

*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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Summer 2023



It's time to put Virginia's prisons & jails on trial!

Sat., Oct. 7, at the Greater Richmond Convention Center

See pages 8, 9 & back page for details.

"The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons." — Fyodor Dostoevsky - Russian writer, Nov. 11, 1821 - Feb. 9, 1881

community news

'Cop City' struggle in Atlanta exposes growth of police state

Staff Report

While much of the country seems to be concentrating on adjusting to the (supposedly) post-pandemic period, a fierce struggle has been erupting in Atlanta over a proposed police training center.

The Atlanta Public Safety Training Center, dubbed "Cop City" by its opponents, is expected to cost \$90 million and occupy more than 85 acres, with the "remaining portion of the 265-acres property as greenspace," according to the center's website, potentially impacting a forest in Atlanta.

Opponents charge that the center would further militarize the police. Among other things, it would include a "mock city" for "urban police training," according to the center's website. (atlantapolicefoundation.org/programs/public-safety-training-center)

Other groups, like Defend The Atlanta Forest, focus on the environmental impact they expect the center to have.

"The Atlanta Police Department seeks

to turn 300 acres of forest into a tactical training compound featuring a mock city," the group said in a statement on their website. "We refuse to let our forest be bulldozed in favor of the police and sold out to Hollywood."

Anger over the massive project has been fueled not only by opposition to the center itself, but by especially repressive police and legal tactics. Dozens of protesters have been arrested and charged with "domestic terrorism." In January, Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp declared a state of emergency in response to ongoing protests in downtown Atlanta, ordering the mobilization of up to 1,000 state National Guard troops "as necessary."

And on Jan. 18, a 26-year-old Venezuelan environmental activist named Manuel Esteban Paez Terán was fatally shot by police.

Terán was killed as police raided a campground used by demonstrators. Officials say Terán fired first at a state trooper and the officer returned fire. Police

15th Annual Black People's March on the White House

Saturday, Nov. 4, 2023

11 am Rally at Malcolm X Park (Meridian Hill Park), followed by a March to the White House, than a Rally at Lafayette Park

Co-sponsored by the Black Is Back Coalition for Social Justice, Peace and Reparations & the Hands Off Uhuru! Fight Back Coalition

For more information:
blackisbackcoalition.org

have said there is no body camera footage of the shooting.

However, according to a lawyer working on behalf of Terán's family, an independent autopsy revealed that "Both Manuel's left and right hands show exit wounds in both palms. The autopsy further reveals that Manuel was most probably in a seated position, cross-legged when killed."

ABC News reported that the autopsy showed that Terán had his hands raised and

was seated when he was fatally shot.

After the Atlanta City Council voted in early June to authorize \$67 million for the project, some organizers turned their focus to a ballot initiative to let the people of Atlanta decide.

Meanwhile, solidarity protests have taken place across the country, including in Richmond. (See page 4.)

The first phase of the training center is scheduled to open in late 2023.

Do you want to fight for Freedom, Justice & Equality? JOIN THE DEFENDERS!

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, the Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project and the Odessa Solidarity Campaign and are a co-founder of the Virginia Prison Justice Network.

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



Photo by Phil Wilayto

Speaking in front of 1619 Inc.'s fire truck, Queen Zakia Shabazz of United Parents Against Lead announces a new anti-lead-poisoning collaboration in Richmond.

Longtime activists team up to fight lead poisoning in children

By Phil Wilayto

United Parents Against Lead, an organization that has been fighting lead poisoning in the Richmond-Petersburg area for decades, has teamed up with 1619 Inc., a nonprofit led by former Richmond City Council member Sa'ad El-Amin, to bring new community awareness to the dangers of lead poisoning, especially lead in residential water lines.

The two groups announced their collaboration at a press conference July 15 at Broad Rock Park in Richmond's South Side. Helping draw attention to the event was a bright red fire truck that El-Amin uses to draw public interest to progressive events.

"The lives of our children are at stake here," Shabazz said. "We must not wait until the likes of Flint to happen, when there is action we can take to prevent another Flint. For too long our children have been sacrificed, used as lead detectors and discarded. Our children are worth being saved; they are not expendable."

The heart of the new effort will be to distribute water-testing kits to residents who can use them to find out if their drinking water contains lead. If it does,

they will be referred to local city and state lead-abatement programs that have funds to replace lead pipes. If those programs don't respond, the groups will advocate for the residents.

In the future, UPAL and 1619 Inc. may expand their efforts to Petersburg, but for now will focus on what they say are Richmond's zip codes at high risk for lead-poisoning: 23219, 23220, 23221, 23222, 23223, 23224 and 23225.

Speaking at the press conference were Monica Esparza, a trustee at Image Church Renewal of Life Trust; Shawn Utsey, Ph.D., professor of Counseling Psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University; King Salim Khalfani, former executive director of the Virginia State Conference NAACP and currently a lobbyist with the Interfaith Center for Public Policy; Queen Zakia Shabazz, founder of United Parents Against Lead & Other Environmental Hazards (UPAL); and Sa'ad El-Amin, a longtime lawyer and activist, former member of Richmond City Council and CEO of 1619, Inc.

According to the federal Environmental Protection Agency, "Lead is a naturally occurring element found in small amounts in the earth's crust.

While it has some beneficial uses, it can be toxic to humans and animals, causing health effects."

According to the Mayo Clinic, "Lead poisoning occurs when lead builds up in the body, often over months or years. Even small amounts of lead can cause serious health problems. Children younger than 6 years are especially vulnerable to lead poisoning, which can severely affect mental and physical development. At very high levels, lead poisoning can be fatal."

In addition to lead in water pipes, homes built before 1978, when the use of lead-based paint was banned, may also contain hazards.

"Adults who work with batteries, do home renovations or work in auto repair shops also might be exposed to lead," says the Mayo Clinic.

Shabazz, who got involved in the lead issue after learning that one of her own children was suffering from lead poisoning, has long advocated for testing all children, starting at birth.

Health scientists for years have maintained that there is no safe level of lead for children. The federal government finally caught up with that assessment this July, when the Biden administration proposed stricter limits on dust from lead-based paint in older homes and childcare facilities, declaring, "There is no safe level of lead."

For more information on the UPAL and 1619 Inc. collaboration, visit: upalnational.org or call UPAL at (804) 308-1518 or write P.O. Box 24773, Richmond, VA 23224.



Leah remembered

This summer, while walking along Richmond's Nickel Bridge on the south bank of the James River. I came across this graffiti: "RIP Leah."

I was wondering who Leah was, and what had happened to her, when a young woman walked by, saw me staring at the sidewalk, and said she had painted the inscription.

It turns out, Leah was her friend. And, apparently, a friend to a lot of people.

Richmonder Leah Patterson was someone who loved the river, and she died doing what she loved: rafting. She was one of two people pulled from the James on May 2.

The river was high that day, but news reports said Leah and her friends had taken the proper precautions. Their raft flipped over while floating on the Hollywood Rapids. The other person pulled from the river survived. Leah did not. She was 26.

Days after I met Leah's friend, she came back and colored in the inscription, making it brighter. It seemed a fitting memorial.

RIP, Leah.

Photo & comments by Phil Wilayto

It's hurricane season, folks

In Virginia, hurricane season officially starts on June 1 and runs through Nov. 30. And as global warming heats up the planet, the storms are getting fiercer.

Back in the summer of 2019, a big storm hit the Richmond area. The Defenders heard a tornado warning on the radio and went door-to-door in the community, warning neighbors and advising them how to protect themselves, like unplugging all electrical devices and staying in a windowless room for protection against flying glass from broken windows.

After the storm passed – with several tornados touching down in town – we were wishing we had a good list of things

to do to prepare for bad storms, but most of the information we could find online involved spending a lot of money, like buying generators.

So we put together a list of more-or-less working-class tips, which now is posted in downloadable form on our website: virginiadefender.org. (Search for "**A Defenders Guide for Preparing for Big Storms.**")

Please think about sharing it with your neighbors and your social media networks.

And above all, look out for each other. In the event of a disaster, the government may or may not be able – or willing – to help.

community news



Photo by Phil Wilayto

Reacting to the national campaign to ban books, parents, teachers and students gather for a “banned book swap” at the Shockoe Bottom African Burial Ground.

Swapping banned books

Staff Report

Last June, the Hanover County School Board unanimously decided to pull 19 books from county school libraries, declaring them unfit for students to read. A quarter of the books dealt with LGBTQ+ themes.

Then, in August, the board told school librarians to start reviewing other books for possible removal, using a tool associated with a “parents’ rights” group that experts in the field say is not a professionally recognized resource for librarians.

The actions follow Gov. Glenn Youngkin’s call to block the discussion of “inherently divisive concepts” in education and are part of a national effort to ban school books, many of which deal with issues affecting people of color, sexual matters and the LGBTQ+ community.

So it was a refreshing break from the censorship offensive when three organizations joined forces June 10 to hold a “banned book swap” in Richmond as part of the third annual Teach Truth National Day of Action. Parents, teachers, students and supporters gathered to exchange banned books, share pledges to “teach the truth” and also learn about the history of the Shockoe Bottom African Burial Ground, where the event was held.

