmates' housing unit toilets. (Flush 3 times and you have to wait 30 minutes before the toilet can be flushed again.) Yes, even here at BKCC, in a two-man cell.



Virginia Defender photo

Ana Edwards, left, chair of the Defenders' Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project, speaks at a press conference in front of Richmond City Hall called to denounce the proposal to put a baseball stadium on the sacred ground of Shockoe Bottom. That proposal, which was defeated in 2015, was supported by some of the same people now pushing for a \$100 million slavery museum on the site of the Devil's Half-Acre, something that was overwhelmingly opposed in more than 20 public meetings held on the future of Shockoe Bottom.

BKCC has one on-off button on each of the 80 showers. Four showers per 64-man pod. The showers each lack separate adjustable hot and cold water valves Currently D2's shower temperature is too hot for these 90-plus-degree Fahrenheit days. We just came off a shakedown/lockdown and we were not allowed to shower each day. It was over 100 heat indexes. ...

The Virginia Parole Board and VDOC are treating its parole-eligible prisoners inhumanely by not providing us a second opportunity at freedom. We were not sentenced to life without parole. They are punishing us 26, 30, 40 and 50+ years later for the exact same crime(s) the courts sentenced us for decades ago.

Charles Zellers
Buckingham Correctional Center
DILLWYN

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Solitary no more Virginia

By Kimberly Jenkins-Snodgrass

Virginia stands out among states for its refusal to cease the inhumane practice of solitary confinement. Calling solitary confinement nine different names in less than a decade, as the Virginia Department of Corrections has done, is simply verbal gymnastics. It's clear that Virginia will never admit to practicing solitary confinement. Quite frankly, I'm no longer asking; I've learned to follow the money and the reported substantiated abuse when advocating for legislation to end solitary confinement.

"The United States spends 182 billion dollars per year on mass incarceration. This includes 3,000 jails and 1,900 state and federal prisons that cost taxpayers \$85 billion per year," according to Forbes EQ. VDOC's annual operating budget is \$1.3 billion. Solitary confinement costs 2-4 times as much to maintain as the general prison population. The "first half of 2020, the Virginia Department of Corrections spent over \$1 million on just two lawsuits related to solitary confinement," according to an FOIA response.

Much of my knowledge about solitary confinement in Virginia is first-hand. My son, Kevin "KK" Snodgrass Jr., served four consecutive years in solitary confinement at Red Onion State Prison. I was mentally caged in confinement with my son. I'll never forget when I finally hugged Kevin; I felt his shiver and he had no body scent. While happy to see his family, Kevin was clearly uncomfortable. The parking-space accommodation, inadequate food, no electronics, and no contact visits had taken its toll.

The practice of solitary confinement in Virginia's prisons, local and regional jails is far too prevalent. It causes irreparable mental and physical harm to those upon whom it is inflicted. Solitary confinement is barbaric and has been condemned by the World Health Organization, the United Nations and other human rights organizations. Depriving a person of human contact and other regular stimulation for 22-24 hours a day is inhumane on its face. Too often, however, it is imposed by corrections officers as retaliation or punishment for behavioral or mental health issues not related to one's criminal sentence.

Continuing the use of this torturous and potentially fatal practice during a global pandemic is even more unconscionable. Extended placement in isolation weakens one's immune system and increases contact with guards who themselves may be infected. VDOC cannot be allowed to continue to use solitary confinement as a prison management tool.

Last General Assembly session, VDOC submitted an \$11 million impact statement to kill an Oversight bill in the House and a \$23 million frivolous impact statement to kill the Solitary

Confinement bill. VDOC's recent announcement that it has ended Restrictive Housing - alias for solitary confinement - is misleading. I find it hard to believe that VDOC spent \$23 million to end solitary confinement since February 2021. Show the public the receipts.

In this upcoming 2022 General Assembly session, both the Senate and House have an opportunity to end an era of VDOC submitting inflated impact statements to kill common-sense legislation that offers real criminal justice. There can be no criminal justice reform without prison reform.

The Virginia Coalition on Solitary Confinement is poised to return in 2022 with a solitary confinement bill that effectively ends prolonged isolation for both adults and juveniles in Virginia State prisons. We will lead the way for a historical moment in Virginia that holds VDOC accountable and relieves those incarcerated individuals isolated behind solid steel doors.

