



Dear Volusia Remembers Coalition,

We hope that you are beginning this new year in good health and with confidence in our work to learn from the past in order to heal the present. I'm writing this letter to update you on recent activities and to point you to some events coming up soon.

This month of February is especially valuable to all of us because of the many opportunities it offers us to continue reflecting on the history of White supremacy and racial terror nationally and in our own county of Volusia. It is a time to continue to celebrate the strength and resilience of Black people. We begin with a glance at past activities, but please see events coming up soon, including this Saturday's celebration, the Dr. Noble "Thin Man" Watts Jazzfest at the African American Museum in DeLand. Details are below, with other events of interest.

First, a VRC activity from the recent past that brings us great pride in Black leadership:

Many of us were honored to visit the marble **statue of Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune** during its stay at the News Journal Center. This inspiring work will soon be the first state-sponsored statue of a Black woman in the Statuary Hall of Congress in Washington DC, and the first work by a Hispanic sculptor. Here's a photo of Grady, Reggie, Kim, Rina, and Tom at one of our visits.



Dr. Bethune's lifelong devotion to human dignity, education of Black Americans to prepare them for their destiny, and opposition to white supremacy and the lynching of Black men like Daytona Beach taxi-driver Lee Snell can inspire all of us to make a difference today. Here, thanks to Jody Williams, is a link to a brief documentary (28 min.) prepared by the Florida Historical Society on Dr. Bethune's spirit and work: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQ-96o3vO30>

And a February 9th anniversary of courageous young Black leadership in our County. On this day in 1960, the first Florida student protest against segregated facilities took place in DeLand. Black students from Euclid High School (DeLand's Black school during segregation) sat down at the lunch counter at the F.W. Woolworth's store (now the DeLand Museum of Art) on North Woodland

Ave. and politely requested service. White servers put up a “Closed” sign and walked away. And soon, the students walked out, too, but the message of this new kind of non-violent action, the “sit-in,” in Greensboro NC, DeLand, and the next day, Gainesville, was clear: Jim Crow would no longer be tolerated. One of these brave young students, Joyce Cusack, who later went on to serve in the state legislature and as a Volusia County commissioner, was there on that February 9th. “We did it,” she has said, “because it just wasn’t right ...we were black, so we could not sit down and eat.” You can read more and see a picture of one of the five attempts the student group made to break segregation at Woolworth’s in DeLand by following this link to the West Volusia Historical Society webpage: https://www.delandhouse.com/?for=west_volusia_black_history.html

Now, inspired by Dr. Bethune and these 1960 high school students, let’s look at our recent accomplishments:

Thanks again to all of you who participated in our silent march and ceremony honoring Lee Bailey, a victim of lynching in DeLand in 1891. The **tree VRC we planted at the African American Museum of the Arts** honoring Mr. Bailey and all other victims of racial lynching, known and unknown, has settled in well, thanks to good care by Evan Keller, Reggie Williams, Mary Allen, Tom Robertson, and others. We are working on a plaque to install at the site in coming months.



a quilt square by Pamela Edwards

Thanks to support from one of our members, we have also contracted with Pamela Edwards, a member of the Hannibal Square quilt collective, to make **a fabric artwork honoring the EJI Soil Collection ceremonies** that have been so powerful in connecting us to the history of racial terror. Ms. Edwards provided a similar work which we used on the cover of our program for Lee Bailey. This artwork, picturing jars rising from earth to a living tree, will be displayed first at AAMA with the **Soil Jar honoring Mr. Bailey**. **Mr. Lee Snell’s Soil Jar** will next be offered to Bethune Cookman University for initial display.

Finally, some news about some **great events coming very soon:**

This **Saturday, February 12**, you are invited to attend the **Dr. Noble “Thin Man” Watts Jazz Fest**, co-sponsored by the African American Museum of the Arts, Inc., and MainStreet DeLand. Here’s a link where you can find out more information and buy tickets: <https://www.wattsjazzfest.com>.



The Jazzfest poster artwork by Don Nedobeck

This is a major fundraiser for AAMA, so you'll also be supporting an important cultural institution in our community. Be a cool cat and buy a ticket today! Buy a ticket for a friend! Thanks to our member Mary Allen, Director of AAMA, for her leadership on behalf of this great community event!