“With the erasure of the history and

presence of the burial grounds until recent decades, I thought this would be an ideal place to host the event,” explained Chanel Hurt, a Richmonder and organizer with National Black Lives Matter at School.

The event was co-sponsored by Hurt’s organization, the Zinn Education Project and the African American Policy Forum.

Among the speakers were Hurt; the president of the Richmond Educational Association; and Phil Wilayto, editor of The Virginia Defender, who spoke about the decades-long struggle to reclaim and properly memorialize Shockoe Bottom.

Full disclosure: Wilayto won a book in the raffle: “The New Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness,” by Michelle Alexander. A good book to read while

preparing for the People’s Tribunal on Virginia’s Prisons, Jails & Detention Centers, (See the stories on pages 8 and 9 and the ad on the back page.)

Dolly Parton’s free children’s book program now available in Richmond & other Virginia locations

Imagination Library, Dolly Parton’s long-running childhood literacy program, is now available in Richmond, as well as dozens of other Virginia cities and counties.

Every month, Imagination Library mails a free, high-quality, age-appropriate book to enrolled children from their birth to age five. The program was founded in 1995 by country music superstar Dolly Parton in her home county of Sevier, Tenn. It since has expanded to cover much of the United States, as well as Canada, Australia, the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom through a network of local affiliated organizations. According to the program’s website, one in 10 children in the U.S. now participates in the program.

Imagination Library offers traditional books as well as audio and braille formats. There is no cost to participate, and families may enroll their children to receive books regardless of their income.

Richmond’s local affiliate is the nonprofit organization Read to Them, Inc. To sign up for Imagination Library in Richmond, visit: imaginationlibraryva.org.

According to Cardinal News, the program could soon be expanded to cover the entire state, with money appropriated by the General Assembly.

To find out if your city or county already is covered, see: imaginationlibrary.com/usa/find-my-program.



Richmond shows solidarity with Atlanta’s Cop City struggle

— Some three dozen people assembled at Richmond City Hall June 30 to participate in the National Stop Cop City Day of Solidarity. The demonstrators marched from City Hall at 9th and East Broad streets to the Maggie Walker statue at Adams and Broad, distributing literature connecting a controversial local project proposed for South Side, the Hickory Hill Burn Tower, to Atlanta’s Cop City police training facility. (See the Cop City story on page 2.)

Photo by Kat McNeal



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community news

news u can use

Nonprofit delivers free food to those in need in Henrico

Henrico County residents who need food assistance but aren't able to travel to a food bank can get help by contacting the Henrico Community Food Bank. The nonprofit organization delivers food once a month to those in need.

What do they deliver? According to its website, "bags full of nutritious pantry staples and an assortment of in-season fresh fruit and vegetable offerings weighing 25-30 pounds."

Since its first food delivery in July of 2022, the food bank has grown into a project that each month serves about 300 households benefiting 1,000 individuals. The nonprofit, started by Sudeshna and Floyd Das-Menezes, is supported by community groups, faith-based organizations, corporate partners and the county government.

To contact the Henrico Community Food Bank, call (804) 549-6609 or email info@henricocommunityfoodbank.org.

According to Ms. Das-Menezes, about 30,000 county residents struggle with hunger.

Want to help? To learn about sponsoring a mobile distribution, hosting a food or fund drive or volunteering at the food bank, visit henricocommunityfoodbank.org.

HOUSE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

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Father and daughter talk about art and community

Staff Report

"In Conversation with Ana and Mel Edwards" was a July 14, 2023, program at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Texas-born, New York-based artist Mel Edwards was paired with his daughter, local public historian Ana Edwards, to talk about the influences between visual art and public history.

The connection for VMFA was the exhibition "Benjamin Wigfall and Communications Village," which opened on Juneteenth and features one of Edwards' barbed wire sculpture installations, titled "Ana's Corner."

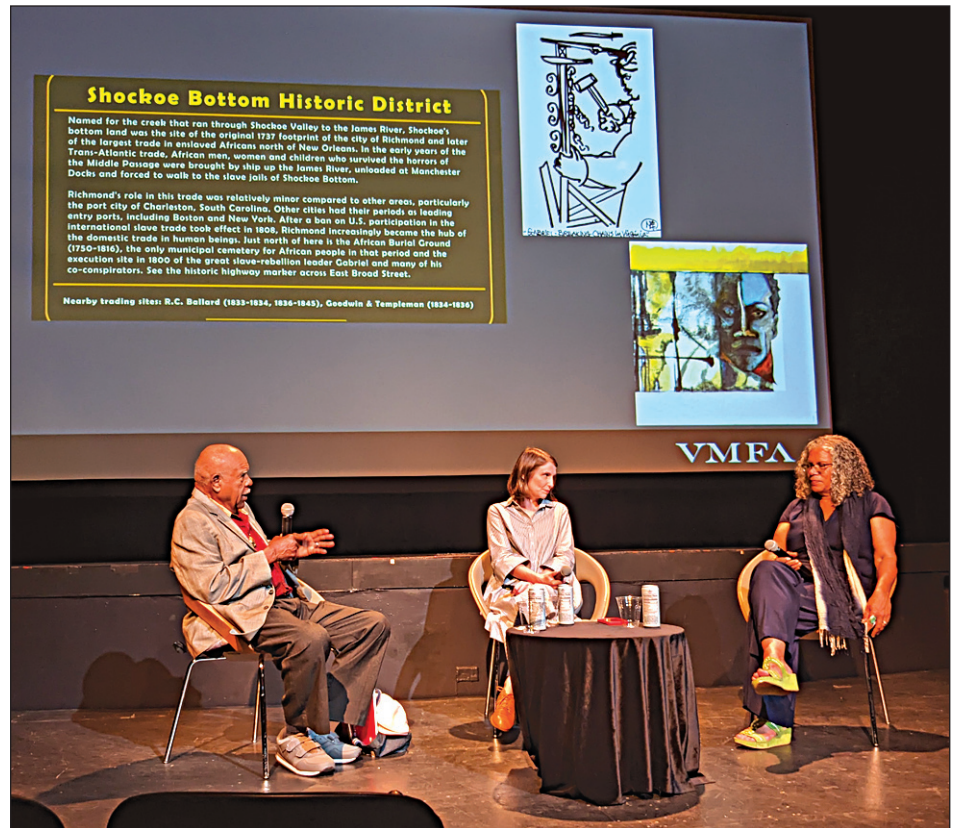
A project of the museum's assistant curator of modern and contemporary art, Dr. Sarah Eckhardt, "Communications Village" is a look into the life and art of Richmond native Benjamin Wigfall through Communications Village, a community arts center he operated in Kingston, New York, from 1974 to 1983.

At a time when Black cultural institutions struggled for support of any kind, one of Wigfall's goals was to create an institution that would bring the best Black artists to young people. Mel Edwards (and wife, poet Jayne Cortez, 1936-2012), were the first of many exceptional artists, writers and performers to conduct workshops there.

The child of an artist family - father, mother, and uncle - Ana Edwards' work to establish a Shockoe Bottom Memorial Park was discussed as another way of expressing the aesthetic values, natural to human beings, to shape a city's landscape.

"Benjamin Wigfall and Communications Village" is on view with "Whitfield Lovell: Passages" through September 10 at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 200 N. Arthur Ashe Blvd. in Richmond.

Information is at: vmfa.museum/exhibitions/exhibitions/benjamin-wigfall-communications-village



Photos by Phil Wilayto

Sculptor Mel Edwards, left, talks with his daughter and public historian Ana Edwards, right, at a program at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Moderating the discussion is Dr. Sarah Eckhardt. Behind them, at top right, is a drawing of the great slave rebellion leader Gabriel by Mel Edwards. Under it is a portrait of Gabriel by Ana Edwards.

UPCOMING EVENTS

SAT. AUG. 19

Down Home Family Reunion

A Celebration of African American Folklife
 4-11 pm - Abner Clay Park Richmond

Sponsored by the Elegba Folklore Society
efsinc.org - 804-644-3900

SAT. AUG. 26

20th Annual Happily Natural Day

Festival & Urban Farm Expo
 Fifth District Mini Farm
 2227 Wise Street Richmond
thenaturalfestival.com



Photo by Phil Wilayto

A bit of antiwar sentiment showed up this summer in this graffiti at the intersection of Forest Hill Avenue and Jahnke Road on Richmond's South Side.

our working lives



Photo by Kat McNeal

Maximus call center workers and supporters rally outside the company's Chester workplace as part of a four-state strike to protest mass layoffs at the company.

Maximus call center workers strike against layoffs

By Kat McNeal

Bright and early on Monday, June 5, a multiracial group of nearly a dozen Maximus call center workers gathered with community supporters to carry out a one-day strike at the company's location in Chester.

The workers represented approximately 30 employees at that location who had signed on to the Communications Workers of America-backed strike in the wake of a wave of layoffs. The Chester workers joined other striking Maximus call centers in Hattiesburg, Miss., Bogalusa, La., and Tampa, Fla. The Chester location is not unionized, but there is an organizing campaign there led by the CWA.

Maximus is the largest federal call center contractor working on Medicare and the Affordable Care Act. The multibillion-dollar company announced in mid-May that it would be laying off 700 workers across its 10 locations.

