

*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



A statewide quarterly newspaper published by the Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality

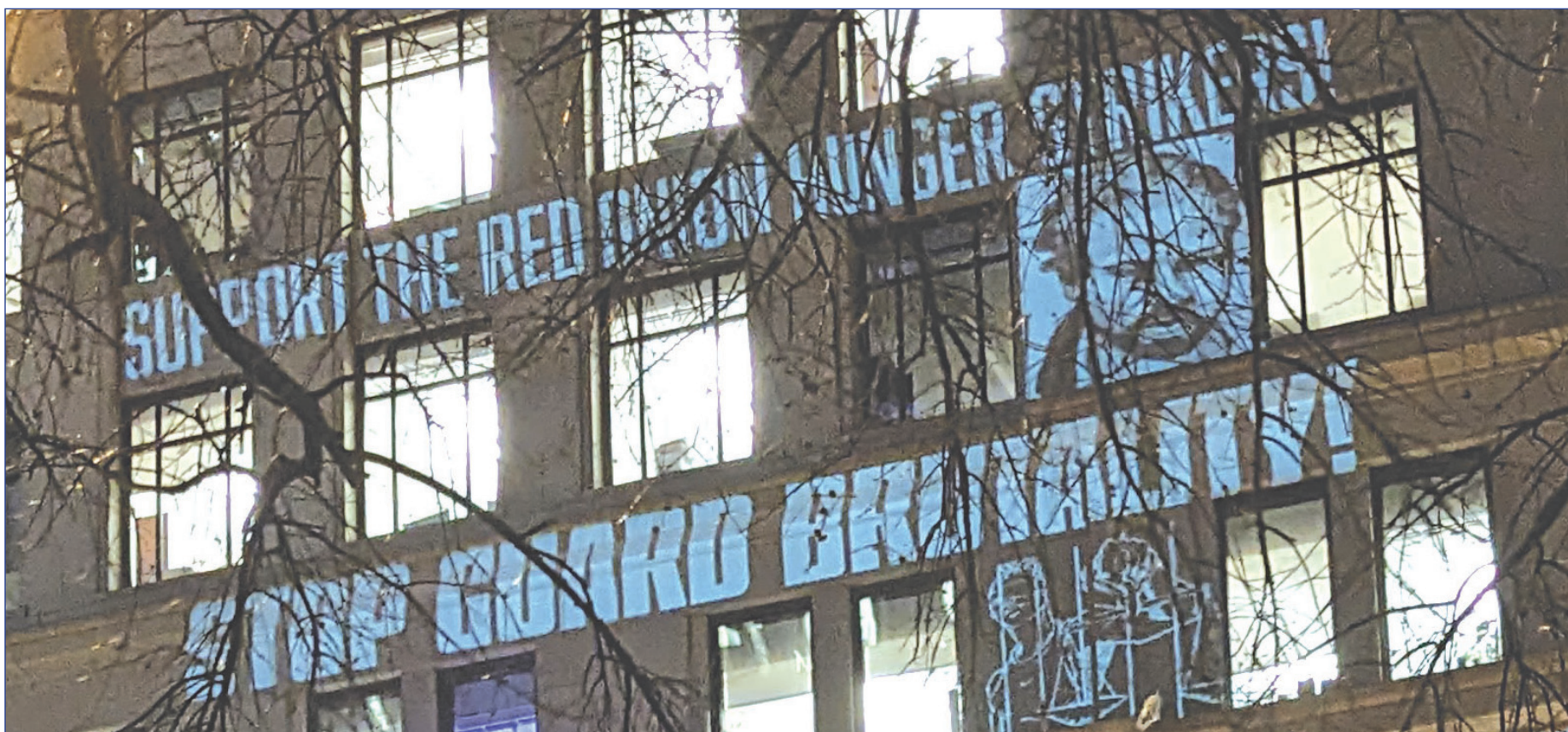
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Slogans and graphics demanding justice for Virginia's prisoners are projected onto the front of the General Assembly building on the evening of Jan. 10, the first day of the 2024 legislative session. The dramatic display took place during a rally to support the Red Onion Hunger Strikers. See story on page 8. Photo by Phil Wilayto

Va. prisoners & supporters demand:
PRISON JUSTICE NOW!

"Prisons do not disappear social problems, they disappear human beings." — Angela Davis - Political Activist & Scholar, Born Jan. 26, 1944

regional & national news

Uhuru 3 headed to trial

Staff report

On Jan. 26, U.S. Magistrate Judge Anthony Porcelli in the federal district court of Tampa, Fla., filed an order recommending that District Judge William Jung reject a motion for dismissal of the charges against three leading members of the Uhuru Movement, an initiative of the African People's Socialist Party. Those charged are APSP Chairman Omali Yeshitela, along with Penny Hess and Jesse Nevel, two white solidarity organizers.

"Uhuru" is the Swahili word for Freedom.

Last year, the federal government charged the Uhuru 3, outspoken opponents of U.S. support for Ukraine, with acting as unregistered agents of the Russian government. The three are all long-time anti-imperialist activists. Yeshitela, 82, has been organizing against U.S. wars and interventions for more than 60 years.

The indictments came after violent, military-style, multicity FBI raids on seven homes and offices of the Uhuru Movement on July 29, 2022.

The Uhuru 3 attorneys had asked that the charges be dismissed on the grounds that they violate the First Amendment right to freedom

of speech.

"The U.S. government has put us in the position of having to fight for the free speech that they claim is the cornerstone of U.S. democracy," said Chairman Yeshitela.

The case is expected to go to trial later this year, either in the spring or late summer. The three activists each face a sentence of up to 15 years in prison.

The charges against the Uhuru 3 come at a time when public support for sending more money to Ukraine has been slipping across the U.S., Europe and Canada, while political repression against critics of Western support for Ukraine has been increasing. Many observers have noted that the charges against the Uhuru 3 seem calculated to discourage U.S. antiwar activists from speaking out on the issue.

In response to the charges, the APSP has initiated the Hands Off Uhuru Fightback Coalition, of which the Defenders' Odessa Solidarity Campaign is a member.

Donations to support the legal defense effort can be made to the Hands Off Uhuru Legal Defense Fund at: handsoffuhuru.org/donate.

UHURU SOLIDARITY

NATIONAL CONFERENCE

NO MORE GENOCIDE IN OUR NAME

A call to white people: Stand in solidarity with African, Indigenous, and Palestinian resistance! The oppressed peoples of the world are winning. 

SAT-SUN MARCH 9-10 2024
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 UhuruSolidarity.org info@uhurusolidarity.org (314) 329-7293 @uhurusolidarity

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

THE VIRGINIA DEFENDERS for Freedom, Justice & Equality

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sacredgroundproject.net
odessasolidaritycampaign.org

The Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality is an all-volunteer organization 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 affiliated with the Virginia Prison Justice Network, which we co-founded.

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

WHAT WE BELIEVE

WE BELIEVE IN FREEDOM

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

from physical, cultural and emotional oppression. LGBTQ+ folks must be free from discrimination and 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 exploitation of Black labor on a historic scale, genocidal wars against Indigenous peoples and the theft of their land, 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

Community Advisory Group proposes use for vacant building at African Burial Ground

Inspired by the community effort that has artistically transformed an old abandoned building at the Shockoe Hill African Burying Ground, the Defenders' Shockoe Bottom Community Advisory Group is proposing a similar redoing of the old sandwich shop that sits at the corner of East Broad Street and the CSX railroad tracks. (See photo at right.)

The advocates have sent their proposal to city officials and, so far, have received an en-

couraging response.

The idea is to solicit input from community artists, especially Black artists, to conceive and execute a redo of the building in a way that is both educational and of benefit to the community.

The Community Advisory Group will formally raise the proposal at the Feb. 27 Shockoe Project Unveiled meeting. (See the announcement below.)



Photo by Phil Wilayto

Sitting at the southeast corner of the Shockoe Bottom African Burial Ground, this building that once housed a sandwich shop has sat abandoned and neglected for some 30 years. Covered with graffiti and with old restaurant equipment still visible through its open back doorway, this is the first thing visitors see when approaching the Burial Ground from East Broad Street. Advocates are now proposing a new use for the structure.