If the Virginia General Assembly didn't have enough reasons to legislate an end to solitary confinement already, the need now is greater than ever. We can't count on VDOC to do the right thing! All incarcerated individuals are at an even higher risk of harm during this ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. I don't want to hear that Virginia has to take baby steps to correct its criminal, racist, broken judicial and prison systems.

George Floyd occurred in Virginia long before it occurred in Minnesota. Let's lead in prison reform, joining Delaware, North Dakota, Colorado and Washington to eliminate solitary confinement administratively.

To join the **#solitaryNOMoreVA** campaign, contact Natasha White, Coordinator/Manager, Virginia Coalition on Solitary Confinement, at nwhite@interfaithactionhr.org. Follow us on social media at fb: **SolitaryNOMoreVA** / ig: **coalition_on_solitary** / twitter: **@onsolitary** / www.interfaithactionhr.org

Kimberly Jenkins-Snodgrass is a tireless advocate for justice, civil and human rights, and her wrongfully incarcerated son Kevin "KK" Snodgrass Jr. In 2016, she joined the board of Interfaith Action for Human Rights (IAHR - www.interfaithactionhr.org) and later served two terms as vice-chairperson. She currently is serving her second and final term as chairperson. She can be reached at: iahr.ksnodgrass@gmail.com. Twitter: [@kimjnsnodgrass](https://twitter.com/kimjnsnodgrass) / Instagram: [kimberlyjenkinssnodgrass](https://www.instagram.com/kimberlyjenkinssnodgrass)



This year, there IS a choice!

By Princess Blanding

During the summer of 2020, as people united in Richmond and across the country to demand legislators do more than say "Black Lives Matter," these words sprang from my heart and became a mantra: It's time for us to expand our fight from the streets to the seats of these key elected positions. It's time for the rise of a strong independent party.

We have power when we are united and we put our demands to our elected officials: to enact legislation that shows that Black Liberation Matters, putting community care and safety first.

The continuous failures of the two-party system, specifically those of the Democratic Party, is why I decided to run for governor of Virginia. After my brother Marcus-David Peters was murdered at the hands of the police in 2018, I co-founded Justice and Reformation, an advocacy organization for mental health care, public safety and protection of our most vulnerable communities from police violence.

Throughout 2020, I worked closely with Virginia legislators to propose legislation that eventually became the "Marcus Alert" bill. Unfortunately, after concessions to please more conservative Democratic Party members, the bill that became law was watered down, ineffective and does not protect vulnerable members of our community from fatal encounters with the police.

As an activist, I advocate for and elevate the voices and concerns of working-class Virginians and address the inequities in our Black and most marginalized communities. The foundational policies of my campaign prioritize community care, public safety and racial and economic justice. The Democratic Party is terrified of my candidacy because they know they have taken advantage of the Black, working-class, LGBTQIA+ and marginalized peoples' vote for too long while they continue to fail us. Virginians no longer have to settle for the "lesser of two evils" option because I am a candidate who is fighting for the needs and concerns of Virginians and to ensure that liberation is a human right, not a privilege.

I am the first Black woman - and first LGBTQIA+ member - to ever make it on the ballot for governor of Virginia. The story of a grassroots activist who fought their way onto the ballot is too powerful for the duopoly, because it empowers other oppressed people to see that if I can do it, they can too. They will

do everything in their power to silence me, which is why I was shut out from the debates. The system is not broken - it is functioning exactly as it was designed: to keep people oppressed, to keep us struggling and divided.

Democrats use fear and false narratives to scare people, spreading the message that voting for a third-party candidate will hand the election to the Republicans. I encourage you to be free thinkers and not let traditional voting practices and fearmongering prevent you from following your heart and common sense.

We cannot keep doing the same thing and expect different results. Voting "blue no matter who" means keeping the working class, Black and Brown people, disabled community members and so many others in an oppressive cycle of limited resources and autonomy.

The only way we will win this election is by continuing to empower Virginians to mobilize, rise up and resist this oppressive system and take actions like registering to vote, getting out to vote and bringing others to the polls when early voting starts in September.