The Chester workers estimate that between 50 to 100 workers were laid off at their location, which had employed approximately 1,100 people.

The one-day strike demands were:

- Protections in the event of layoffs, including two months notice, severance pay and rehiring and job transfer preference for laid-off workers. Laid-off Maximus workers were given just two weeks notice and no severance, with no preference for rehiring.

- A \$25 base wage, to bring pay at Maximus in line with that of other federal call center contractors. The current Maximus base pay is

\$17.11.

- Opportunities for career advancement, with support and training.

The Virginia Defender spoke with Maximus workers on the picket line, where they were joined by supporters from the Virginia AFL-CIO, United Campus Workers, SEIU 32BJ and the Defenders. We learned that their jobs are complex, demanding and often emotionally draining.

Maximus employees work either 4-, 8- or 10-hour shifts, with one, two or three scheduled 15-minute paid breaks and an unpaid 30-minute lunch. If they need to leave the phones for any reason outside of their scheduled breaks, for example to use the bathroom, the workers say they must enter a code. That begins a timer that allots 6 minutes per day of unscheduled break time. After 6 minutes pass, one worker said, their pay is docked in 10-minute increments.

But unscheduled bathroom breaks aren't the only times workers are over-accountable to the phones. Will Magnant, 35, who has been at Maximus for four years and primarily works on complex "escalated" Medicare calls, recounted an electrical fire in the building in March 2022. Although Magnant could see the flames, he said that the protocol before hanging up to move to safety is to read from a script telling callers that they're being disconnected due to fire.

And the calls themselves can be difficult.

"I've gotten people on the phone, crying because their bill is \$7,000," said one worker. "We get callers who are angry, callers



Photo by Phil Wilayto

Mom's Siam workers and supporters rally outside the Carytown restaurant demanding better pay. The owner responded by closing the eatery for 11 days.

Workers at Mom's Siam still fighting for better pay

By Phil Wilayto

They walked, they rallied, they protested — and they got fired.

Or at least that's the way it looks, for now.

Mom's Siam, a Thai restaurant in Richmond's Carytown district, reopened July 6 after shutting down during a rally held by some of its workers and supporters on Sunday, June 25. The workers were demanding better pay, especially for the front-of-the-house employees who make less than minimum wage and have to rely on tips to get by.

"Your threats and tricks will not divide, workers standing side by side!" was one of the chants that rang out as around 50 workers and supporters staged a rally across the street from the restaurant.

The workers say they aren't trying to organize a union, they just want to discuss their concerns with the owner, Sukanya Pala-art.

who are schizophrenic, callers with nobody else to talk to."

"It's literally four seconds in between calls," said Naomi Harrison, 28, who has worked for Maximus for 18 months. She pointed out that this is too little time to even drink water, let alone process the content of the call. Calls that most disturb Harrison involve accounts of extreme poverty, although she also described occasionally getting racially abusive callers.

"I get all types of calls," she said. "I've been called a [n-word] ... I'm glad I have thick skin, but you don't have time between calls to process being called a [n-word], you just get

According to a story in the Richmond Times-Dispatch, Pala-art also owns YaYa's Cookbook and MPM Tiki Bar in Short Pump; Mom's Siam 2 in Shockoe Slip; and, with her sons, My Noodle Bar on Monument Avenue.

"There's been some progress on wages, but not for everyone," said Midge O'Brien, a spokesperson for Workers Siam, an organization formed to speak for the workers at the restaurant.

According to the RTD, Pala-art said she met with the group on June 22 and the day before had raised the hourly wage for hosts to \$14 to \$15 and for bartenders to \$15, as well as a \$0.50 raise every six months.

O'Brien told the Defender that servers still made \$2.13, the state's minimum wage for tipped workers.

"But if servers want to be paid more, they need to work more hours," Pala-art was quoted

See WORKERS on page 11

back on the calls."

"The work that we do is much more valuable than the price that they put on it," said James Weir, 21, a Maximus worker for 19 months. "I don't want to have to worry day-to-day if I'm going to be losing my job."

Maximus headquarters did not respond to an email asking for a comment on the workers' allegations in the story.

The Virginia Defenders have contributed \$100 to the Call Center Workers Solidarity Fund. To add your support, see: actionnetwork.org/fundraising/call-center-workers-solidarity-fund.

no hay fronteras en la lucha de los obreros/as

Mara Cortez, Monica Chavez and Martin Gonzalez stand in the middle of La Milpa Farm. Chavez and Gonzalez are co-owners of the farm and the restaurant it serves. Cortez and Chavez are co-founders of the advocacy organization AMIGOS Legacy, which serves the Latino community. Gonzalez is the group's chief financial officer.

Photos by Phil Wilayto



La Milpa uses ancient ways to produce healthy food on a sustainable farm

By Phil Wilayto

July 7 was a hot day at La Milpa Farm, but that didn't stop the owners, workers and visitors from gathering for the first day of the 2023 harvest.

The all-organic project is now in its fifth year of producing fresh fruits and vegetables - and more - for La Milpa, a Mexican

restaurant located at 6925 Hull Street Road in North Chesterfield, a little more than a mile from the farm.

Under the direction of the restaurant co-owners, Martin Gonzalez and Monica Chavez, the farm uses an ancient Mexican agricultural technique known as Chinampas, which, as developed by the Aztecs, involves a long and narrow field floating on a shallow

bed of water, built up by layering soil to produce crops that are free of chemicals and in harmony with the surrounding natural environment.

"We have three full-time workers on the farm," Chavez explained, "all descended from generations of Mexican farmers, so they have a lot of knowledge."

The farm area includes an adjoining forest that provides the nutrient-rich soil used for the raised beds. There's also an irrigation system built over the cilantro greenhouse that collects rainwater used in the system. And any of the produce that isn't used at the restaurant goes back to the farm to become compost.

On harvest day, Chavez and Gonzalez took the time to show a reporter around the farm, which includes an amazing variety of separate projects: the floating gardens, which produce the cilantro; a separate area for tomatoes, cucumbers, squash and peppers, all destined to be used for tacos, burritos, salsas, fajitas and more. Plus, there's a small pond where, sometime in the future, catfish will be raised.

New this year is the cornfield, which also includes beans and zucchini, a combination known as the "Three Sisters." According to the Farmers' Almanac, "A number of Native American tribes interplanted this trio because they thrive together, much like three inseparable sisters."

Chavez, Gonzalez and their friend Mara Cortez are also leaders of the advocacy organization AMIGOS Legacy, which runs a variety of programs serving the Latino community. (See amigoslegacy.org.)

Youngkin sends Va. National Guard to Mexican border

By Phil Wilayto

Answering a call from Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin on July 8 sent a contingent of 100 state National Guard troops and 21 support staff members to the U.S.-Mexico border.

The 30-day deployment is expected to cost Virginia taxpayers \$3.1 million.

"As leadership solutions at the federal level fall short, states are answering the call to secure our southern border, reduce the flow of fentanyl, combat human trafficking and address the humanitarian crisis," Youngkin said in a statement.

"Humanitarian crises" don't seem to be high on Abbott's agenda. Texas Rep. Sylvia Garcia recently posted a video showing that the bright orange, wrecking ball-sized buoys the governor had installed in July to create a floating barrier in the Rio Grande have circular saws installed between the buoys.

You read that right: circular saws.

Already, Mexican authorities have said that a body had been recovered from the river, caught in the floating barrier. (Newsweek, Aug. 9, 2023)

The saw-equipped buoys are produced by a company called Cochrane Global, with has an office at 3551 Lee Hill Drive in Fredericksburg, Va. (cochraneglobal.com)

Meanwhile, the more than 90 miles of razor wire Texas has installed on the banks of the Rio Grande have resulted in many people, including children, suffering bloody slashes. The wire is part of Abbott's multibillion-dollar Operation Lone Star, which is aimed at stopping unauthorized border crossings.

On July 3, Texas DPS trooper and paramedic Nicholas Wingate emailed his superiors that he and fellow troopers were ordered by commanders to push men, women and children "back into the water" toward Mexico.

The email also described a 19-year-old pregnant woman having a miscarriage while stuck in the wiring.

"I believe we have stepped over a line into the inhumane," Wingate wrote. (USA Today, July 21, 23, 2023)

As for stopping the flow of fentanyl into Virginia, the evidence is that most fentanyl crossing the southern border is coming through the official U.S. checkpoints, most likely by U.S. citizens, not migrants. (The Washington Post, Oct. 4, 2022)

But why would a couple of governors with presidential ambitions want to muddy up their arguments with the facts?



La Milpa's cilantro is grown using the ancient Aztec method called Chinampas.



Monica Chavez by the cornfield, which includes beans and zucchini - the Three Sisters.



Cucumbers grow in tidy rows, adding to the farm's natural beauty.

cops, courts & prisons

Some of the reasons why we're holding a PEOPLE'S TRIBUNAL ON VIRGINIA'S PRISONS, JAILS & DETENTION CENTERS

Sat., Oct. 7 - 10 am - 4 pm - GREATER RICHMOND CONVENTION CENTER

"Within two months in solitary confinement at Virginia's Red Onion State Prison, **Tyquine Lee** began to speak in numbers. He signed his name with a series of random letters. During his **more than 600 days in isolation** - from 2016 to 2018 - he lost more than 30 pounds. His food was sometimes covered in maggots, dirt, and insects. He was confined to his cell for 22 to 24 hours a day. When he voiced grievances about his treatment, correctional officers maced him - about 25 times in total, according to a suit filed in 2019 by his mother against the Department of Corrections."