THE CITY OF RICHMOND
ESTABLISHED 1781

The Shockoe Project UNVEILED

Join the City of Richmond, Elected Leaders, Community Members and Neighbors for the Unveiling of the Shockoe Project.

FEB. 27 2024 5:30 P.M.

Main Street Station (Main Shed)
1500 E. Main Street
Richmond, VA 23219

TO RSVP SCAN QR CODE

For details, contact Athena Hanny at (804) 337-1337.

Federal judge: RPD discriminates against Black drivers

In an unusual move, a federal judge has found that the Richmond Police Department engages in discriminatory stops of Black drivers.

U.S. District Court Judge John A. Gibney Jr. made the determination Feb. 12 after reviewing data about police stops presented by Keith Rodney Moore, an African-American who had been stopped by police in Richmond on Dec. 2, 2020. Moore, who had a prior felony conviction, was charged with a felony after a gun was found in his car. He argued that discriminatory practices by Richmond police led to his being stopped in the first place. The judge agreed, dismissing the case.

The data presented covered the last six months of 2020, when the Richmond police chief was Gerald Smith, also an African-American.

REMINDER: EVERY MONDAY "CALLS FROM HOME" TO VA PRISONERS

Call in: 7-9 pm
Broadcast: 9-10 pm
Phone: 1-888-396-1208

Do you have a loved one/friend in a faraway Va. prison - Keen Mt., Red Onion, Wallens Ridge or surrounding local jails & federal prisons?

Every Monday, the WMMT "Calls from Home" radio show broadcasts brief messages from friends & family, faith-based communities & advocates to incarcerated people in Va. prisons, jails & federal facilities in SW Appalachia.

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R. M. HUNTER
Pastor

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Richmond, VA 23223
Church (804) 644-5830
Residence (804) 329-1375

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Richmond Reproductive Freedom Project

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rrfp.net  1-888-847-1593

community news

VMFA honors Community Makers

Staff report

Five local community advocates were honored Feb. 15 at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts as the museum held its sixth annual RVA Community Makers Award Program. The event “commemorates Black History Month with an art installation that brings together local artists and the community to honor individuals who positively impact the metro Richmond community.”

This year’s program, titled “Uncovering Hidden Histories,” featured the unveiling of five quilts, each with an image of an award recipient, created by Richmond artist Unicia Buster.

Those honored were:

J. Dontrese Brown, a “strategic thought leader and change agent” who led the movement to rename Richmond’s Boulevard after human rights activist and tennis great Arthur Ashe. He also “co-founded ‘Hidden in Plain Site,’ a virtual reality exploration of the Black American experience.”

Elvatrice Parker Belsches, a “public historian, archival researcher, lecturer, author and filmmaker who speaks locally and nationally on the Black experience in history.” Among other works, she is the author of “Black America Series: Richmond, Virginia” and served as an art consultant on the Steven Spielberg movie “Lincoln.”

Ana F. Edwards, a public historian who co-founded the Virginia Defenders, its quarterly newspaper The Virginia Defender and its Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project “to promote the history and memorialization of Gabriel’s Rebellion, Richmond’s first municipal African Burial Ground and the Shockoe Bottom district.”

Lauranett Lee, the “Inaugural Director of Race and Social Justice at Richmond Hill, an ecumenical retreat center” in Richmond. She is the author of “Making the American Dream Work: A Cultural History of African Americans in Hopewell, Virginia” and helped create the genealogy database “Unknown No Longer.”

Brian Palmer, a “Peabody Award-winning visual journalist” whose photographs are in the collections of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Library of Congress and others. He and his wife, Erin, “have worked to reclaim East End Cemetery, a historic African American burial ground in Henrico County, Virginia.”

The five quilts were created by **Unicia Buster**, a former graphic designer with the Richmond Free Press and art specialist for VCU Health who is a member of Richmond Really Sews and a founding member of the Black American Artists’ Alliance of Richmond. She “works primarily in fiber, creating art quilts and soft sculptures.”



Public Historian Ana F. Edwards with the quilt created by Unicia Buster. The five quilts will on display at the VMFA.



Recipients of this year’s RVA Community Makers Awards, from right: J. Dontrese Brown, Ana F. Edwards, Brian Palmer, Lauranett Lee and Elvatrice Parker Belsches. From left, Hamilton Glass and Unicia Buster.

Photos by Phil Wilayto

Speaking at the event were Buster, artist and muralist **Hamilton Glass**, and **Valerie Cassel Oliver** and **Paula Saylor Robinson** of the

Honored as Special Guests and demonstrating the quilt-making process were members of the Richmond-based **Sisters of the Yam African American Quilters Guild**.

BE SET FREE

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Saturday, March 16
10:00 AM

LOCATION

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DEFENDERS SUPPORTER PROGRAM



The Defenders Supporter Program is for friends who want to support our work on an ongoing basis. Make a **monthly pledge** - as little as \$1 - or as much as you can afford. Your donation goes directly into the organizing.

HOW TO JOIN

Visit DefendersFJE.blogspot.com or scan the QR code. Click “Donate” on the right or open the menu (mobile). Enter the amount you want to donate. Select “General Support” in the dropdown. Check the box “Make this a monthly donation”.

community news

news u can use

Free 24/7 advice from a nurse

It's 3 a.m., your child wakes up and says they aren't feeling well and you don't know what to do? "CONSULT A NURSE" is a free, 24/7 hotline that provides professional advice on health issues. Call 833-866-6727.

988 for mental health support

Feeling overwhelmed? Maybe even suicidal? Thanks to federal funding, people in need of mental health support can call 988, the number that connects the caller to the National Suicide Prevention Hotline.

Free legal advice

Legal Aid offices across Virginia offer pro bono (free) help for low-income individuals facing civil (noncriminal) legal problems. Call 866-534-5243 to reach your local Legal Aid office and find out if you're eligible.

\$35 consultation with an attorney

If you think you have a civil or criminal issue that may require the services of a lawyer, you can call the Virginia Lawyer Referral Service for an up-to-30-minute consultation for a prepaid fee of \$35. Statewide, 800-552-7977. 9-5, M-F.

Richmond museum events for Black History Month

BLACK HISTORY MUSEUM & CULTURAL CENTER OF VIRGINIA**"STOLEN LIVES, DREAMED LIVES"**

Feb. 7-29, 2024

"The Stolen Lives, Dreamed Lives exhibit features works created by Sandrine Plante. The sculptures presented in the exhibition tell the chronological story of a people depicted as healers and nomads, the tribulations of slavery, and life on the plantation, lynchings, exodus, and freedom. It is presented by Legacy Media Institute, Souldify Productions, and Virginia Oral & Facial Surgery."

"VISIONS OF PROGRESS"

Feb. 7-29, 2024

"Visions of Progress consists of stunning photographs of pre-Harlem Renaissance-era representations of African American life. The images show a multifaceted perspective of African Americans in Virginia during the early 20th century."

Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia
122 W. Leigh St., Richmond, VA 23220

More information at: blackhistorymuseum.org.

LIBRARY OF VIRGINIA**"CURRENT: A DESCENDANT'S JOURNEY FOR TRUTH"**

Friday, Feb. 23, 2-4 p.m.

"Join us for a preview screening of the documentary film *Current: A Descendant's Journey for Truth* followed by a discussion with producer Pam Smith, director Loria King and other members of the film's team. The filmmakers ride the rivers and walk the land that brought enslaved people to the shores of Virginia and to the places of their bondage and resistance. As the film explores the legacies of enslavement and what it will take for our country to repair and heal, it examines why it is important to tell the truth about history."

Library of Virginia
800 E Broad St., Richmond, VA 23219

More information at: lva.virginia.gov

VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF HISTORY & CULTURE**"HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT: CONCEALING ENSLAVEMENT IN AMERICAN VISUAL CULTURE"**

Wed., April 3, 2024, Noon

"In an illustrated lecture, Rachel Stephens will share her recently published findings addressing themes of concealment regarding the art of slavery. Her book, *Hidden in Plain Sight: Concealing Enslavement in American Visual Culture*, tracks the ways that artwork was used by proslavery supporters to justify the institution. Stephens will introduce and trace the themes used by artists in support of slavery and discuss a racist history that often involved forms of concealment. She will re-

veal the development and evolution of these themes as well as the ways that white-produced artwork addressing enslavement attempted to conceal the humanity of enslaved people and much more."

