

Feb. 7, 2018

Greetings, Friends,

Much has happened since my last newsletter. It's a troubled time in our country and, yet, it is also a time of rich ferment, and of painful, but productive conversation and activity. I continue to travel about the country giving readings and conducting discussions about race and history and will do so as long as the body holds out and the invitations come in. At the moment I am scheduled to speak at a synagogue in White Plains, NY, a university in Santa Cruz, CA, two SURJ (Showing Up for Racial Justice) groups also in CA, churches in CA and Md., and several book clubs. A story about the happenings in Harris County, which I detail below, is coming out soon in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*. I am reaching out to numerous "new" African American cousins whose DNA matches mine and together we are trying to figure out how we became kin. It's a fascinating way to engage across the so-called "races." I hope you are inspired by some of this to begin or continue your own work to heal racial wounds and unite Americans of all persuasions to protect and expand our democracy.

**Newly-United Cousins Face Our Tragic Past**



(from L to R) Dr. Jackie Jordan Irvine, Candler Professor of Urban Education (Ret.), Emory U; Dr. Angela Jordan Davis, Professor of Law, George Washington Law School, American University; Bryan Stevenson, Founder and Executive Director, Equal Justice Initiative; Karen Branan, Dr. Jennifer Jordan, Professor of American Literature (Ret.), Howard University, my sister Dr. Barbara Williams, retired physician. Drs. Irvine, Davis and Jordan are our cousins. We are related through my second great uncle and their third great grandfather, James B. Moore. That story is told in *The Family Tree*. Here we hold jars of soil collected from the 1912 lynching site in Hamilton, Georgia. One of those jars will bear the name of Johnie Moore, the youngest lynching victim, to whom we are all related. Earlier that day, at near where the four were lynched I quoted this from Bryan Stevenson:

Bryan Stevenson speaks eloquently the power of soil to remind and rejuvenate and I quoted his words on this day: "In this soil, there is the sweat of the enslaved. In the soil there is the blood of victims of racial violence and lynching. There are tears in the soil from all those who labored under the indignation and humiliation of segregation. But in the soil there is also the opportunity for new life, a chance to grow something hopeful and healing for the future."

Dec. 4, 2017. This was a day none of shall ever forget, both sorrowful and joyful, filled with the pain of the past and our hopes for the future, with a deep satisfaction in having found one another. (None of us had been told of what happened in Hamilton in 1912, yet we have all spent much of our adult lives striving for racial justice.) Dozens of services like this, some small and private, like ours, others large and public, are taking place all over the country, spearheaded by organizations like Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Beloved Community: Commission for Dismantling Racism of Atlanta's Episcopal Diocese, ONE Harris County, Troup Together, Lynching Sites Project of Memphis, and others. (So far there are several dozen actual physical memorial markers for U.S. lynchings in contrast with over 4,000 people lynched; few public officials have apologized to date. On April 26, EJI's magnificent National Lynching Memorial (see [eji.org](http://eji.org) for photos) will be christened and Dusky Crutchfield, John Moore, Burrell Hardaway and Eugene Harrington's memorial jars containing the soil from their death place will be among the thousands of jars eventually housed there. Their names, the date and place of their lynching, will be on the jars.

## Henry “Peg” Gilbert’s Lynching & Memorialization



Henry "Peg" Gilbert

In *The Family Tree*, I wrote of the 1947 jailhouse murder of another innocent African American man named Henry “Peg” Gilbert by Harris County Police Chief Willie Buchanan. I did not call it a lynching because at that time the NAACP, keeper of the records, did not term police murders *lynchings*. Gilbert’s murder, however, was recently investigated by a team of law students and their professor Margaret Burnham at Northeastern U. Law School’s Civil Rights & Restorative Justice Center and in their

report (<http://nuweb9.neu.edu/civilrights/georgia/henry-gilbert/>) they call it a “lynching” and so shall I.

Soon after Lagrange, Georgia’s police chief, mayor and other officials made their ground-breaking apology for various lynchings in Troup County, which abuts Harris County, Episcopal priest Jeff Jackson and members of his St. Nicholas congregation formed a bi-racial social justice committee called ONE Harris County to bring about racial healing there.

While they plan to eventually recognize and memorialize all the lynchings of the county, they began their work by extending the work of Troup Together to mark and apologize for Henry Gilbert’s lynching. Because he lived in Troup County and was taken from there into Harris County with the complicity of Troup law officials, the Lagrange events included his name on their marker as well as apologies to his family. At that event, Father Jeff Jackson asked Sheila Brown, one of Gilbert’s granddaughters, what Harris County could do for the family. She requested that they purchase new tombstones for her grandfather and grandmother. They have raised the \$4500 needed and the stones are already being prepared for the event. To watch a short video of Gilbert’s daughter talking about his murder and to contribute some small amount for memorial service expenses, go to <https://www.gofundme.com/henry-peg-gilbert-gravesite>. Tax-deductible checks may be written to Chattahoochee Valley Episcopalian Ministry or CVEM, P.O. Box 5811, Columbus, GA 31906.