---- theappeal.org - Feb. 5, 2021

[In January 2021, Lee was transferred to a prison in New Jersey, near his mother's home, as part of a settlement agreement with the Virginia Department of Corrections.]

"On January 15, the [Virginia] Department of Corrections settled with **[Nicolas] Reyes**, who was **held in isolation at Red Onion for more than 12 years**. Reyes, who does not speak or read English, could not complete the Department of Corrections' step-down program, which is, generally, required for release from solitary confinement. The program materials were only offered in English."

---- theappeal.org - Feb. 5, 2021

"The American Civil Liberties Union's Virginia chapter has filed a lawsuit against U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement on behalf of **three Central American immigrants** who they say are being detained unlawfully in Virginia jails against

the instruction of federal policy.

"It alleges that the immigrants, one from Honduras and two from El Salvador, won a legal protection that prevents their deportation back to their home countries. The protection was won by demonstrating to an immigration judge that doing so would expose them to being **tortured or killed**."

"Despite winning that protection, **ICE has not yet released the men**, the suit says."

---- [Richmond Times-Dispatch](http://RichmondTimes-Dispatch),
Aug. 7, 2023

"Public personnel records show that [Sgt. Anthony Raymond] Kelly was first demoted and transferred to a new facility after an investigation began into the Feb. 5, 2022, death of **Charles Givens**, a developmentally disabled inmate, at Marion Correctional Center, a prison for the mentally ill in Southwest Virginia.

"On security video from inside the prison, Kelly and his fellow officers are seen **escorting Givens from his cell into the off-camera showers of the prison**. When they emerge, Givens is seen limp between the guards. **Two hours later, Givens was found dead**. A medical examiner determined that the death was caused by internal bleeding due to blunt force trauma, but did not rule it a homicide."

---- [Richmond Times-Dispatch](http://RichmondTimes-Dispatch),
July 27, 2023

"The Virginia Department of Corrections, under scrutiny over the death of an inmate that raised broader questions about conditions at a southwest Virginia prison, is refus-

ing to release public records documenting inmate complaints about the facility.

"Allegations that multiple inmates were **treated for hypothermia** arose as part of a lawsuit over **Charles Givens'** death last year at the Marion Correctional Treatment Center. The lawsuit alleges Givens was **tortured and beaten by guards off-camera** ...

"The Associated Press had asked the department for two years' worth of any inmate complaints related to topics such as uncomfortably cold temperatures at the prison, nonfunctioning or poorly functioning heating systems, and windows being left open during cold months. Those and other claims were made in the lawsuit filed on behalf of Givens' sister, Kym Hobbs.

---- Associated Press, Aug. 10,
2023

"Authorities are releasing little information about the circumstances surrounding **the death of an inmate** at Riverside Regional Jail in Prince George County on Monday. ... "The center was placed on probation by the Virginia Board of Local and Regional Jails after a review committee found that Riverside staff may have contributed to the deaths of two inmates who killed themselves in 2017. It was one of two jails **targeted for closure for unsafe conditions**; the other was in the Hampton Roads region. **Both are still operational.**"

---- [Richmond Times-Dispatch](http://RichmondTimes-Dispatch),
July 21, 2023

"Arrested for stealing \$5.05 of sweets and soda, a 24-year-old who doctors re-

peatedly diagnosed as psychotic and delusional was **left to essentially starve to death** over four months in a squalid Virginia jail cell, **Jamycheal Mitchell's** aunt alleged in a federal lawsuit.

"By the time Mitchell died in August - officially, of a heart condition "accompanying wasting syndrome of unknown etiology" - jail staff had allegedly denied him many meals, cut off the water to his cell and left him naked with no bedding or shoes as he smeared feces on the window of his urine-covered cell, the lawsuit states, citing numerous inmates who served time with Mitchell."

---- CNN, May 17, 2016

The Department of Justice (DOJ) has collected data on **transgender inmates**. Its data from 2015 shows an estimated 35 percent of transgender inmates in prisons and 34 percent in jails experienced one or more **incidents of sexual victimization** by another inmate or facility staff over a 12-month period, or since being admitted.

---- [WTKR \(Hampton Roads, North-east NC\)](http://WTKR), July 31, 2023

A Virginia mother is claiming her son and other inmates at Buckingham Correctional Center have been suffering through the recent heatwave because the jail does not have air conditioning. ... In a statement to 8News, the Virginia Department of Corrections (VADOC) confirmed that **Buckingham and other prisons built before the 1990s don't have air conditioning**.

---- WRIC News, Aug. 3, 2023

This is why we need **INDEPENDENT OUTSIDE OVERSIGHT** of all prisons, jails and detention centers in Virginia.

On **FACEBOOK**:
People's Tribunal on Virginia's
Prisons, Jails & Detention Centers

cops, courts & prisons

What is the People's Tribunal?

By Phil Wilayto

The People's Tribunal on Virginia's Prisons, Jails & Detention Centers will be an expansion of the annual Virginia Prison Justice Rally that the Virginia Prison Justice Network has organized for the past six years in January.

Those were outdoor rallies, in the cold, but still have drawn between 90 and 325 people, and have been helpful in gaining media attention on prison issues around the opening of the General Assembly.

While those rallies ran for an hour or two, the People's Tribunal will take place from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., on Saturday, Oct. 7, indoors, at the Greater Richmond Convention Center, which should attract even more media attention.

The program will consist of oral and written testimony by prisoners, the formerly incarcerated, family members and supporters. Both the morning and afternoon sessions will include scheduled presentations, followed by an open mic. All presentations will be up to three minutes.

The testimony will be given before a panel of Community Judges drawn from the legal profession, academia, the religious community and advocacy organizations. (See the photos below.) The entire event will be livestreamed and archived.

After the Tribunal, there will be a written report summarizing the testimony, with input from the judges and suggestions for reform.

This report will then be sent to every candidate for the General Assembly - and all 140 seats will be on the ballot on Nov. 7. Tribunal attendees will be encouraged to contact the candidates and ask them to take a public stand on the recommendations.

FOR OUR IMPRISONED SISTERS & BROTHERS:

Your testimony will be the heart of the People's Tribunal. If you have something to say, please write it down and send it to us. But first read it to yourself, timing it. All statements must be able to be read in no more than three minutes. You may send more than one statement, and if there's time we'll read them all, but we want to make sure that everyone gets at least one chance to be heard.

**Send all statements to:
Defenders, PO Box 23202
Richmond, VA 23223**

The central demand will be for the creation of an Independent Outside Oversight body, with the authority to enter any prison, jail or immigrant detention center, at any time, and speak, in private, with any incarcerated person.

We are still working out the specific pow-

ers the body would have, but they have to be more than simply investigating and reporting, and the body has to be independent of the Department of Corrections, regional jail authorities and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

Just like the police, the jailers have proven they can't be trusted to oversee themselves.

We understand that we won't win all of what we'll be asking for - not right away, anyway, but we want to move the goalposts closer to real Prison Justice. We believe the way to accomplish that is by informing the general public about the atrocities that take place on a daily basis behind the walls, motivating them to act, and creating a political atmosphere in which the politicians, no matter their party label, will be compelled to do the right thing.

Simply put, we need to make Prison Justice an issue that can't be ignored. That's what we did with the Shockoe Bottom struggle, which many said couldn't be won. But 20 years ago, Shockoe Bottom, once the epicenter of the U.S. domestic slave trade, was nothing but rundown parking lots. Now it's on its way to becoming a \$42 million, 10-acre memorial park.

And all it took was a whole lot of people and decades of struggle.

We hope this gives you a better understanding of what the Tribunal is all about and what we hope to accomplish. For ex-prisoners, family members and supporters, please make a decision now to be there.

THE PEOPLE'S TRIBUNAL

is co-sponsored by the

Virginia Prison Justice Network & Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality

As of Aug. 23, 2023, the Tribunal has been endorsed by more than two dozen organizations and individuals, including:

Abolish Slavery Virginia
Bridging the Gap in Virginia
Citizens United for Rehabilitation of Errants (CURE)
Coalition for Justice (Blacksburg)
Community of United Focus (Norfolk)
Forty Strong
Freedom Over Everything (F.O.E.)
From Conviction 2 Redemption
House of Dreams ReEntry Services
Interfaith Action for Human Rights
Kevin "Rashid" Johnson - Defense Minister, Revolutionary Intercommunal Black Panther Party (Sussex I CC)
Askari Lumumba - Co-Founder & Steering Committee Member, VAPJN; Member, Virginia Defenders (Greensville CC)
National Association of Social Workers - VA/DC Nolef Turns Inc.
Resource Information Help for the Disadvantaged & Disenfranchised (R.I.H.D.)
Uhuru Baraka Rowe - Co-founder/Co-leader, Justice for Uhuru Coordinating Committee and Incarcerated Women's Clemency & Support Project (Dillwyn CC)
Shaka Shakur - On behalf of NALC - New Afrikan Liberation Collective, Co-Founder (Beaumont CC)
Sistas in Prison Reform
Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality
Virginia Justice Alliance
Virginia Prisons Accountability Committee
Natasha White - Director of Community Engagement, Interfaith Action for Human Rights

Meet the community judges



Princess Blanding

Sister of Marcus-David Peters; Co-founder, Justice & Reformation; Liberation Party candidate for governor of Virginia, 2021.