Virginia Museum of History and Culture
428 N Boulevard, Richmond, VA 23220

More information at: virginiahistory.org

VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS**DAWOUD BEY: "ELEGY"**

Nov 18, 2023 – Feb 25, 2024

"Mesmerizing and evocative, these 42 photographs and two film installations by contemporary American artist Dawoud Bey contemplate the harrowing journeys and human realities of the Virginia slave trail, Louisiana plantations, and Ohio's Underground Railroad.

THEASTER GATES: "WONDER WORKING POWER"

Jan 27– Jun 30, 2024

"This exhibition features ceramic works by Theaster Gates, a Chicago-based multidisciplinary artist and professor dedicated to community transformation. He has called pottery "the magic of taking the lowliest material on earth - mud - and turning it into something beautiful and useful."

Virginia Museum of History & Culture
428 N. Arthur Ashe Blvd.
Richmond, VA 23220

More information at: virginiahistory.org

LIBRARY OF VIRGINIA**"INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVES"**

Open through Aug. 17, 2024

"A free multimedia exhibition featuring reflections from Virginia's tribes highlights the commonwealth's Indigenous history and how the tribes remain a vital part of Virginia's culture today. The exhibition places the voices and experiences of Virginia's tribal communities at the center of an examination of the Library of Virginia's holdings."

More information at: lva.virginia.gov

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to your address book so it doesn't go into your spam folder.



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RAID ON
THE POSTAL
PENSION
FUND**



AFL-CIO to Biden: 'Stop the raid on the postal pension fund!'

Editors note: On Feb. 16, The Virginia Defender received the following email from Team AFL-CIO.

For more than 52 years, U.S. Postal Service (USPS) workers have unfairly had their retirement funds raided by the U.S. Government - resulting in more than \$90 billion in unjust expenses to the USPS.

We need your help to send a message to the Biden administration to do the right thing for postal workers.

By directing the accounting experts at the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to stop the raid on the Postal Service pension fund and implement overdue reforms, the president can safeguard the USPS's financial stability and honor his promise to the dedicated postal workers who have tirelessly served the nation.

President Biden is the most pro-union president in history - it's time for him to be a champion for postal workers, too.

Send a Letter Now:

act.afclcio.org/letters/tell-the-white-house-to-stop-the-raid-on-postal-worker-pensions

Letter carriers deliver mail to 152 million U.S. businesses and households. Postal letter carriers exemplify an unwavering commitment to service so you can get your mail. Our postal workers are vital community members. And as wonky as this issue might sound, OPM's valuation of the Postal Service pension obligations jeopardizes the financial stability of the USPS - and raises the prices for anyone who uses the Postal Service.

Please help us tell President Biden and his administration to address this historic injustice, fortify the Postal Service's vital role in our communities and honor the administration's promise to letter carriers.

This is the right thing to do, for postal workers and for all Americans. Thanks for speaking out.

In Solidarity,

Team AFL-CIO

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**It's not just the better pay & benefits.
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no hay fronteras en la lucha de los obreros/as

The roots of the ‘Crisis at the Border’

By Phil Wilayto

Editor’s note: This essay is based on an interview the author did in January with the Washington regional office of the Sputnik news agency.

What has led to the current situation?

It’s true that a record number of people are illegally crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, seeking to find a new life in the United States, and putting a big strain on the resources of border towns, law enforcement agencies and even major Northern cities. This is what is referred to as the “Crisis on the Border.”

While Mexicans still make up the largest number of migrants - 30% of the total - many people are also coming from other Latin American and Caribbean countries, as well as Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe.

Former President Donald Trump and the Republican Party he now controls are accusing the Biden administration of promoting “open borders” with no restraints on immigration, while President Biden insists the problem is simply the record number of migrants seeking to enter the U.S. Now this dispute has been interjected into the debate in Congress over providing more military aid to both Ukraine and Israel, further politicizing what should be viewed, in the case of immigration, as simply a humanitarian issue. It’s also a major issue in the lead-up to the presidential election.

What both sides of the debate ignore are the reasons why so many people are crossing the border in the first place: poverty, violence, wars and climate change, all of which can largely be traced back to policies of succeeding U.S. administrations.

For example: In 1993, the U.S. signed onto the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). In the following years, millions of rural Mexicans fell deeper into poverty as the corn they grew couldn’t compete with the subsidized corn pouring in from their northern neighbor.

The result was a big surge in migration north. From 1994-2000, the annual number of Mexicans emigrating to the United States soared by 79 percent.

The sharp increase in poverty also forced

more people into the drug trade, which has its roots in the U.S. drug addiction crisis. This led to an increase in gang violence, which in turn spurred more migration.

And then there is the central fact that the area now called Texas was once part of Mexico, along with California, Nevada, Utah, most of Arizona and parts of New Mexico, Colorado and Wyoming, all of which were



stolen from Mexico in the U.S.-provoked war of 1848.

As Mexican migrants put it, “We didn’t cross the border - the border crossed us.”

In a similar way, the U.S. wars in Central America in the 1970s and 1980s disrupted the local economies, leading to the growth of criminal drug gangs. El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala are now among the most violent countries in the world. (Nicaragua, under a more progressive government, was able to contain the resulting chaos, and thus has a lower rate of migration to the U.S. than the other three countries.)

Another major source of migrants is Venezuela, which has been the target of devastating U.S. economic sanctions and coup attempts.

Many Haitians also have tried to enter the U.S., fleeing extreme poverty and political violence that is the result of many decades of U.S. intervention.

And there is an increasing number of migrants coming from countries in Africa and Asia, which also experience poverty and political violence that have their roots in West-

ern imperialism.

‘Open Border’?

There is no “Open Border” policy in the U.S. While the Biden administration has enacted some more enlightened immigration policies, it still is arresting record numbers of people crossing the border. And the immigration deal the Democrats have been working

on, almost all of whom are Latino. In addition to being especially cruel, all this is unconstitutional and a direct challenge to federal authority.

On Sunday, Feb. 4, about a dozen Republican governors joined Abbot in Eagle Pass to express their support for his resistance to Washington. Several have offered to send state National Guard troops to support his efforts. And on Feb. 16, Abbot announced that construction is underway for a “base camp” to house hundreds of Texas National Guard members serving as part of the state’s border security initiative.

Abbot has intensified border enforcement as part of a deepening conflict with the federal government,

Abbot is doing all this to increase his personal political prestige among the right-wing Republican base, perhaps laying the groundwork for a bid for higher office.

In every aspect, it’s cruel and repressive policy and is leading to a further fracturing of the country along political lines.

Where is all this going?

Unless the economic and political situations improve in Central and South America, the Caribbean, Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe, migration to the U.S. will continue to grow. A starving person goes to where there’s food, no matter how difficult the journey or how unwelcome they may be once they get there.

The Biden administration is putting pressure on Mexico to slow the flow of migrants through its territory to the U.S., but the desperation of the migrants will prove stronger than the determination of the Mexican or U.S. governments. The rate of migration to the U.S. will increase, and the right wing here will continue to use the issue to spread fear and xenophobia, further moving a large part of the public to the right.

The solution has to be a recognition that fleeing poverty and violence is a human right, that the descendants of the people who stole North America from the Indigenous people have no right to deny others the right to come here, and that addressing the deep problems caused by many decades of U.S. foreign policy is the only way to “solve the crisis at the border.”

And that will take a mass movement - as

with the Republicans would give Biden the authority to completely close the border with Mexico, which he says he would do, which would condemn many thousands of migrants to inadequate camps on the Mexican side of the border.

‘States Rights’ emerging again as a political battleground

In the United States, immigration policy and enforcement is the responsibility of the federal government, not the states. Yet Texas Governor Greg Abbott has signed a law allowing the state’s law enforcement agencies to arrest migrants, something only federal law enforcement is constitutionally authorized to do.

