

## READING

# Acknowledging the Past to Shape the Present

How we think about the past can play a powerful role in shaping the present. In 2013, Bryan Stevenson, a lawyer who started the Equal Justice Initiative to challenge bias and inequity in the US justice system, launched a campaign to memorialize historical sites of racist violence across the American South. He began leading a project to identify, record, and mark places where lynchings occurred, both to accurately report the number of people killed and also to teach the public about the roots of twenty-first-century racial injustice. Between 1877 and 1950, at least 3,950 African Americans were lynched (executed by a mob, without a trial, usually by hanging) after being accused of “crimes” such as knocking on a white woman's door, wearing an army uniform in public after World War II, or bumping into a white girl while running for a train.

Often, Stevenson says, the hangings became public carnivals designed to instill fear. He calls them incidents of domestic terrorism, purposefully used to enforce racial subordination and segregation.<sup>1</sup> “We cannot heal the deep wounds inflicted during the era of racial terrorism until we tell the truth about it,” writes Stevenson. “The geographic, political, economic, and social consequences of decades of terror lynchings can still be seen in many communities today and the damage created by lynching needs to be confronted and discussed. Only then can we meaningfully address the contemporary problems that are lynching’s legacy.”<sup>2</sup>

Students at Overton High School in Memphis, Tennessee, came to a similar conclusion in 2016 after learning about the lynching of Ell Persons. Zoey Parker, a senior, encountered the Persons case while doing a research assignment and shared the story with her classmates. Persons was an African American woodcutter who was burned alive in 1917 after being accused of murder. About 5,000 people from the Memphis community came to watch the event, which was prominently covered by the local newspaper, and gruesome postcards were made showing photos of his head; his murderers had decapitated his body after they had burned him to death.

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<sup>1</sup> John M. Glionna, “Civil rights lawyer seeks to commemorate another side of Southern heritage: Lynchings,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 5, 2015, accessed July 13, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> “Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror,” Equal Justice Initiative, accessed July 13, 2016.

When Parker's teacher, Dr. Marilyn Taylor, informed her students that the lynching had occurred close to their school, near a present-day drive-in movie theater, students were stunned that something so brutal could have taken place in their own backyard. They were also shocked to realize that an incident that had been widely known about when it happened was almost completely lost to memory a century later. Dr. Taylor reflected, "They have all been to this drive-in. They had a multitude of questions the following day so we put our scheduled lesson aside and they began their investigation."<sup>3</sup>

The students felt they needed to do more than investigate the history, so Dr. Taylor asked them, "What are we going to do about it?"<sup>4</sup>

They decided to turn research into action and form a nonprofit organization called Students Uniting Memphis. This group launched a project to create a memorial garden at the site of Ell Persons's lynching, which in 2016 contained an abandoned bridge support surrounded by river overflow and dense foliage. Students also began to educate their community about Ell Persons. They reached out to a nearby high school where, in 1917, students had been released from classes to attend Persons's lynching, and they partnered with another nonprofit, The Lynching Sites Project of Memphis, which was formed after its founders heard Bryan Stevenson speak about the importance of facing the past.

In 2016, 99 years after Persons's death, more than 100 people gathered at the site of his lynching for an interfaith prayer service. The Lynching Sites Project, Students Uniting Memphis, the Memphis chapter of the NAACP—which was formed in 1917 in response to the Persons lynching—and other student groups then began working together to involve 5,000 people in a commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the lynching in 2017. Students from a Facing History and Ourselves student leadership group based in Memphis were among those who became involved.

"Young people today have to take action in order for history not to repeat itself," said Zoey Parker, the student who first researched Persons's case for Dr. Taylor's class. "We have to be mindful enough to understand we cannot continue to make the same mistakes as those before us."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Marti Tippens Murphy, "Students Memorialize a Past Tragedy to Create a More Hopeful Future," Ideas This Week, entry posted May 23, 2016, accessed July 13, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Marti Tippens Murphy, "Students Memorialize a Past Tragedy to Create a More Hopeful Future," Ideas This Week, entry posted May 23, 2016, accessed July 13, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Marti Tippens Murphy, "Students Memorialize a Past Tragedy to Create a More Hopeful Future," Ideas This Week, entry posted May 23, 2016, accessed July 13, 2016.

## Connection Questions

1. Why do you think that the Overton High School students were shocked to learn that Ell Persons's lynching happened so close to their school, in an area that was familiar to them?
2. How do students and activists intend to commemorate Persons's lynching? What do they hope their efforts will achieve?
3. How can making a disturbing moment in history visible be an act of civic participation? How can it be an act of hope?
4. What role does history play in a healthy democracy? Is it necessary to acknowledge past injustices in order for democracy to be possible in the present?
5. No matter where you live, your community has a history. Is some of your community's history unacknowledged or forgotten today? How might you discover and explore such histories? Could awareness of the past change your understanding of the place you call home?