Lillie "Ms. K" Branch-Kennedy

Executive Director, Resource Information Help for the Disadvantaged & Disenfranchised; mother of a formerly incarcerated son.



Margaret Breslau

Cofounder & Steering Committee Member, Virginia Prison Justice Network; Chair, Coalition for Justice, Blacksburg.



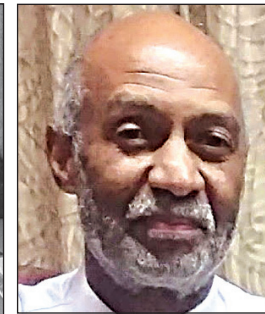
Monica Chavez

Cofounder, AMIGOS Legacy, working with programs to improve the quality of life in the community.



Mignonne C. Guy, Ph.D.

Chair, Dept. of African American Studies, VCU; Founder & Co-chair, VCU College of Humanities & Sciences Committee on Racial Equity & of the Committee on Racial Equity Student Advisory Group



Rev. Rodney Hunter

Pastor, Wesley Memorial United Methodist Church; Vice President, Richmond Area Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)



Rob Poggenklass

Executive Director, Justice Forward Virginia; former attorney with the Youth Justice and Civil Rights and Racial Justice program of the Legal Aid Justice Center, Charlottesville

cops, courts & prisons



Hundreds attend funeral for Irvo Otieno — The Rev. Al Sharpton, middle right, delivers a eulogy June 24 at the funeral of Irvo Otieno, held at First Baptist Church in Chesterfield. Otieno, 28, died on March 6 while in custody at Central State Hospital in Dinwiddie County, where he was transported after spending time in the Henrico County Jail. Seven county sheriff's deputies and three hospital employees were charged with second-degree murder in connection with his death. The charges against two of the hospital workers were later dropped. Otieno was allegedly suffering from a mental health crisis when originally arrested. As of press time, the case is ongoing.

Photo by Phil Wilayto

Juneteenth celebrated at Greenville

Men incarcerated at the Greenville Correctional Center in Jarratt held a very impressive program this year to celebrate Juneteenth, the day in 1865 when Black folks in Galveston, Texas, finally learned about President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation.

The program, held on July 19, drew more than 50 people and featured a panel discussion by Brother Marvin Muncy of Greenville; Dr. Zoe Spencer, sociology professor at Virginia State University; and Phil Wilayto, editor of The Virginia Defender newspaper.

The program began with opening remarks

by Lord Universal Al-Samad Allah; remarks on the history of Juneteenth by Marcus Ganzie; spoken word presentations by Magnetic Peace Life Allah; a song by Max; and musical selections by the S-1 Band. Askari Lumumba moderated the panel discussion, which consisted of panelists answering questions submitted by the event organizers.

Although the Emancipation Proclamation itself did not free any enslaved people, it was taken up by enslaved people themselves, who transformed the Civil War from a limited effort to preserve the Union into a broader struggle to end slavery. After being celebrated by Black communities across the country for generations, Juneteenth was recognized as a national holiday in 2021.

'End legalized slavery in Virginia!'

By Jennifer Dalton & Amber Phelps

Did you know that slavery still exists in Virginia? Due to a loophole in the Thirteenth Amendment, slavery is legally allowed - as punishment for a crime.

Abolish Slavery Virginia, in partnership with the Virginia Justice Alliance and the Abolish Slavery National Network, is working to build grassroots support across the state to end legalized slavery.

Though the Thirteenth Amendment ended chattel slavery, it made an exception, "as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted." Exploiting this loophole, Southern states, including Virginia, used the criminal justice system as a means to perpetuate slavery, enacting and exploiting Black Codes to imprison Black people, forcing them to provide the labor needed to rebuild the economy after the Civil War.

Once incarcerated, they were leased out to private plantations and corporations, filling the labor gap and lining the states' pockets. Convict leasing gave way to chain gangs and prison farms, extending the institution of slavery throughout Jim Crow times and into our current era of mass incarceration. This has allowed forced labor to continue in Virginia's prisons to this day.

In Virginia, prison wages range from \$0.27 to \$0.45 an hour for general jobs and from \$0.55 to \$0.80 for jobs in state-owned enterprises. (prisonpolicy.org/blog/2017/04/10/wages)

Those are slave wages.

"Most Virginians are shocked to learn that slavery still exists in our state," said Amber Phelps, director of Abolish Slavery Virginia. "Amending the state constitution is the only way to close the loophole in the Thirteenth Amendment and end state-sanctioned slavery. Our campaign will put the power in the hands of voters to make this right."

The campaign calls on the Virginia General Assembly to pass a resolution in the 2024 session. The resolution must be approved by both legislative houses during two separate legislative sessions before it is placed on the ballot for voters. The amendment would add new language to Article I of the Virginia Constitution stating: "No person shall be held in slavery or involuntary servitude in this State, including as a penalty or a punishment for a crime."

"This is a pivotal moment in our history to acknowledge past harms and make things right," said Jennifer Dalton, director of the Virginia Justice Alliance. "Ending the exception clause is a racial and economic justice issue that deserves bipartisan support. We call on people of conscience across Virginia to join the campaign and make their voices heard."

The campaign invites all who believe in social justice to push for passage of the legislation and join the effort. Together, we can abolish all forms of slavery in Virginia, for the first time in history.

To learn how you can help, visit: abolishslaveryva.org



Jermaine Doss waits on parole board decision

As we go to press, Norfolk native Jermaine Doss, who has been locked up for more than two decades for a crime he didn't commit, is waiting for a decision by the Virginia Parole Board as to whether he will finally be granted his freedom. A Fishback prisoner, this will be his third try. Above, his father, Ray Doss, speaks to a reporter about his case at a Norfolk rally years ago. Ray Doss passed last year.

Photo by Phil Wilayto

Restoring Parole www.rihd.org RIHD INC

Ban-the-Box RIHD INC Disadvantaged

Sentence Reform RIHD INC

RIHD INC

Reentry Virginia

Help Mobile Justice Tour

www.rihd.org Help End Solidarity Confinement Ban-the-Box

RIHD INC Information RIHD INC Resource

Virginia Ban-the-Box

RIHD INC Help Resource

Restoring Parole

Fighting Mass Incarceration in Virginia

international & antiwar news



Photo by Phil Wilayto

Virginia antiwar activists protest the annual NATO parade in Norfolk.

Norfolk's NATO parade draws opposition

By Phil Wilayto

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the largest military alliance in the world, has two Strategic Commands - one in Belgium, the other in Norfolk. And every year Norfolk holds a NATO Festival, complete with a parade, to honor the U.S.-led alliance.

This year the festival took place on April 22 - Earth Day - totally ironic, since the U.S. military is the greatest polluter on the planet.

But along with the thousands who came out to watch the parade was a small band of antiwar activists holding a bright yellow, 5-foot by 10-foot canvas banner that read "Fight Poverty, Racism + Global Warming, not NATO's Wars!"

The protest was sponsored by the Hampton Roads Coalition for Peace & Planet and endorsed by the Norfolk Catholic Worker, the Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality and the Odessa Solidarity Campaign.

WORKERS Continued from page 6

as saying in the RTD. "If they don't like it, why not work somewhere else? Or work more (hours here)?"

On its Instagram page, Workers Siam says, "Mom's Siam continues to operate with new management and a minimized FOH [front of the house] staff. We have been told explicitly that the owner wants nothing to do with anyone that was involved with organizing.

"The irony is that many changes have been made that we were asking for, but now we do not get to benefit. We have filed an Unfair Labor Practice (ULP) claim to continue fighting back against the illegal and retaliatory actions taken against us for organizing. Meanwhile, we continue to meet and discuss how to move

forward a movement for restaurant workers across Richmond."

According to its website, Mom's Siam is normally open until 10 p.m. on Sundays. Seeking a comment on the rally and the workers' demands, this reporter called the restaurant three times the evening of the workers' protest, between 8:40 and 8:43 p.m. Each time the call was dropped, without a ring tone.

We tried again the following Sunday, at 7:45 p.m., again three times. Each time there was one ring, and then the call was dropped.

The workers have started a petition at Coworker.org, "Support Mom's Siam Workers," that lists their demands, including a \$12 hourly wage for servers and "equal and fair distribution of shifts."

As of Aug. 23, the petition had gathered more than 4,000 signatures.

NYT attacks antiwar groups

By Phil Wilayto

In what looks like a serious move toward a new McCarthyism, The New York Times on Aug. 5 ran a front-page story smearing three respected Left organizations, insinuating (without proof) that they are paid agents of the People's Republic of China.

The groups targeted by the country's leading "newspaper of record" are Code Pink, a women-led antiwar group with offices in Los Angeles and Washington, D.C.; Left Forum, an educational and cultural space in New York City; and Tricontinental, a think tank based in Massachusetts.