Abbot has said he will build his own border wall along the Texas-Mexico border. He has ordered deadly barriers complete with chainsaws to be installed in the Rio Grande, a major crossing river for migrants. He has forbidden U.S. Border Patrol agents from accessing certain areas where migrants gather along a section of the Texas-Mexico border in Eagle Pass, a town with about 29,000 resi-

cops, courts & prisons

Red Onion Hunger Strike spotlights lack of transparency by VADOC leadership

By Phil Wilayto

Last year, a lot of incarcerated folks in Virginia thought the General Assembly had passed a law banning the use of solitary confinement in the state's prisons. That was not the case. In fact, the law that was passed actually made the situation worse in some important ways.

Fed up, a group of men at the notorious Red Onion Supermax prison in far-western Wise County decided to take matters into their own hands.

On Dec. 26, they started a hunger strike. At least 14 and as many as 30 prisoners may have taken part. In addition to demanding an end to long-term solitary, several had particular demands of their own.

The Defenders had been planning to hold a press conference on Jan. 10, the opening day of the 2024 General Assembly, to try and get the GA's attention on prison issues. When we heard about the hunger strike, we decided to combine the press conference with a support rally, which we held in front of Richmond City Hall, across Broad Street from the new GA building.

Defenders Ana Edwards, Joseph Rogers and Phil Wilayto spoke, followed by an Open Mic.

And there was a special added feature: We teamed up with the folks who garnered worldwide attention during the 2020

See **RED ONION** on Page 9

OPEN LETTER TO VADOC DIRECTOR DOTSON

Feb. 7, 2024

Mr. Chadwick Dotson
Director, Virginia Department of Corrections

As you know, several prisoners at the Red Onion State Prison in Pound, Va., have been on a hunger strike to protest the continued use of solitary confinement in the state prison system. We have heard that as many as 30 prisoners may have taken part in the strike.

VADOC spokespeople are telling the news media that the strike is now over, without releasing any further details. However, we have received credible information that at least some people remain on the hunger strike, including through a lawsuit filed on behalf of prisoner Kevin Johnson earlier this week.

Out of deep concern for the well-being of these men, we are asking that you provide answers to the following questions:

- How many prisoners took part in the hunger strike?
- How many are still on strike?
- What are the physical conditions of the men?
- Are the men who are still on strike allowed to communicate with their families?
- Were any of the strikers forced fed?
- Have any of the strikers received new charges as a result of their participation in the strike? If so, what are the charges?
- And concerning the case of Kevin "Rashid" Johnson (#1007485): We know

that Rashid has serious health issues, including prostate cancer and problems related to his heart. He had been saying for several months that he wasn't receiving the proper medical care for those conditions, but was finally able to see doctors at VCU Health in Richmond. We understand that he is now being held at the Powhatan Medical Unit, but has been told that he will be sent back to Red Onion if and when he agrees to start eating again. Rashid wants to be kept at a facility close to his doctors. We are asking that you look into his situation, arrange for him to be kept at a prison near Richmond and also allow him to communicate with people on the outside.

Sir, we know you have a reputation for honesty. The lack of transparency around the Red Onion hunger strike is a challenge to that reputation. If VADOC has nothing to hide, it should be willing to be open about what is happening to the hunger strikers. We urge you to provide answers to the above questions.

Sincerely,

Phil Wilayto

For the Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality

This letter has been endorsed by the following organizations and individuals:

Amigos Legacy - Chesterfield County
Juanita Belton, Pauletta James & Santia Nance - Sistas in Prison Reform
Rev. D. Regina Boyd - Community of All People UCC in Reston, Virginia
Lillie Branch-Kennedy (Ms K) - Founder, Resource Information Help for the Disadvantaged and Disenfranchised (RIHD, INC.),

Highland Springs
Arturo Chávez, Katya Chávez, Monica Chavez, Mara Cortes, Daniela De la Llave, Martin Gonzalez & Tonatihu Gonzalez - Virginia Coalition for Justice - Blacksburg
Andrea Collins - Member Valley Justice Coalition, Harrisonburg
Community Unity In Action (C.U.I.A.) - Richmond
Jennifer Dalton - Virginia Justice Alliance & Abolish Slavery VA
Charles Blake Deyhle - TXVA Consulting LLC
Ana Edwards - Chair, Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project, Richmond
Forty Strong - Virginia Humanization Project - Virginia
Rev. Rodney Hunter - Pastor, Wesley Memorial United Methodist Church, Richmond
Interfaith Action for Human Rights - Arlington
Justice and Witness Action Network of the United Church of Christ, Virginia Chapter
Katherine Lins - Member, St. John Neumann Parish, Reston
MGB Transitional Center - Henrico County
Malie Minhaj - President, Community of United Focus
Karen Morrison - Founder/President, Fighting 4 Freedom, Chesapeake
Nolef Turns Inc. - Virginia
Norfolk Catholic Worker
Parole Virginia Advocacy Group
Queen Zakia Shabazz - Founder, United Parents Against Lead, Chesterfield County
Social Action Linking Together (SALT), Vienna
Debra E. Turner - Member Valley Justice Coalition, Harrisonburg
Richard Walker - Executive Director, Bridging the Gap in Virginia
Natasha White - Coordinator, Virginia Coalition on Solitary Confinement
Harvey Yoder - Chair, Valley Justice Coalition, Harrisonburg

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By Askari Lumumba & Chango Olorum

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The central base of the struggle to free Shaka Adiyia Shakur, a committed New Afrikan revolutionary.

Shaka Shakur has been held captive by the state since 2002. He is currently imprisoned at Beaumont "Correctional" Center in Virginia.

cops, courts & prisons

RASHID UPDATE: Hunger Strike leader in critical condition

Editor's Note: The following is an updated version of a Fact Sheet the Defenders have sent to the media and are sending to all 140 members of the 2024 Virginia General Assembly. We are asking that they - and you, our readers - contact VADOC Director Chadwick Dotson and express support for Rashid. The contact information is at the end of this Fact Sheet.

- Kevin "Rashid" Johnson, 52, originally from Richmond, Va., has been serving a life sentence since 1990. While doing his time, he has developed into a writer, author, poet, artist and political activist. Because of his exposure of abuses in various prison systems, he has been transferred numerous times to other states, most recently back to Virginia, where he has been held at the Red Onion Supermax prison in Wise County.

- On Dec. 26, 2023, a group of men incarcerated at Red Onion began a hunger strike to protest the continued use of solitary confinement in the state's prisons, something many people thought had been ended by a bill passed in the 2023 General Assembly.

- Eight weeks later, one of those men, Kevin "Rashid" Johnson, is still refusing to eat. In addition to the general demand to end solitary confinement, Rashid is demanding to be kept at a prison near Richmond so that he can continue to see the doctors that had treated him for prostate cancer. He also has serious heart issues that were discovered in the course of his cancer treatment but have not yet been addressed.

- The health care Rashid needs is not available at Red Onion, and his cancer was not treated until it had advanced to a dangerous stage.

- For the first month of the hunger strike, Rashid was kept in a cell with no running water. He was denied bottled water, along with soap, toothpaste and other hygiene items. The only water he had to drink was from the toilet, which he was not able to clean.

- The Virginia Department of Corrections has gone to court to try and get permission to force-feed Rashid, but the court ruled that he was competent and so had the right to continue his hunger strike.

- Around the beginning of February, Rashid was moved to the Powhatan Medical Unit, about 45 minutes west of Richmond. There he was told that, if and when he agreed to resume eating, he would be moved back to Red Onion.

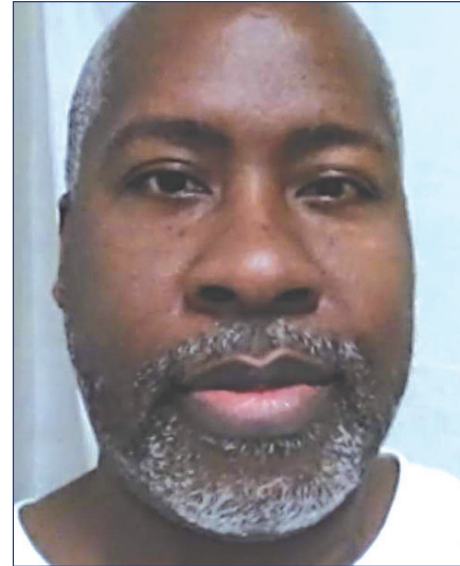
- In January and February, according to his legal team, Rashid was taken to the VCU Health medical center in Richmond 11 times. He is unable to retain liquids. As of Feb. 20, he had been moved back to Powhatan.