Our campaign will always be out-earned by millions of special interest dollars driving the well-oiled Democratic and Republican machine. We made it on the ballot because of people power, not by submitting to corporate donors. It was no easy task, but what I know for certain is that we the people have a lot of power when united. I am on the ballot because of our collective voice driven by one-on-one conversations with people across the Commonwealth who are sick of the same old broken record of promises made with little delivered. We the people are tired of receiving crumbs; we are here to claim the full-course meal.

We deserve better and I will not give up or back down until we claim better for all of us. To learn more, please visit us at **www.princessblanding.com**, follow us on social media and donate if you can.

Princess Blanding is the Virginia gubernatorial candidate for the Liberation Party and will be on the ballot this November. She can be reached at: Contact@princessblanding.com.



international & antiwar news



Photo by Phil Wilayto

Muslims, Jews, Christians and others gather May 19 in Richmond's Monroe Park to condemn settler violence and the Israeli government's attacks on Gaza.

Massive Richmond protest declares: 'WE STAND WITH PALESTINE!'

Staff Report

In the largest antiwar protest this city has seen in nearly 20 years, more than 1,500 people turned out May 19 to defiantly declare, "We Stand with Palestine!"

The youthful and predominantly Arab but very multinational crowd soon took over Broad Street, blocking traffic and filling the air with militant chants of "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free!"

Printed signs carried the protest demands: Stop the Israeli bombing of Gaza; Stop the settlers' seizing of Palestinian homes in Jerusalem; Stop all U.S. funding of Israeli apartheid; and Self-determination for Palestine!

The two-mile march was led by Arab youth holding the lead banner that proclaimed "We Stand with Palestine!" and the names of the three sponsoring organizations: the Arab American Association of Central Virginia; Richmonders for Peace in Israel-Palestine; and the Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality.

Richmond police, who had threatened the organizers with arrest if the march didn't stay on sidewalks, were reduced to blocking vehicle traffic - a task already being handled by autonomous bike marshals.

The protest was in response to the Israeli terror bombing of the Gaza Strip and police and settler violence against Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem. By the time the 11 day-bombardment ended with a ceasefire on May 20, at least 243 Palestinians had been killed, including more than 100 women and children, according to the Gaza health ministry. In Israel, 12 people, including two children, were killed,

according to the Israeli medical service.

During the bombardment, the Biden administration authorized the sale of \$735 million worth of armaments to Israel, which pays for the arms from its annual \$3.8 billion U.S. subsidy.

Other protests took place in Blacksburg, Roanoke, Harrisonburg and Norfolk, as well as Washington, D.C., an event that drew many from Northern Virginia.

In Richmond, the day's events began at Monroe Park with a rally co-chaired by Adeeb Abed, a Palestinian-American who heads the Arab American Association of Central Virginia, and Nancy Wein, a Jewish woman who co-chairs Richmonders for Peace in Israel-Palestine. The march ended with a second rally back at the park.

Rally speakers included independent gubernatorial candidate Princess Blanding; Rabbi David Feldman, who drove more than 300 miles from New York City with a carload of other members of Neturei Karta International - Jews United Against Zionism; State Senator Ghazala Hashmi; the Rev. Rodney Hunter, pastor of Wesley Memorial United Methodist Church; Reem Khaldy, an RPIP member born in East Jerusalem; Noorah Ramadan, a former resident of the Gaza Strip; and Defenders Ana Edwards and Sanaz Ghodsi.

The event was covered by all three network television stations, most of the city's daily and weekly newspapers and public radio.

Security for the march and rallies was coordinated by the Virginia Defenders, who also provided the lead banner, sound system and printed posters and helped with publicity and media work.



Virginia Defender photo

Carlos Lazo, center left, with supporters and other members of Puentes de Amor after a Richmond public meeting called to oppose the 60-year U.S. blockade against Cuba.

Puentes de Amor builds 'bridges of love' in Va. on their way to D.C.

Staff Report

Weeks before the July 11 anti-government protests in Cuba and the resulting tsunami of anti-Cuban media and political attacks in this country, Carlos Lazo and a small group of fellow Cuban-Americans set off from Miami to walk 1,300 miles to Washington, D.C.

Calling themselves Puentes de Amor, or Bridges of Love, their purpose was to engage the public about the effects of the more-than-60-year U.S. blockade of Cuba, holding meetings in Orlando, St. Augustine and Jacksonville, Fla.; Macon, Jenkinsburg and Atlanta, Ga.; and Roanoke and Richmond in Virginia.