Besides their politics, what the three organizations have in common, according to the Times, is support from a longtime leftist who made money in the tech industry and now funds organizations that oppose the escalating U.S. war drive against China. Ron Singham, 69, is a former member of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, an organization that played a leading role in rank-and-file struggles in Detroit auto plants back in the 1970s.

After the Times article came out, U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio, the far-right Republican from Florida, called on Attorney General Merrick Garland to investigate Code Pink and other organizations reportedly funded by Singham for potential violations of the Foreign Agents Registration Act.

Alleged violations of that act is the basis for felony charges brought in April against three members of the St. Louis-based Uhuru Movement, including Omali Yeshitela, the longtime chairman of the African People's Socialist Party. In that case, the three were charged with accepting money from Russia in exchange for opposing U.S. support for Ukraine. The APSP, which has a 50-year history of opposing all U.S. wars, has denied the charges.

Meanwhile, antiwar activists in Germany and other European countries have also come under attack for questioning their governments' support for Ukraine.

The Virginia Defender is speaking out against this new McCarthyism. We have written about the attacks on the Uhuru Movement and are promoting that organization's Nov. 4 March on the White House. (See the announcement on page 2.) We worked with the Coop Antiwar Cafe in Berlin to build international support for the cafe's director, Heinrich Buecker, who has been investigated for publicly speaking out against Germany's support for Ukraine. And we have signed onto the Open Letter initiated by the ANSWER Coalition opposing the attacks on Code Pink and other organizations that oppose Washington's new Cold War against China.

You can add your voice to this fight-back by also signing the letter, at: answercoalition.org.

Majority of U.S. opposed to sending more aid to Ukraine

A new CNN poll shows that a majority of the U.S. public now opposes sending more aid to support Ukraine in its war with Russia.

"Overall, 55% say the US Congress should not authorize additional funding to support Ukraine vs. 45% who say Congress should authorize such funding. And 51% say that the US has already done enough to help Ukraine while 48% say it should do more." (CNN.com, Aug. 4, 2023)

The poll was conducted for CNN by SSRS from July 1 through 31, with a margin of error of plus or minus 3.7 percentage points.

Just how much money has Washington sent to Ukraine?

Exactly how much money has Washington sent to Ukraine since the Russian intervention in February 2022? That's a matter of heated debate, and the answer depends a lot on what's considered "aid."

But here's one answer:

"Since February 2022, the United States, allies, and partners have provided Ukraine with equipment and training to defend against Russian aggression. Additionally, the U.S. Congress has appropriated more than \$113 billion for the U.S. Government's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine ..."

That's from the U.S. Department of Defense Office of Inspector General in a report dated July 24, 2023.

Note the word "additionally,"

So the *officially* acknowledged figure is *more* than \$113 billion.

Then, on Aug 10, the Biden administration asked Congress to cough up more than \$13 billion in military aid and another \$7.3 billion in "humanitarian" aid for Ukraine. (Richmond Times-Dispatch, Aug. 11, 2023)

That brings the total of *acknowledged* money up to more than **\$133.3 billion**.

Meanwhile, people here at home - and around the world - are struggling to put food on the table and a roof over their heads.

And the Biden administration refuses to even consider peace talks with Russia.

Note: Every time we criticize U.S. support for the war in Ukraine, somebody accuses us of supporting the Republicans. who are also criticizing the war - because they're more interested in starting a war with China.

The two major parties may differ on which wars to fight, but they're both loyal servants of the ruling class, whose goal is to control the world in order to maximize and secure their wealth. And we reject them both.

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In our opinion

Some thoughts on country music

Virginian Oliver Anthony is a rising country singer/songwriter with two first names. The late, great country/folk singer/songwriter John Prine wrote a song about a kid with two first names, the tragic product of a one-night stand and a runaway father. Prine, a working-class guy himself, a Vietnam-era vet who delivered mail for six years before finding his true calling, always had a sympathetic tune for the less fortunate among us.

Anthony's new hit song "Rich Men North of Richmond" could have followed the same path, but it didn't. The song by the self-described off-the-grid farmer from Farmville rants and rails against the rich and privileged, but then takes a nose dive to beat up on somebody on welfare, as if that person was responsible for his hard times and lousy wages.

Like the story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, (white) country music has always had two sides, one class-conscious, the other reactionary. Another big country hit this summer, "Try That in a Small Town" by Jason Aldean is much worse than Anthony's, equating Black Lives Matter protests with violent, mindless crime.

But then there was Woody Guthrie, who combined class-consciousness with anti-racism to produce the immigrant-sympathetic ballad "Deportee," later covered by the great - and progressive - Dolly Parton.

And as of Aug. 20, the Number 2 song on Billboard's Hot 100 was country star Luke Combs' cover of Tracy Chapman's "Fast Car," a tribute that also made her the first Black woman to get a top hit on the country charts,

Anyway, I was thinking back to my days in the GI Movement when we wrote songs to try to reach sailors, Marines, soldiers and Air Force folks. One particularly talented guy from California penned a piece in answer to Merle Haggard's "Okie From Muskogee," with its opening lines, "We don't smoke marijuana in Muskogee, we don't take our trips on LSD; we don't burn our draft cards down on Main Street, we like livin' right, and bein' free."

Hmmp.

The answering song started out:

"We don't make war on children in Muskogee, and we don't think too much of folks that do; I believe we should get out of Southeast Asia, like the Man should stay away from me and you."

The best verse, I thought, was this one:

"Now if you're Red or Black or Brown or if you're Yellow, then you must know what the Man has done to you; he's got you all to fightin' one another, and he's got the poor whites fightin' all of you."

There's good country music out there - Willie Nelson, Kris Krsitofferson, Dolly, John. The music industry doesn't push it, but it's there.

Maybe what we really need are a lot more good, working-class, anti-racist folks writing more good songs, and send the bad ones to the trash can.

Try that in a small town, north of Richmond. - PW

Letters to the Editor

Hands off Uhuru!

Editor's note: Three prominent activists, including Omali Yeshitela, chairman of the African People's Socialist Party (APSP) have been charged with serious felonies as a result of their speaking out against U.S. support for the war in Ukraine. The Defenders have made a contribution to their legal defense fund. To add your support, see: apspuhuru.org.

Uhuru Greetings

Your profound and generous support for Hands Off Uhuru has made a tremendous difference.

Your donations have made it possible to secure legal representation for Chairman Omali Yeshitela and the "Uhuru 3," who are prepared to fight back against the U.S. government's bogus charges and win!

With your support, the Hands Off Uhuru Campaign has been working at a blistering pace, pushing back the colonial state attacks with powerful days of action in dozens of cities, speaking tours, events, media interviews and more.

This has been possible because you stood up and declared, "We are not going back! This will not be COINTELPRO all over again. This time, we will win!"

Since the FBI raids on the Uhuru Movement last July, thousands of donations have come in to support the Hands Off Uhuru! Hands Off Africa! Campaign and legal defense fund.

The struggle is not over, but with your support and participation, it is clear that we are on the road to victory. Thank you for getting us this far.

Uhuru!

Mwezi Odom
Chair, Hands Off Uhuru Campaign

A Greenville Appeal

Editor's note: As we go to press, Greenville Correctional Center in Jarratt has been on lockdown for three



Photo by Phil Wilayto

The Greater Richmond Convention Center, the state's largest convention site, is where the People's Tribunal on Virginia's Prisons & Jails will be held on Oct. 7. For details, see pages 8 and 9 and the ad on the back page.

weeks, following three fatal overdoses, one escape and several fires. This is a first-hand account of what the prisoners there have been experiencing.

I've seen numerous prisoners die from health issues. Who came to the

staff & begged for help & they said put in a request for or grievance. At Nottoway I seen a dude jus collapse after playing basketball & it took 10-15 for the staff to respond & dude died on

See LETTERS on Page 13

The Virginia Defender

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FREE FOR PRISONERS IN 2023

Checks or money orders payable to:

VIRGINIA DEFENDER

We welcome letters, while reserving the right to edit for clarity, length and style. To submit a letter, an item for the Community Calendar or to place an ad, contact:

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Email: virginiadefendernews@gmail.com • Web: virginiadefender.org

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LETTERS continued from page 12

the concrete. This incident was never reported in the news. That man had 14 days left. & The staff jus let him die. Now in 2023 years later guys get high & od off drugs. & U punish 3,000 individuals for the drug use. ...

I feel sympathy for the dudes who died from the overdoses. I send my sympathy to their families. Hence this is a regular thing for not only us but the world worldwide. ...

Now we r behind bars & if a drug of choice presents itself an addict is going to say why not. I am not going to blame an addict that is not getting help/treatment. In a system that is fraudulent. If these people cared about our safety they would offer serious help.

Now to the dude who escaped. If u couldn't take a shower ever 3/4 days what u would do? If I couldn't talk to my family, wife, kids, what u would do. When that to a person in here means everything. Even though we r on lock behind his escape how is that our fault? When it was two trained officers right there. & He escaped mental/

physical Sufferage! ...