- The Department of Corrections isn't saying where they plan to keep him. They are not releasing any information about his condition and have even removed his name and prison number from the department's Offender Locator web page.

- Rashid is being given a choice: Starve himself to death, or agree to end the hunger strike and be kept at Red Onion, where he risks dying from inadequate health care for his heart condition and cancer.

- On Feb. 20, Rashid's legal team said they were going to seek a preliminary injunction to keep him from being moved back to Red Onion.

- The hunger strike has received some media attention, in the Richmond Times-Dispatch, Richmond Free Press, a few smaller newspa-



Kevin "Rashid" Johnson

pers and Virginia Public Media's Radio IQ, but Rashid's condition has not yet been reported on.

- We are asking that every member of the media and the Virginia General Assembly contact Chadwick Dotson, Director of the Department of Corrections, ask about Rashid's present medical condition and if he will be kept close to Richmond so he can receive the medical care he needs.

- Carrying out a hunger strike for nearly eight weeks is either an act of insanity or extreme desperation. A Virginia court has already ruled that Rashid is competent to make his own decisions. This must mean that he believes he is already facing a life-or-death situation by not receiving necessary medical care.

Please contact Director Chadwick Dotson. It may save a courageous man's life.

CHADWICK DOTSON
Director, Va. Department of Corrections

Email: Chadwick.Dotson@vadoc.virginia.gov
Phone: 804-674-3000 (Not his direct line.)
Call this number and ask to be connected with his office.)

RED ONION continued from page 8

George Floyd protests for projecting anti-racist images onto Richmond's Robert E. Lee statue.

This time, they projected slogans and images onto the front of the GA building: "Prison Justice Now," "Support the Red Onion Hunger Strikers," "End Solitary Confinement" and "Stop Guard Brutality," as well as images, including a self-portrait by hunger striker and longtime prisoner activist Kevin "Rashid" Johnson. (See the photo on the front page.)

The action resulted in coverage about the strike in the Richmond Times-Dispatch, Richmond Free Press, (Harrisonburg) Daily News Record and Virginia Public Media's Radio IQ.

Then we wrote to the 14 strikers whose names and prison numbers we had; brought up the hunger strike at a GA House subcommittee meeting where we were asked to testify in support of bill promoting more transparency about deaths in custody; sent emails to the delegates who had supported that bill, asking them to contact Department of Corrections Director Chadwick Dotson about the hunger strike; and sent an Open Letter to Dotson, signed by more than three dozen organizations and individuals, calling for transparency about the hunger strike and especially Rashid's condition. (See the Open Letter on page 8.)

We also put together a fact sheet about Rashid's case (see page 9) and sent it to key reporters in Virginia and are sending it to all 140 state legislators.

As the Defender goes to press, we have yet to hear from VADOC Director Chadwick Dotson.

Stay tuned.

Jermaine Doss denied parole for 4th time

Jermaine Doss, a Norfolk native who is 25 years into a life-plus-34-year sentence for a crime he did not commit, has been turned down for parole, again.

"I got the turn down December 5, 2023, and it was my 4th turn down," Jermaine wrote the Defender. "Those reasons are static reasons, meaning that those are things I cannot change. The 3 reasons were 1) the serious nature of the crime, 2) to release me now would diminish the seriousness of the crime, 3) the board wants to see me do more time towards my sentence.

"I have done everything asked of me,

jumped through every hoop, did all programs asked of me and remained infraction-free since 2006, which was my only charge, a 200 series."

Jermaine was convicted in 1999 in connection with the murder of a white businessman, a crime that received a great deal of media attention. He was originally charged with murder-for-hire, but when the jury failed to convict him of that, the trial judge said it could consider murder as a "lesser included offense."

The only evidence presented was the

testimony of the actual confessed killer, Nathaniel McGee, who has since stated several times under oath that he only testified against Jermaine because he was told that otherwise he would face the death penalty.

McGee received 17 years for the murder, plus some time for related offenses. According to the VADOC Offender Locator web page, he is scheduled to be released April 24 of next year.

Jermaine has always maintained his innocence, saying he was set up by a crooked cop who was trying to shake him down for money. The officer who arrested Jermaine was former Detective Robert Glenn Ford, who was

later sentenced to serve 12.5 years for extorting defendants and lying about it to the FBI.

Over the years, Jermaine's family has worked tirelessly to clear his name and help him win his freedom. More than 6,000 people have signed a Chang.org petition calling for his release. In 2021, Governor Ralph Northam turned down a pardon request that had been submitted a full eight years before.

The Defenders have been supporting Jermaine Doss for nearly 15 years and will continue to do so until Justice is done.

To add your support, please sign the petition at [change.org](https://www.change.org). To find the petition on the site, just search for "Jermaine Doss."

reclaiming our sacred ground

Tues., Feb. 27, at the Main Street Station ...

Richmond to unveil Shockoe Project vision for memorial park

By Ana Edwards

On Tuesday, Feb. 27, the city of Richmond will present its proposed master plan - design and rationale - for the 10-acre Shockoe Bottom memorial park, including the signing of the city charter that commits a \$42 million down payment of city and state funds for the project.

The unveiling of the master plan is scheduled to take place from 5:30 to 7 p.m. at the Main Street Station, 1500 E. Main St. You must RSVP to attend, but the event is open to the public.

To register, call Athena Hanny at 804-337-1337.

A long time coming

The master planning process has taken a year to process the history of the area, but also the history of the struggle to bring to fruition the place that should put Richmond on the contemporary map for historical truth-telling about slavery and our city's role in it.

Full disclosure: Having served on the master planning committee, I have seen the plan, and I think it's beautiful. Yet we must remember the expectations we have for a project like this:

Criteria for success

First, this project needs to convey the scale of this local history's impact on society - what it meant to be a slavery-based culture and economy.

Second, the project needs to acknowledge that the physical landscape, these 10 acres, are the place where these activities took place, that the stories the project tells are authentic and that they also are representative of the places that did not survive to have their stories shared.

Third, the project must have relevance to the repair work needed to begin to make up for 246 years of enslavement

and 400+ years of a white-supremacist ideology. The economic benefits, from contracts to good-paying jobs to dedicated tax revenues and career development, must first go to those descended from those who were enslaved.

Those expectations have come from the years of the Defenders listening to men, women and children in our Richmond community who are not typically considered "stakeholders," as well as those involved in groundbreaking work around the country with global impact on fields such as anthropology, biology, archaeology, urban design and community-centered reclamation of Black resources in the USA and throughout the African diaspora.

Projects like the New York African Burial Ground have inspired and encouraged us when we didn't know what might happen, only that it was important to persevere. Emancipation-era cemetery recovery projects and museums and universities examining their origins in slavery and white supremacy - documenting and learning from how these tasks are accomplished - are important to conversations about human value in society.

No 'business as usual'

Meeting the expectations described above means we can't just conduct all "business as usual." After all, the "business" for Gabriel and his comrades in August 1800 was insurrection to end the system of slavery, which meant the upending of society.

In this moment, not doing business as usual means specifically ensuring that Black people and their ideas are not exploited for the "greater good," but cultivated and nurtured for their own benefit and thereby fundamentally contributing to the greater local and human good.

How?

After a more-than-20-year struggle,

Richmond city government has finally agreed to activist demands that Shockoe Bottom, once the epicenter of the U.S. domestic slave trade, be reclaimed and properly memorialized. This tremendous victory was the result of thousands of people, primarily Black but also many people of other races, taking up this cause as their own.

But in addition to this mass pressure, a big reason city government has finally agreed to properly memorialize the site was that it finally understood how much the expected increase in tourism to Richmond would mean for the city's coffers - specifically, a big boost in tax revenue from tourists patronizing hotels, restaurants, etc., as well as visiting other "attractions" in the city.

The memorial park must materially benefit the Black community

The Defenders would like to demand that this increase in tax revenue go directly to benefit the Black community. The problem is, right-wing politicians have passed laws forbidding "set-asides" based on race.