For more about what happened in Lagrange, read my blog --

<http://www.karenbranan.com/single-post/2016/06/15/One-Morning-in-Lagrange-Ga> and a previous newsletter: <http://www.karenbranan.com/single-post/2017/03/25/More-about-Lagrange>. On Feb. 3, Henry Gilbert's niece and ONE Harris County members collected soil from his gravesite along with soil from the lynching site of another Troup County man, Austin Callaway, and took it to Equal Justice Initiative for inclusion in the National Memorial.



Some of Henry "Peg" Gilbert Family Came to Lagrange Library to Hear Me Speak

On March 10, 11 a.m., at Union Springs Methodist Church, in Troup County, across the road from Union Springs Baptist, where Henry Gilbert served as treasurer and deacon, his large family will gather to hear Harris Countians express their deep sorrow for his brutal lynching and to present the new tombstones donated in honor of him and his wife, who was also briefly jailed in 1947.

Henry Gilbert's last living daughter, who lives in Detroit and who was a teenager at the time her father was murdered and her family terrorized, never spoke of that time with her children or grandchildren until very recently. She has never been back to either Troup or Harris counties. She has wanted to be here for this occasion, which she deeply appreciates, but, at 90 years old, simply cannot make herself come. She is writing a letter to be read at the service.

In addition, a memorial marker will be placed in the cemetery at Union Springs Baptist, where the Gilberts are interred. Another marker will be placed in Harris County at the Jones Road Crossroad Store, not far from where the Gilberts lived and where they worshipped. ONE Harris County tried to obtain permission from county officials to place a marker in Hamilton, where Gilbert was murdered. They were not successful. They will continue their efforts to win unity around this issue and hope within several years to be able to place a marker naming Harris County's eight lynching victims in the county seat. The hopes is that such a service will include an apology and an announcement of other reparations, such as scholarships.

Recognizing lynchings with memorials, both concrete and living (scholarships, essay contests, school curricula, etc.) is an excellent way to educate a community about its past and to unite across the race line to create positive projects in the present and for the future. You can research lynchings in your community by going to [eji.org](http://eji.org) and

finding their database. You do not have to be a descendant but should make an attempt to find some – both victim and perpetrator descendants if you can. If you want more information contact me at [karenbranan@gmail.com](mailto:karenbranan@gmail.com).

## People I Meet

I met Katharina von Kellenbach on the back seat of an Uber coming home from the Kennedy Center where I was the guest of Police Chief Lou Dekmar of Lagrange. He was one of four Anti-Defamation League Concert Against Hate honorees for his efforts to repair police-community relations and his apology (the first and only, thus far, for a police chief) for a lynching.

Dr. von Kellenbach is a religious studies professor at St. Mary's College (St. Mary's, Md.) and the author of *The Mark of Cain: Guilt and Denial in the Post-War Lives of Nazi Perpetrators*.



[Katharina von Kellenbach](#)

It did not take us long to discover we both descended from perpetrators of a massacre. It does no good to compare these things. They're all hideous, more devastating for the victims, of course, but they leave descendants of perpetrators with scars, seen and unseen, for generations to come. She, like myself, has discovered that by breaking the silence, the shame and guilt can be turned to creative results.

Katharina's uncle, a Nazi commander, oversaw the murder of 30,000 Jews at Pinsk, Bellarus. He was never prosecuted. In fact, as a child, she knew him as a kind uncle, treated as just another member of the family. She learned the truth as a teen and eventually, much as I have done, she put her training as a scholar to work and plumbed

the depths of her uncle's crimes, writing and speaking widely about them. As a religion scholar, she seeks and writes deeply, from a biblical perspective, of reasons and ways for entities and individuals to face and dispel the shame, guilt and subsequent denial that arises from these monstrous operations in ways that transforms their culture in the hopes of avoiding future travesties. She and I plan to participate on some panels or workshops together.

Before I ever discovered "my story," I was inspired by *The Nasty Girl*, a book, then movie, about a young German woman who uncovers the well-hidden Nazi crimes of her village. When I first met Katharina, I said, "Oh, you're like the Nasty Girl." She smiled and said, "I am The Nasty Girl. I came first." So from Lagrange, Ga., and meeting a fine police chief to the back seat of an Uber and meeting this fine scholar and soulmat, I am ever grateful I struggled through my shame and my fears to write my book. And grateful as well for you who read it.