Now we can't even get clean clothes. We haven't had fresh sheets/clean clothes in 3 weeks. My body right now feels disgusting. They give us no soap. We haven't been to the store & to no surprise they won't let us order razors. All so u can't take the easy way out from what every action that happens is individuals tired of being oppressed.

It takes a fire to open up communities eyes what if that was u? What if u were innocent of your crime/oversentenced. What if u took a plea to something u did from not having to testify on your own brother/sister. Circumstances in life guide us to make terrible mistakes. But when the oppressor commits crimes to our humanity when does the gavel come down on them?

It is doc policy to evacuate the pod/building when a fire erupts we r asking for any staff member to b fired. Them 86 people could've died. Hell the whole 1 bld could've died which is 300+. So jus cuz they r locked up they deserve to die? & It takes one to expose such barbaric anarchy.

[Name withheld by request]
GREENSVILLE CORR. CENTER

The time is now to do something about the housing crisis in this city and nation

By the Rev. Rodney Hunter

No longer can citizens sit down and watch thousands lose their homes, their dignity, and their security. It is outrageous and unacceptable that legislators have sat back and watched the rich become excessively wealthy, while hard-working citizens receive the crumbs that trickle down from their waste. Immediate action is demanded to end this crisis.

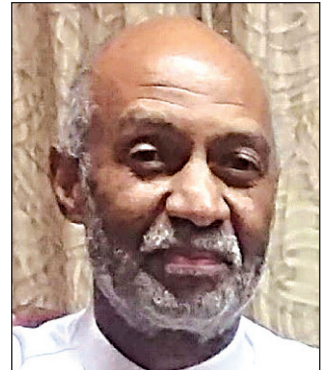
As a pastor, I am bombarded with requests for assistance from persons facing homelessness or excessive increases in their rent. With wages stagnant, how are individuals expected to pay for higher rent, higher gas prices, increased cost of food, as well as utility increases?

Since Christmas, I have assisted four individuals facing eviction. One woman had to sleep outside while being pregnant. The homeless support facilities are always filled to capacity; therefore, persons must find sleep elsewhere, usually a park.

The housing crisis is a systemic problem that needs to and can be resolved. If we can spend billions of dollars in Ukraine, we surely should be able to provide funds for our own citizens. How should citizens be concerned or excited about the upcoming election, when they are overwhelmed

with debt, housing issues, and loss of jobs during this economic slowdown created by the Federal Reserve's inflation policy?

Let us rise up and demand fair housing policies and practices for all. The city, state, and federal governments need to work together to address this problem. They could start by reducing the tax loopholes for the rich. Let's make our government work for the people who empowered them and not just for the rich.



Rev. Rodney Hunter

Rev. Rodney Hunter is pastor of Wesley Memorial United Methodist Church and vice president of the Richmond Area Southern Christian Leadership Conference.



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reclaiming our sacred ground

Update on the Shockoe Bottom struggle

City of Richmond releases Shockoe Bottom Small Area Plan

This spring, the City of Richmond released its Small Area Plan for Shockoe Bottom, which lays out its vision for the development of the downtown area that once was the epicenter of the U.S. domestic slave trade. The Defenders have posted it on the website of the Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project. (sacredgroundproject.net)

In response, the Defenders submitted the following critique:

Defenders' response

The City of Richmond's Small Area Plan has many features that reflect what community activists have been promoting as part of the reclamation and proper memorialization of Shockoe Bottom: An honest retelling of the area's history; economic opportunities for the descendant community; affordable housing for a racially and economically diverse population; and community input into the area's design.

At the same time, the Plan also includes what we would consider inadequacies and even problems.

The real significance of Shockoe Bottom

Most important is the number of errors the Plan contains in terms of Shockoe Bottom's history and significance.

Most egregiously, the plan simply refers to Shockoe Bottom as the country's second largest

slave-trading district, after New Orleans. This is true as far as it goes. But the district's true significance is the fact that it was the epicenter of the U.S. domestic slave trade - the warehouse district that supplied enslaved human beings to the other slave markets further south, including New Orleans.

This is important because, in the three decades before Emancipation, according to the records uncovered to date, at least 100,000 people were sold out of Shockoe Bottom, with another 200,000 to 250,000 sold out of Virginia as a whole, with many of those also likely passing through Shockoe.

By 1860 there were an estimated 4.5 million Black people in the entire country. Since U.S. participation in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade had ended in 1808, most of these people would have been descended from people born in this country. Since Shockoe Bottom was the slave-trading district that supplied the slave markets of Charleston, Savannah, Vicksburg, New Orleans, etc., it is likely that the majority of African-Americans today could trace some ancestry to Shockoe Bottom - making it one of the most important places in the country for people of African descent.

Charleston, S.C., makes the same claim, because it was the major entry point for captured Africans brought to the colonies and the states, until 1808. So Charleston, which this summer will open its \$100 million International African American Museum to explore that city's role in the slave trade, promotes the fact that the majority of Black people in the U.S. today could

trace some ancestry to Charleston.

Richmond could make the same claim, but for some reason chooses not to.

Shockoe Bottom as an early example of mass incarceration

Another major omission in the history laid out in the Small Area Plan is that, of the six to eight slave jails that Richmond historian Elizabeth Kambourian reports as operating in Shockoe Bottom, only one is mentioned: the one owned by Robert Lumpkin. Slave trader Silas Omohundro also had a jail, at the southwest corner of 17th and East Broad streets. William Goodwin and Henry Templeton had one at the northwest corner of 17th and Grace streets and another near the Seaboard Building. Several other slave jails were located in the district, along with 40 to 50 auction houses.

The Plan states that there were numerous slave trader offices located in the Bottom, but doesn't mention that many of these offices had penned-in areas in the back that also functioned as slave jails.

Together, we can see that Shockoe Bottom was one of the country's earliest examples of mass incarceration, a fact that's very relevant to today's Black community.

The lack of a mechanism for serious community input into decision-making

Another major flaw in the Plan is that there is no hint that community input would be anything other than just suggestions. While there are promises of open meetings to receive feedback on the various elements of the Plan, there is no assurance that those views would carry any kind of weight.

That was the problem with the series of public meetings held by SmithGroup JJR, in which that company's proposal for a slavery museum never received majority support, and yet remained as the main project of the company.

The Shockoe Bottom Advisory Group

We understand that the Small Area Plan is separate from the Heritage Campus Master Plan, for which an Advisory Group has been formed. Some of the Advisory Group members form a curatorial body to advise on the accuracy, sensitivity and framing of historical content for the master planning process. This group

includes Christy Coleman, executive director of the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation; Ana Edwards, chair of the Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project of the Virginia Defenders; Luranett Lee, professor of Public History at the University of Richmond and founding curator of African-American History at the Virginia Historical Society (2001-2016); Lynn Rainville, an anthropology professor and director of Institutional History at Washington and Lee University; and Toni Wynn, a writer, exhibit developer, arts educator and facilitator with Brocade Studio.

Of these, four are the only African-Americans on the Advisory Group. The other 10 members are all white, making up nearly three-quarters of the advisors.

Further, each of the companies represented by the white members are themselves overwhelmingly white, as is SmithGroup JJR, which, as far as we know, is still under contract to build the National Slavery Museum.

It is difficult for us to understand how private, for-profit companies that have not achieved any real diversity within their own ranks can be entrusted to create a public memorial for such a sensitive topic as the U.S. domestic slave trade.

Who will financially benefit?

Which brings up another important point: Who will financially benefit from the Heritage Park and the Interpretive Center?

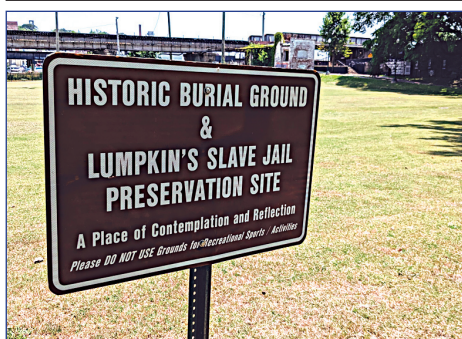
The Small Area Plan makes reference to promoting "minority" businesses. However, according to the Code Of Virginia (§ 2.2-1604. Definitions), the term "minority" doesn't necessarily mean Black. It can mean any person who belongs to a race other than white. While we are certainly in favor of people of color in general receiving preference in the granting of government contracts, along with "small" and "women-owned" businesses, in the case of Shockoe Bottom Black-owned businesses must have the first priority.

This principle must also apply to the training and hiring of workers to construct and operate the Heritage Campus and Interpretive Center. There is no mention of this in the Plan.

The Plan mentions the creation of "public art," but without stating that priority be given to members of the descendant community.

Similarly, the Plan includes the idea of space being reserved for artists and craftspeople to sell their wares, but doesn't specify that people of African descent would be given any priority.

See **SHOCKOE** on page 15



More than 12 years after the Shockoe Bottom African Burial Ground was reclaimed from its use as a parking lot, the City has still used this sign, describing the sacred ground as simply a "Historic Burial Ground."