That's why we have raised the proposal that a substantial portion of this increase in tax revenue be directed to Richmond Public Schools and affordable housing, actions that would benefit all working-class Richmonders, but especially the descendant community.

Further, there must be a body or mechanism by which descendant community members will be permanent, contributing partners to the governance and programming of the proposed Shockoe Bottom memorial park.

And there must be assurance that this place will be the go-to space for fact-based, historical truth-telling and research that enables new scholarship, artistic interpretation and ongoing learning.

And it all must be done in such a way that it is accountable to the community, visible and understandable.

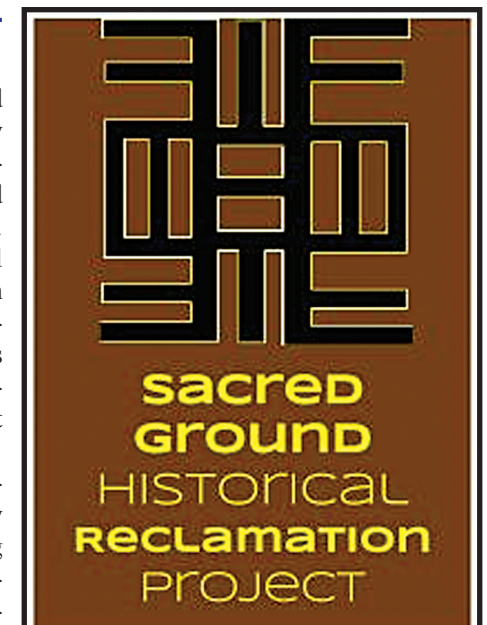
There are models for this kind of work and people from whom we can learn. The Family Representative Council for VCU's East Marshall Street Well Project, the Montpelier Descendants Committee and The Lemon Project at the College of William and Mary are just three.

Now, let's show up!

So, our job is to show up, be aware, and carry our expectations forward into reality. See you at the city meeting on Tuesday, Feb. 27.

And please visit our website for information on how to stay connected:

SacredGroundProject.net



Ana Edwards, Founder & Chair

PO Box 23202, Richmond, VA 23223

Ph / Text: 804 644 5834

sacredgroundproject.net

sacredgroundproject@gmail.com

reclaiming our sacred ground



Photos by Phil Wilayto

For the past 17 years, this historic cabin, once owned by a formerly enslaved woman named Emily Winfree, has sat deteriorating on a city-owned parking lot in Shockoe Bottom.

Finally: Progress for Winfree Cottage

By Ana Edwards

Emily Winfree's cottage, situated in 1866 in the town of Manchester on the south side of the James River, was saved from demolition in 2002 by being relocated to Shockoe Bottom.

Since 2007, however, the small house has been sitting on steel I-beams next to the Lumpkin's Jail Archaeology site, steadily deteriorating.

This year that will change. According to Burt Pinnock of Baskervill, the firm designing the 10-acre Shockoe Project, the property will be transferred from Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority ownership to the City of Richmond's Department of Parks, Recreation and Public Facilities. A request for bids and permits will be issued with the intention that relocation to a property adjacent to Blackwell Elementary School and renovation can begin this year.

You can see the plans at the Baskervill website: baskervill.com.

It seems fitting that not only will the house be returned to the community from where it came, but it will also become part of the call to be educated that influenced so many of

Emily Winfree's descendants for generations. Learn more about Emily Winfree and her legacy at: virginiahistory.org



For years, the Winfree Cottage was allowed to deteriorate. It was given a whitewash, but it continues to decay.

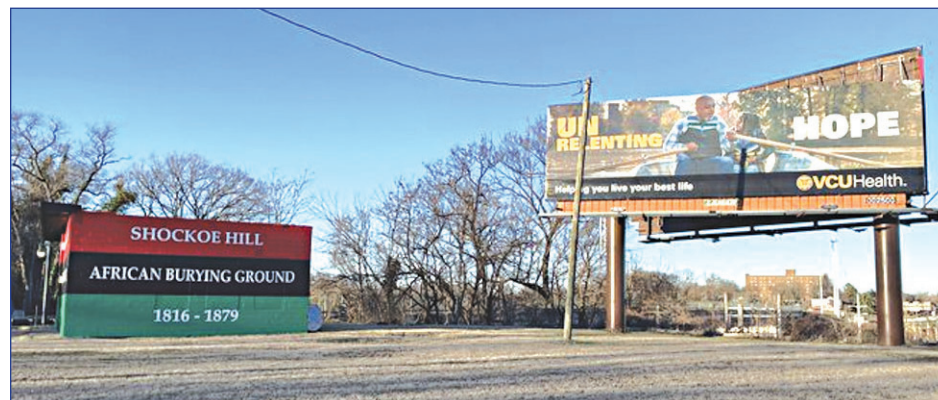


Photo by Ellen Chapman

The above photo shows the site of the Shockoe Hill African Burying Ground and the Lamar Advertising billboard with a VCU Health ad.

Community pressure forces VCU to remove offensive billboard

By Ana Edwards

"The desecration of the Shockoe Hill African Burying Ground, once the largest burial site for free and enslaved Black people in the nation, has taken many forms."

That was the opening line of Michael Paul Williams' Feb. 12 column in Richmond's daily newspaper, following the discovery that Virginia Commonwealth University had rented space on a billboard whose pillars plunge deep into the soil of the 19th century cemetery site, located about a mile and a half north of the Shockoe Bottom African Burial Ground.

Lenora McQueen, whose four-times-great-grandmother was buried in the cemetery in 1854, said she was shocked when she first saw the billboard, which is owned by the Lamar Advertising Company, a multi-million-dollar outfit based in Baton Rouge, La.

"For a moment I couldn't believe what I was looking at," McQueen told the Defender. "Seeing that VCU Health advertisement on the burial ground was so painful. It was quite

a slap in the face."

Archaeologist Ellen Chapman, who has worked with McQueen to preserve the site, first posted her sighting of the billboard Feb. 4 on the social media platform X (formerly Twitter).

"Advertising is back up on the Shockoe Hill African Burying Ground," Chapman wrote. "Even worse, it's @vcu - whose medical school grave robbed the cemetery for decades. There are bodies directly under this sign. Shame on @vcu and @LamarOOH."

Emails and phone calls from McQueen and many others to VCU President Michael Rao's office expressing outrage and disappointment got the desired result rather quickly.

"I am thankful that VCU was so responsive to my request to remove the billboard ad," McQueen said. "It was expressed that the ad placement in the burial ground was not intentional. I received an apology, and the ad was removed by the next day."

As of Feb. 20, there were no ads on either side of the billboard.

The Defenders acknowledge that we live on stolen Indigenous land and that the Commonwealth of Virginia was built by the labor of enslaved Africans. Reparations are seriously past due.

In our opinion

About the new prison Ombudsman position

For several years now, the Virginia Prison Justice Network and the Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality, along with many other organizations, have been calling for Independent Outside Oversight of Virginia's prisons, jails and immigrant detention centers. And in the past year, there has been a constant stream of media reports about the horrendous conditions inside these facilities: alleged fatal beatings of prisoners by guards; death by starvation; years spent in solitary confinement; fatal drug overdoses; suicides; lack of air conditioning while temperatures top 100 degrees; and more. This has been bad publicity for Virginia and its elected officials, many of whom aspire to higher office.

So it's not surprising that the Youngkin administration and the General Assembly have agreed to establish an office of Ombudsman to investigate and report on these conditions. We welcome this development.

At the same time, we know that these same elected officials have for years been well aware of these same conditions and have chosen to ignore them. And we know what has happened to earlier popular demands such as establishing a Marcus Alert and ending solitary confinement: Bills introduced to address these demands were watered down, while other reforms were later reversed.

The Ombudsman position, as it has been established, could provide a means for prisoners to raise grievances in a more effective way than presently exists. Or it could just be a toothless mechanism designed to convince the public that a serious problem has been addressed, when in fact it hasn't.