Planning to speak July 25 at a mass rally in D.C., they carried a petition to President Joe Biden signed by more than 27,000 people calling on him to lift the blockade.

The group arrived in Richmond July 19 in a visit sponsored by the Virginia Defenders, African Awareness Association and All-African People's Revolutionary Party (GC).

More than 40 people attended the Defenders' public meeting that evening, held at Wesley Memorial United Methodist Church. Carlos was the featured speaker, eloquently explaining his own evolution into an anti-blockade activist and talking about how the blockade was hurting families, including his own relatives,

saying families must come before politics.

The next day, Lee Robinson of the AAA and A-APRP (GC) gave the group a tour of local historic sites, followed by a cookout, where Carlos gave another excellent talk.

The U.S. imposed the blockade shortly after the Cuban Revolution nationalized land and businesses owned by U.S. companies that had been exploiting the Cuban people for decades. The effects of the blockade became much worse in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba's major trading partner.

The blockade was further tightened when President Donald Trump imposed hundreds more sanctions. Then the worldwide pandemic forced Cuba to close its doors to tourism, losing its primary source of foreign exchange. All this has led to the present severe economic crisis on the island, which the protesters in Cuba blame on their own government, which still provides free health care and education and subsidised food and housing.

On June 23, the U.N. General Assembly again overwhelmingly condemned the blockade.

For more information on the blockade and efforts to end it, google the National Network on Cuba, Pastors for Peace and the Embassy of Cuba in the United States.

A longer version of this story is posted at: virginiadefender.org.

international & antiwar news

Vietnam, Afghanistan & the limits of U.S. military power

By Phil Wilayto

"This is manifestly not Saigon," U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, told ABC's This Week.

Well, that's not quite true, is it? The gruesome images of Afghans desperately clinging to the undercarriage of a U.S. Air Force jet as it takes off from Kabul's besieged airport definitely looked like the images of Vietnamese desperately clinging to the landing gear of a U.S. helicopter as it lifted off from the roof of the U.S. embassy in Saigon.

Apparently, the lessons of 1975 have been lost on both the military brass and the civilians who supposedly run the wars.

The professional political pundits are trying to explain why the 180,000-member Afghan army seemingly melted away before the blitzkrieg offensive of the Taliban insurgents. President Joe Biden himself said they just weren't willing to fight, ignoring the decades of war in which more than 66,000 Afghani soldiers died.

Others said the Afghans didn't want to die for a corrupt government that itself was fleeing the country. Still others pointed to the U.S. air attacks that had been responsible for so many civilian deaths, turning many grieving relatives into Taliban supporters and recruits.

But there are other, deeper reasons, ones that those of us who pay for these wars with our lives and tax dollars - \$2.3 trillion in the case of Afghanistan - would be wise to study.

Vietnam and Afghanistan were both poor, predominantly peasant countries. Insurgent forces in both countries were vastly outgunned by the most powerful military in all of world history. Neither insurgent military had an air force. And yet, both eventually drove out the occupier.

In both Vietnam and Afghanistan, the insurgents believed they were fighting to rid their lands of foreign occupying forces. And both had determined leadership: The Vietnamese had a disciplined communist party, while the Afghans had the Taliban. While vastly different in their

politics, both believed deeply in their causes.

And in both wars, the insurgents, increasingly supported by the broad masses of people, were willing to die. They weren't fighting for money or career advancement. Instead, they believed in something, and that something was a mix of national liberation from a foreign oppressor and the vision of a new society conforming to their world views.

In other words, they were fighting for something greater than themselves - and they were willing to give their lives for victory.

The nuclear-armed United States can stare down nuclear-armed Russia or China, but it should have learned by now that it can't win a People's War, the term that famed Vietnamese Gen. Võ Nguyên Giáp called his winning strategy.

If a people are determined to seize victory no matter the cost, they can win. All they have to do is be willing to fight one day longer than their opponent.

That is why, despite all the hatred Washington has for little Cuba, it has never attempted a full invasion of that island-nation of 11 million people. They know that they would be facing, not just 50,000 regular soldiers, but the entire population.

In Iran, it would be 80 million patriots, who, regardless of any differences they may have with their own government, would fight to the end to defend their homeland from a foreign aggressor.