Photo by Phil Wilayto

African Burial Ground to get 2nd marker

The Virginia Department of Historic Resources has approved seven new historical markers to "highlight Black history" in the state. One of them, "Richmond's First Municipal African Cemetery," is the second to mark the site of the Shockoe Bottom African Burial Ground, and the first to distinguish it from the municipal cemetery opened in 1816 north of the city limits on Shockoe Hill. Marker SA-66, "Gabriel's Execution," was unveiled in 2004 at a ceremony attended by 200 people. Located in the 1500 block of East Broad Street, it was the first marker to acknowledge the existence of this early 19th century burial site. The Shockoe Hill African Burying Ground historical marker, SA-130, was installed in June 2022. — ANA EDWARDS

reclaiming our sacred ground

Introducing the Shockoe Bottom Community Advisory Group

By Ana Edwards

The city's Shockoe Project master planning process is underway, with a group of contractors and advisors acting as consultants to the chief architect and his team.

This group includes five public historians, of whom four are African-American. Most of the other consultants are white. Several head up companies that presumably would be interested in receiving contracts to work on the project.

The master plan is due by the end of the year and will include the design concept from which the overall project will be realized.

In our view, the issue of how the Black community will benefit from the \$42 million now available for the "Heritage Campus" and interpretive center remains a concern.

In the last edition of The Virginia Defender, we explained that, going forward, we intend to promote real transparency in the decision-making process, and meaningful input from the Black community in that process. We also intend to make sure that the descendant community materially benefits from the development and operation of the memorial park and interpretive center.

To that end, we have initiated the Shockoe Bottom Community Advisory Group as a Black community vehicle for following the city of Richmond's work to establish a Heritage Campus in Shockoe Bottom. Each member of this group has played important roles in reclaiming and promoting the proper memorialization of this sacred ground.

Let us introduce you to the members:



Ana Edwards, Chair

Chair of the Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project of the Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality; descended from people sold out of Richmond.



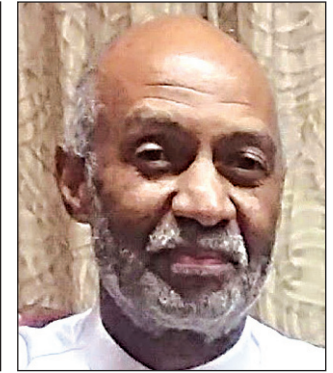
Donnell Brantley

Longtime community advocate; participated in the civil disobedience action in April 2011 that shut down the VCU parking lot over the African Burial Ground.



Florence Breedlove

An active community advocate; helped with the community brainstorming and development of the Alternate Proposal for a Shockoe Bottom Memorial Park.



Rev. Rodney Hunter

Pastor, Wesley Memorial United Methodist Church; hosted many events supporting the Shockoe Bottom struggle, including the city-wide meeting at which the Memorial Park proposal was approved.



Anita Lee

With her husband, Jim Armstrong, distributed hundreds of flyers to people parking cars on the African Burial Ground and protested the baseball stadium proposed for Shockoe Bottom.



Joseph S. H. Rogers

Public historian and historical interpreter, has co-facilitated annual events on the African Burial Ground and promoted the Memorial Park during his candidacy for Richmond City Council.



Lynetta Thompson

As president of the Richmond Branch NAACP, led the branch in supporting the Shockoe Bottom struggle; steadfast participant in annual events at the Burial Ground.



Shawn Utsey, Ph.D.

A VCU professor; produced the documentary film "Meet Me in the Bottom: The struggle to reclaim Richmond's African American Burial Ground."

SHOCKOE Continued from page 14

And then there are the tax revenues

Finally, there is the issue of the general increase in tax revenue that the City will realize as a result of the creation and operation of the Heritage Campus and Interpretive Center.

Back in 2016 during a visit to Poland, we met with the director of the Oskar Schindler's Enamel Factory - Museum of Krakow, the factory owned by the Schindler of the movie "Schindler's List." The museum explores the horrific Nazi occupation of the city of Krakow during World War II.

When we asked the director if the museum paid for itself, we were surprised to learn that, no, it relied on subsidies from the local government, which we knew was very conservative. The reason for the subsidies, the director explained, was because of the enormous financial benefits the city receives from the huge number of tourists who visit the museum each year. This

benefits the local businesses - hotels, hostels, restaurants, etc., which results in a substantial increase in local tax revenue.

We can expect to see similar benefits to Richmond's businesses and city government as a result of creating the Heritage Campus and Interpretive Center. In fact, we're sure this (somewhat late) realization on the part of elected officials was what finally convinced them to endorse the Community Proposal for a Shockoe Bottom Memorial Park, which has now been incorporated into the Small Area Plan.

Therefore, it seems only right that a substantial portion of this increase in sales tax revenue be set aside to directly benefit the descendant community.

We understand that, thanks to reactionary lawmakers, racial set-asides are no longer legal. However, there is nothing to prevent sales tax revenue from being directed to projects that, while not racial in nature, do benefit the Black community.

We are proposing that a substantial

percentage of the increase in sales tax revenue that will be realized from the creation and operation of the Heritage Campus and Interpretive Center be directed to the Richmond Public School system - over and above what the City normally allocates for the maintenance and operation of the schools.

Of the 28,225 students now in Richmond's 54 public schools, 79% are students of color, and 55% are Black. (<https://www.publicschoolreview.com/virginia/richmond-city-public-schools-school-district/5103240-school-district>)

The Defenders raised this proposal in the Spring 2023 edition of The Virginia Defender newspaper (<https://virginiadefender.org>) and will be promoting it going forward.

In conclusion

While there are many aspects of the Small Area Plan that seem positive, there also are substantial omissions, including any mechanism for the descendant community to have meaningful input into the decision-making

process, or necessarily financially benefiting in any significant way from the creation and operation of the Heritage Campus and Interpretive Center.

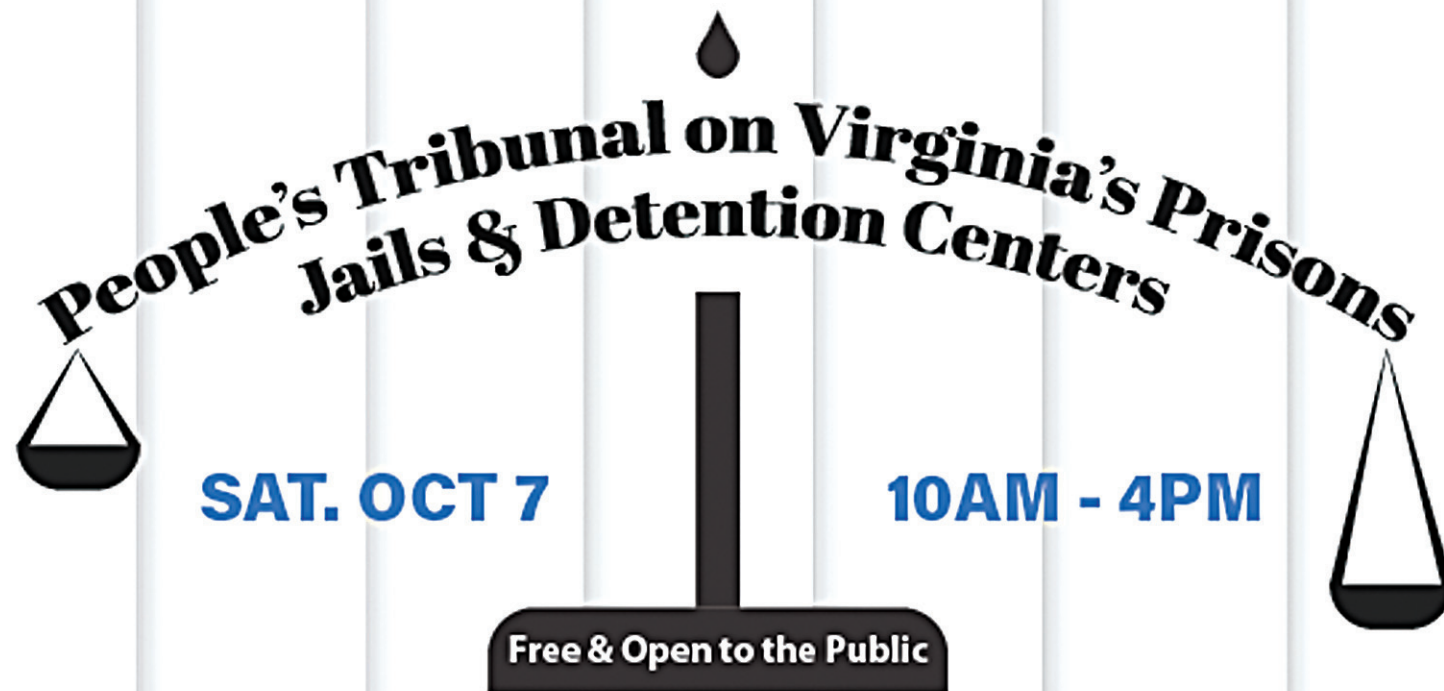
For our part, the Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project and The Virginia Defender newspaper are organizing a Shockoe Bottom Community Advisory Group that we will meet with on a regular basis to receive and provide feedback on updates on memorial park developments. We will also report on developments in our newspaper and other means of mass communication.

Going forward, we hope that the designers of the Master Plan for Shockoe Bottom will take these concerns into consideration.

Submitted by:

Ana Edwards - Chair, Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project

Phil Wilayto - Editor, The Virginia Defender



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