Gov. Youngkin's budget calls for an Ombudsman position that is limited to investigating complaints and reporting to the governor and General Assembly. There is no enforcement power. Further, the budget allocates a mere \$250,000 for the office, when, as the Richmond Times-Dispatch pointed out in a Sept. 28 editorial, a study conducted by DLG Strategies for the Virginia Department of Corrections concluded that, "... an effective, independently run ombudsman office would cost between \$2.3 million and \$3.7 million to fully staff." In other words, between nine and 15 times what the Virginia budget allocates.

This is no time to declare victory. The only sure guarantee that the government will do the right thing is constant public pressure. It was the mass Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 that forced some changes in the prison and criminal (in)justice systems. That same kind of mass pressure will be needed to ensure that any Ombudsman position is more than just a fig leaf hiding a festering wound.

Lives depend on it, as does our own integrity.

Letters to the Editor

Shaka Shakur v. Michael Brinegar, et al.

The regular subscribers and readers of The Defender may already be familiar with this particular incident and case. I was asked to write a brief update.

On Dec. 21, 2021, I was the victim of a Hate Crime at River North Correctional Center. Upon my arrival at the prison from another prison and while still handcuffed, shackled and chained in transport gear I was escorted into a corridor off-camera and beaten by approximately seven prison guards as they hurled/spat racial epithets. I sustained serious injuries and permanent scarring.

I filed a Civil Rights Complaint/Lawsuit, but withdrew it in 2023 as I attempted to find counsel. I have since refiled the lawsuit and I have managed to find an attorney to take the case who specializes in both Civil and Human Rights Violations.

One of the points I want to make is this: Guards at River North are well-known for beating prisoners and then covering it up by hiding evidence, erasing video footage, falsifying medical records or blaming the victim for his own injuries, as they did in my case. This is a part of a larger culture that has been allowed to go unchecked by VADOC-Richmond and the prison administration within itself, and also extremely pervasive in this Southwestern Region.

A region where prisoners are routinely beaten, victims of dog bites by trained k-9 attack dogs and orchestrated physical attacks. When u look into these incidents, you will discover that it's the same ol group of guards involved, and none have bn terminated for conduct.

These cases and incidents need to both be exposed and pursued. The culture and sense of diplomatic immunity needs to be changed.

Contact: VADOC HQ in Richmond



Prison Justice activists rally across from the Virginia General Assembly on Jan. 10, the opening day of the 2024 GA session. Photo by Phil Wilayto

and demand an investigation into these abuses!!

Alert media contacts and ask progressive reporters to either demand access or have the heart to do some investigative journalism.

Thank you to everyone who has helped me thus far in demanding some form of Justice n accountability and bringing this case to trial.

Peace!!

Shaka Shakur

BEAUMONT CORR. CENTER

Every day is a struggle

Every day is a struggle being locked up at Red Onion State Prison, but it's even worse when the Administration fails to adhere to their own policy.

Red Onion is a Level 5 maximum security prison and is "supposed" to be run by a number of "Operating Procedures" that govern Virginia D.O.C.

For example, per Operating Producer 804.1 (Inmate Privileges by Security

See LETTERS on Page 13

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LETTERS continued from page 12

Level) states that we are to receive a MINIMUM of 7 hours of out of cell rec daily. However, we are only given about 3, on a good day.

It has been proven that anything under this 7 hour minimum is inhumane because of the mental tax it causes the person being confined to a small area for long periods of time. Now add this with another person locked in it with you, using the restroom in front of each other (#1 & #2), body odor, bad food, etc., and all the while this area being as small as a common apartment bathroom (smh.. unbelievable).

Since being at this prison I've never received 7 hours of rec and the excuses that's always given is it's because they are "short staffed" or "institutional maintenance purposes." (Come on, man #Freedaguys).

so you mean to tell me in 2 & 1/2 years - that's about 900 days STRAIGHT! - this Level 5 supermax prison that houses all these so-called "extremely dangerous" inmates hasn't had a full roster of employees?? (gasp!!) & this prison is breaking down??(OMG!!).

So to all my good working folk of VA, who get taxes deducted from their hard-earned check to keep this place up & running, wouldn't y'all like to know where ALL this money is going?? Surely it's not to a "understaffed/rinky-dink" prison. let's ponder, hmmn??

Simply put, we're not asking for "4 seasons" treatment, but since when is human life placed below that of a house pet?? Come on, people, we have to do better.

Greg Azeez
RED ONION STATE PRISON

Who's bringing in the drugs?

Here is just a brief update on the bleak drug-related events at the Greenville Cor-

rectional Center.

I am sad to report GRCC has had another fentanyl overdose this morning (10/08/2023). We are on full lockdown again. This facility is fastly becoming a national tragedy. If 60% of the general population is not dead by December 2023 it will be a huge shock to me.

Locking down the entire facility every time a predisposed dope fiend decides to overdose or die is not being intellectually responsive to the problem. Being intellectually responsive is having the United States Attorney pull up in front of this facility with an entourage of 10 or 12 black SUV's loaded with FBI agents, hand Warden Punturi a stack of federal indictments and inform him that he and his staff are under federal arrest for violating the RICO statute.

Next, have the United States Marshal Service put a padlock on the front entry door of this facility. That is an intellectual response.

The United States Attorney has to bring an end to this ongoing criminal organization; it is killing predisposed substance abusers by the dozen.

And finally, a federal judge should step in and issue an emergency federal injunction to enjoin the Greenville Correctional Center from continuing to incarcerate current and future offenders in this facility as it is now a federal crime scene.

That is just my take.

(Name withheld by editor)
GREENSVILLE CORR. CENTER

Editor's note: According to Richmond's WTVR Channel 6, officials at the Greenville Correctional Center reported that the prison underwent a series of searches from Oct. 30 to Nov. 14. The searches, conducted by security staff and members of the state-

wide Special Response Team, reportedly turned up a large quantity of drugs, including heroin, cocaine, Buprenorphine strips, THC and THC Wax, possible crack cocaine and "many unknown substances."

There also was a change in the prison's leadership.

According to Richmond's WWBT 12, the lead warden, warden and assistant warden at Greenville all were replaced - and assigned to other facilities.

In 2023, six prisoners at Greenville died in just one three-month period. State-wide, VADOC reported 85 overdoses, the highest number since 2016.

It should be noted that, since the pandemic, the number of visitors has dropped sharply. So who is bringing in the drugs?

Truth in Sentencing

The Democratic Party controls the upper senate and lower house chamber of the state legislature.

The state government [must] end the egregious, racial policy of warehousing African-Americans to decades of higher sentencing guidelines than Caucasians recommended by Commonwealth's Attorneys and enforced by the Court.

Real criminal justice reform starts with repealing the Truth-in-Sentencing "Proposal X" in Virginia, the sentencing reform movement of the 1990s, implemented under former segregationist George Allen (Governor 1994-1998), to effectively restrict and eliminate parole eligibility and good-time credits.

The Truth-in-Sentencing law became effective in Virginia on Jan. 1, 1995. Virginia's sentencing reforms abolished parole, reduced good-time allowances to ensure that inmates serve a minimum of 85% of their imposed sentence, and became the most effective, profitable warehouse prison-complex business that disproportion-

ately affects ethnic minorities.

Along with the federal government, Virginia is the worst state for ensuring civil rights and one of eight states that abolished parole and implemented Truth-in-Sentencing legislation that requires offenders to serve 85% of the imposed sentence.

The amount of time served by nonviolent offenders was supposedly not changed by the Truth-in-Sentencing. Judge-imposed sentences for nonviolent offenders are supposed to be lower, [but] the time served in prison remains the same 85% because sentences are no longer reduced dramatically by parole and good time allowances.

Under Truth-in-Sentencing, offenders serve an average of 89.7% of the judicially imposed sentence.

Although parole was abolished for all offenders convicted after Jan. 1, 1995, parole remains in effect for individuals incarcerated prior to Truth-in-Sentencing reform. Post-statute inmates are repeatedly denied parole and good-time allowances based on decades of blanket denials of the serious nature of the offense and disrespect of the law, backdoor enforcement of the Truth-in-Sentencing.

Mr. Roy L. Perry-Bey
Executive Director of Civil Rights
United Front For Justice
NORFOLK

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We welcome your letters - up to 300 words. Just tell us if your letter or JPay is for publication. And remember, we're not lawyers and can't represent you or give you legal advice. And we're a small operation, so please be patient if you don't hear back from us right away. Thanks!