All this should make the rest of us think carefully before we give our silent consent to another U.S. war. We need to ask, are we defending our country, or are we conquering someone else's? Are we fighting for democracy, or to protect and expand the profits of U.S. corporations? Have we allowed the wealthy few who run our lives to define for us our enemies and our friends?

And we need to start thinking again that opposing unjust wars must be seen as a central responsibility for everyone in this country who thinks of themselves as progressive.

Odessa Solidarity Campaign calls for global solidarity to mark May 2 massacre

By Phil Wilayto

It's been more than seven years since a mob of right-wingers led by openly fascist organizations chased a much smaller group of progressives into a union building, set it on fire and then beat people to death as they tried to escape the blaze.

At least 42 people were killed and many more were injured. And yet, despite the fact that the events were captured by scores of cell-phone cameras, to date not one of the perpetrators has ever been convicted for their role in the mass murder.

This horrific crime was carried out on May 2, 2014, in the Black Sea port city of Odessa in the Eastern European country of Ukraine.

The people of Odessa have a saying about the massacre: "We do not forgive, we do not forget." And every month they go back to Kulikovo square in front of the House of Trade Unions to remember their dead and renew their demand for an international investigation, something the Ukrainian government has never allowed.

In 2016, the Defenders organized a delegation of U.S. peace activists - Bruce Gagnon of the Global Network Against Weapons and Nuclear Power in Space, independent filmmaker Regis Tremblay and this writer - to travel to Odessa. We had been invited by the Council of Mothers of May 2 to join with other International Observers and stand with the survivors, family members, friends and supporters as they held their second annual mass memorial. The same fascist organizations that had committed the massacre were threatening to return and attack the mourners, and the Council of Mothers hoped that having foreigners present might force the authorities to keep the peace.

We also organized an international campaign demanding that the U.S. and Ukrainian governments guarantee the safety of those attending the memorial. The efforts succeeded in getting the attention of the U.S. State Department, which then knew that U.S. Americans would be at the memorial and that any attack would likely bring international attention to the fact that the U.S. ally Ukraine allowed neo-Nazis to run the streets with impunity.

May 2, 2016, passed almost without incident. More than 4,000 Odessans defied the fascist threats and gathered all day at Kulikovo square. It was a deeply moving experience.

When we got home, the Defenders founded the Odessa Solidarity Campaign, which each year since has initiated a global day of solidarity with the people of Odessa, supporting their demand for an international investigation of the massacre. In 2020, despite the pandemic, there were events in 20 cities across Europe and North America.

For 2022, we're working with our friends and allies in Ukraine and other European countries to organize a much broader day of solidarity. We've written a Call that has been approved by our friends in Odessa and by the Union of Political Emigrants and Political Prisoners of Ukraine.

The Call is posted at odesssolidaritycampaign.org.

On May 2, 2022, we're asking all our friends and allies in other cities - in whatever country - to also hold an event. This could be a public meeting with a film showing or video speaker; a march; a vigil; even just a few people standing in a public place with signs saying "We Remember the Odessa Massacre & Demand an International Investigation!" The people of Odessa also bring black balloons as a sign of mourning and red roses as signs of love. We do that each year here in Richmond.

Please consider joining us in this international anti-fascist effort. It will be greatly appreciated by the people of Odessa, and will help keep pressure on the Ukrainian and U.S. governments to finally do the right thing.

For more information on the events of 2014, see: odesssolidaritycampaign.org.

To contact the Odessa Solidarity Campaign, call or text **1-804-644-5834** or email DefendersFJE@hotmail.com.

PLEASE DONATE TO RELIEF FOR HAITI

At 08:29 a.m. on Aug. 14, a magnitude 7.2 earthquake struck the Tiburon Peninsula in the Caribbean nation of Haiti. Two days later, the area was hit by heavy winds and rain from Tropical Depression Grace.

By Aug. 22, more than 2,200 people had been confirmed killed, with more than 12,000 injured. At least 136,800 buildings were damaged or destroyed. All this happened in the middle of the pandemic against which few Haitians have been vaccinated, and just after the July 7 assassination of the country's president.

If you are able, please make a donation to help relieve the terrible suffering of the Haitian people.

One good organization the Defenders recommend is the Haiti Emergency Relief Fund at:

haitiemergencyrelief.org

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