### Some People Just Can't Look at the Photos...

*But they can look at quilts*, said my new friend Lynda Tredway, as we sat at her work table, surrounded by several dozen stunning quilts. Eventually there will be one or more for every state where lynchings occurred. The front of each quilt bears the state tree. On the back, the names of lynching victims. She hopes to see them displayed someday,

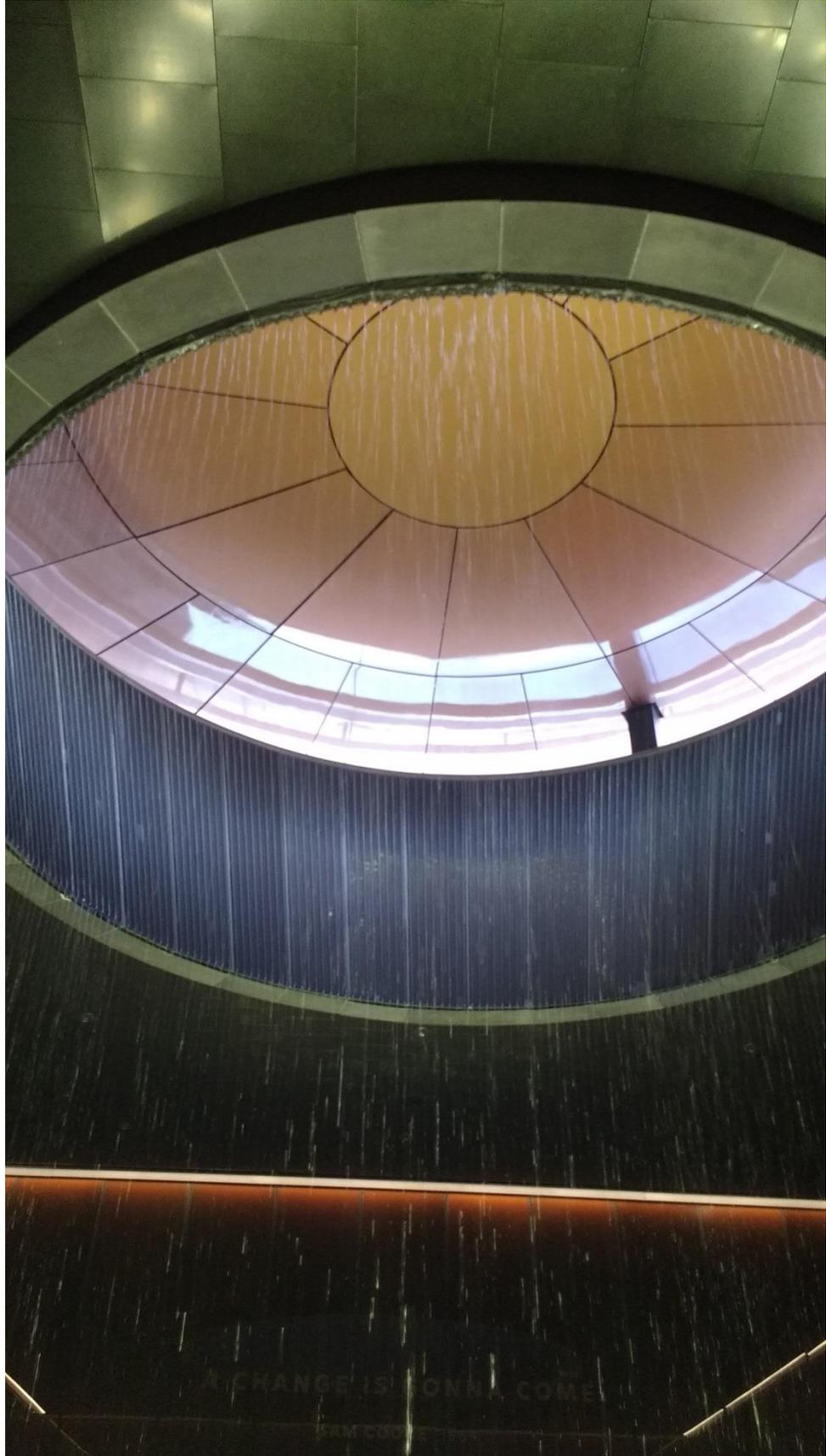
perhaps at the EJI Memorial or the National Museum of African American History and Culture, but for now just making them is enough. "It's a constant prayer," she says of the making of these evocative memorials. Soon there will be an article about Lynda Tredway and her quilts in the *Washington Post Magazine*.

Below see one of the Georgia quilts. The tree is a live oak. There was disagreement among my sources as to the exact tree of the 1912 lynching, but most said *live oak*. Beneath it in the photo is Lynda's worktable.





On Jan. 22, the 105<sup>th</sup> anniversary Lynda and I and my friend Mary went to the National Museum of African American History and Culture to meditate in the Contemplation Court. Lynda gave me a small vial of dirt she'd brought from a castle in Ghana where slaves were held captive before coming to this continent. As I cradled it in my hand, I gazed into the breath-taking dome above my head and asked my Higher Power to guide me in the difficult years to come. And I heard a voice say, "Do audacious things."



## Contemplation Court - looking upward

Next month I'll introduce you to Maya, an amazing young mixed-race woman, a high school senior, in Harris County who works with ONE Harris County and, as it turns out, is related to me! We have had some beautiful phone conversations, but will meet for the first time at the Gilbert event in March.. You'll also meet another lynching memorial quilter, Shawna Crowe Storm, an African American artist who has involved a world of people in the making of these quilts and the voyage back into history and with whom I plan to collaborate on some future events. I'll also include new material about Lagrange, Ga.'s year-long efforts at racial trust-building and progress toward racial justice and equality.

So, until next time! Study, journey inward, reach out, speak out, be a bridge for racial unity and progress. Karen