This is a celebration of music that is distinctively African American but has grown into a diverse and multi-cultural art form beloved around the globe (and in outer space!) Jazz is a conversation among players, often encouraging individual improvisation, exploring dissonance and virtuoso playing, but nonetheless moving toward harmony. Listening to performers at the "Thin Man" Jazz Fest reminds us of the gifts of diversity and collaboration. It reminds us of the powerful joy of living in diversity.

Sunday February 20 at 10:30, VCR members Felicia Benzo and Jody Williams will be speaking briefly on VCR's mission to the **First Unitarian Universalist Church of West Volusia**. A Q & A will follow. Thanks to our member Mara Whitridge for issuing an invitation for all of us to attend. For more on their month of services focused on racial justice, click this link: <https://www.uudeland.org>

On **February 25th and 26th**, you're invited to attend and support the annual **Orange City African American Heritage Festival**:



Organized by Everybody is Somebody, Inc., with leadership by our own Sharon Stafford, this annual festival is another great way to celebrate Black creativity and accomplishment. A call has gone out to ask for volunteers, participants, sponsors, and supporters. **VRC's Steering Committee will sponsor a table on Saturday to spread our message of facing up to the past in order to build a united future, and we welcome volunteers to help in speaking about our mission with folks who stop by.** Email me if you can **volunteer a couple of hours at our VRC booth** on Saturday the 26th. Email Sharon (sstafford0816@yahoo.com), as soon as possible, if you'd like to **donate as a "Unity in the Community" partner or register your organization for a booth**. For more, go to www.ocaahf.com

Look for an announcement of our first 2022 meeting soon. Beginning in March, VRC would like to focus on community conversations about racial justice and healing. We want to acknowledge the hard truths of the past, but our focus will be on building shared relationships to address injustice now. These **"hard history" conversations** are uncomfortable for some people, but as we have

learned in our organization, the truth can ultimately set us all free and make us all whole. It hurts to have to acknowledge injustice, but doing the work of justice can give us strength and peace.

Also look soon for discussions about **our next and final Soil Collection Ceremony**, where **we will honor two victims of racial terror lynching in 1896, Charles Harris and Anthony Johnson**. On September 17, 1896, Mr. Harris and Mr. Johnson were accused of assaulting their employer's young daughter. They were being transported by sheriff's deputies from Maytown, near the Brevard line, to the county jail in DeLand, when they were abducted and hanged by a White mob. Their bodies were left on display. This, we know, are facts about the lynching, but we'll work hard to tell the full human story of these men.

In the next phase of our work, reaching out more broadly in conversation with our communities, we want to think about the legacies of slavery, Jim Crow, and anti-Black racism in our own time. While nationally we see more nods to diversity and inclusion (or at least commercials!), we aren't seeing the same fullhearted and fully funded commitment to actions necessary to support equity and inclusive excellence.

Black and Brown people, understandably, tire of having to teach true history that they and their ancestors have lived. Some White people have begun to recognize how deeply White Supremacy is imbedded in our laws and social systems, but too many others don't want to confront the legacy of racial injustice. They prefer to think that all's fine now, and no White person should feel any responsibility, much less shame, about what happened in the past. In fact, **some Florida legislators hope to forbid teachers from talking about any "uncomfortable" topic**. Racism is, as we know, a hard topic to talk about, but that is what we have agreed to take on: **honest talk about hard truths**. If we don't honestly acknowledge past wrongs and work together to address injustice in the present that can be traced to that long racial past, we can never truly come together, heal, and move forward, united.

I'll close by asking for your continuing **thoughts and prayers for Sharon** on the loss of her son, Kevin C. Roberson (1978-2021, Beloved Father, Son, Friend), in an automobile accident in late November.

Do reach out if you have any thoughts about this letter or our work! My email: Grady.ballenger@stetson.edu. (All mistakes are mine. We'll look forward to Sharon's design in our next newsletter!). Onward, Grady, co-chair

Finally, here are words from Dr. Bethune's Last Will and Testament:

I leave you love. I leave you hope. I leave you the challenge of developing confidence in one another. I leave you a thirst for education. I leave you a respect for the use of power. I leave you faith. I leave you racial dignity. I leave you a desire to live harmoniously with your fellow men. I leave you finally a responsibility to our young people.

Can I get an amen?