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international & antiwar news

Richmonders press City Council to call for a ceasefire in Gaza

By Danielle DiBlasio

Richmond City Council chambers were filled to capacity the night of Feb. 12, requiring the use of an overflow room to accommodate all the attendees. It was the third general Council meeting this year and the second since members of the Richmond community proposed a resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza.

The resolution was drafted by a coalition of local organizations, including the Richmond chapters of American Muslims for Palestine, Democratic Socialists of America and Virginia Commonwealth University's Students for Justice in Palestine.

The resolution outlines the many documented cases of war crimes and violations of international human rights laws by Israel and resolves that the City of Richmond (1) support an immediate and permanent ceasefire in Gaza; (2) support the release of all hostages, both Israelis and detained Palestinians; (3) call for the unrestricted entry of humanitarian aid into Gaza, coupled with the restoration of basic services; and finally, (4) affirm Council's commitment to ensuring the safety and dignity of all Richmond residents by combating anti-



Photo by Ainsleigh Gil

Half of U.S. adults believe Israel has 'gone too far' in Gaza

An AP-NORC poll conducted from Jan. 25 to 28 found that half of adults in the United States thought Israel had "gone too far" in its war in Gaza. That included 33% of Republicans, 52% of independents and 62% of Democrats. Democrats of color and those under the age of 45 were most strongly critical of Israel's actions. The poll was taken before Israel began its current offensive in southern Gaza.

Since the Hamas attack of Oct. 7, more than 28,000 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza, two-thirds of them women, children and babies. More than 80% of Gaza's 2.3 million people have been displaced and, according to the United Nations, a quarter are now starving.

While the Biden administration is increasingly calling on Israel to take more care not to kill civilians, it is pushing to send \$14 billion more in aid to the Zionist state.

Richmonders have been packing City Council meetings, demanding a resolution condemning the Israeli genocide in Gaza. Similar efforts are taking place across Virginia, including in Norfolk and Newport News.

Semitism, Islamophobia and anti-Palestinian and anti-Arab racism.

Since the Hamas attack of Oct. 7, more than 28,000 Palestinians, most of them women and children, have been killed by the Israeli attacks on Gaza, a small enclave that Israel has militarily blockaded for the past 16 years. More than 80% of Gaza's 2.3 million people have been displaced and, according to the United Nations, a quarter now face starvation.

Over the past two months, proponents of the Richmond resolution have offered powerful testimony, speaking from a diverse array of perspectives. In the January council meeting, speaking as an individual, Mads McElGunn, a proud and active

member of Congregation Beth Ahabah, spoke about how core Jewish values have informed their own pro-Palestinian actions and beliefs. Jasmine Cuellar, a student of Environmental Studies and Sociology at VCU, cited the long-lasting environmental impacts that Israel's bombing campaign will have, not just on Gaza, but the global community.

Despite the persistence of the community and the clear rising interest in the ceasefire resolution, there has been little feedback from Council members. Second District representative Katherine Jordan has responded to community requests by stating that council does not "have any purview on foreign conflicts."

However, during the Feb. 12 public comment period, VCU professor Mark Wood noted that Council has in fact previously used its position to petition the state and federal government. Wood urged council members to invoke this privilege again by supporting the proposed resolution.

Clearly, Richmond City Council members will not be able to continue to ignore the issue, as the community is determined to keep showing up and demanding acknowledgment.

As Palestinian-American healthcare worker Mariam Oweis stated to council, "You're politicians put into power by the people; LISTEN to the people."

The next general meeting of Richmond City Council is Monday, Feb. 26.

Community members have also turned out at city council meetings in Alexandria, Newport News and Norfolk to promote a resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza.

SAVE THE DATE: Richmond fundraiser for Palestinian refugees

On Saturday, March 16, Richmonders for Peace in Israel-Palestine will hold its 5th annual Interfaith Ramadan Potluck Iftar in support of ANERA, the American Near East Refugee Aid. (Time, place and registration details to be announced.)

ANERA provides aid and services to Palestinian refugees living in Gaza, the West Bank and Lebanon.

"This annual event is always a wonderful opportunity for Richmonders to come together as a community, to share a meal with old and new friends, and to contribute to a worthy cause. And this year especially, we hope that our contributions will help to give ANERA the resources needed to help alleviate the current overwhelming humanitarian crisis in Gaza, which includes severe shortages of food and medical supplies." - RPIP

This is a free event – just bring a dish to share. Of course, donations are encouraged.

For more information, email:
rpic.rva@gmail.com

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international & antiwar news

‘NO MORE AID TO ISRAEL!’

Interracial, interfaith delegation delivers Open Letter to Kaine & Warner

On Dec. 18, four Richmond-area social justice activists delivered copies of an Open Letter to the Richmond offices of Virginia Senators Tim Kaine and Mark Warner, calling on the two Democrats to oppose any more U.S. funding for Israel.

The letter was initiated by the Virginia Defenders and endorsed by more than three dozen organizations and individuals, Black, Latino

and white.

The activists were Saba Abed, President of the Ibn Russd Cultural Center; Ana Edwards, Founder and Chair of the Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project; Nancy Wein, Co-founder, Richonders for Peace in Israel-Palestine; and Phil Wilayto, Editor, The Virginia Defender.

Neither senator was in their office, but staff members accepted copies of the letter.

Both senators sent replies, thanking the four for sharing their thoughts, expressing their concern for the suffering of the Palestinian people - and clearly stating their intention to keep on funding Israel.

The activists are continuing to solicit co-signers to the letter - and will be back.

Defenders support calls to boycott all Israeli products

As the Defender goes to press, we learn that the Israeli military has now killed more than 29,000 people in Gaza. The majority are women and children - and babies. More than 80% of the population has been displaced. A quarter are actually starving.

And the president of Israel says he plans to order a “ground operation” in the southern Gazan city of Rafah, where more than a million people have taken refuge after Israel said they would be safe there.

Decent-minded people of every race and creed must do everything we can to support the Palestinian people in the midst of this genocide.

One thing we can do is not buy Israeli goods.

There are two organizations organizing boycotts of Israeli companies.

The **US Campaign for Palestinian Rights (uscpr.org)** is based in the U.S. It has several chapters in Virginia, including:

Plowshare Peace & Justice Center

Email: plowshare@plowshareva.org
Website: plowshareva.org

Richmonders for Peace in Israel-Palestine
Facebook: facebook.com/RPIP.RVA
Email: rpip.rva@gmail.com

William & Mary Students for Justice in Palestine
Facebook: facebook.com/sjpwpm

Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) (bdsmovement.net) is a Palestinian-led group that organizes in countries around the world, including the U.S.

The BDS website states: “The Palestinian BDS National Committee (BNC) calls for a boycott of Israeli and international companies that are complicit in violations of Palestinian rights. Virtually all Israeli companies are complicit to some degree in Israel’s system of occupation and apartheid. We focus our boycotts on a small number of companies and products for maximum impact. We focus on companies that play a clear and direct role

in Israel’s crimes and where we think we can have an impact.”

One company that BDS targets is **Sabra** hummus, a joint venture between PepsiCo and the Strauss Group, an Israeli food company that provides financial support to the Israeli army.

Sabra hummus is sold in many supermarkets in Virginia. The Defenders encourage all our readers and friends to not buy this product.

Every year, the U.S. government sends \$3.8 billion to Israel. This is the largest amount of U.S. foreign aid given to any country.

Virginia’s share is \$106,170,454. And this is what it could fund instead:

- 12,621 households with public housing for a year
- 36,941 children receiving free or low-cost healthcare
- 1,159 elementary school teachers
- 302,264 households with solar electricity produced for a year
- 2,809 students with their loan debt canceled



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May 2: International Day of Solidarity with the People of Odessa!



odessasolidaritycampaign.org

This May 2 will be the 10th anniversary of the day in Odessa, Ukraine, when a mob led by openly fascist organizations trapped scores of progressives in the House of Trade Unions and set it on fire, killing at least 42 people. Each year the Odessa Solidarity Campaign, a project of the Virginia Defenders, encourages people around the world to remember the massacre in some public way. Check out our website for more information and ideas.

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