

ALEXANDRIA COMMUNITY REMEMBRANCE PROJECT NEWSLETTER



May 2023 Edition

There is Hope for U.S. in Speaking Truth to Power

On Saturday, May 20, mere hours before the Alexandria City High School prom, a representative from the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), members of the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project, and leadership from the city and public schools, met a large group of smartly dressed students in Council Chambers at City Hall to honor and celebrate the ACHS students' accomplishments in the field of racial justice.

Since midnight on March 17, when the EJI Racial Justice Essay Contest closed, 10 Alexandria City High School students have been waiting to find out if they were among those who would win up to \$5000 in scholarships. EJI sent Project Assistant Deskyos Damte to Alexandria to make the announcement.

At the same event, City Council recognized ACHS students who have contributed their time and talents to ACRP and those who went on the October 2022 pilgrimage.

"We do not often have opportunities to celebrate, but today, we want to recognize Alexandria's youth who have been with us on this truth and reconciliation journey," said ACRP Co-Chair and Director of Historic Alexandria Gretchen Bulova as she opened the ceremony.

Bulova reminded the audience that Joseph McCoy was just 18 when he was lynched by Alexandrians and Benjamin Thomas was only 16 - neither had a chance at a future. She asked ACRP students to take advantage of their opportunities by continuing to carry the story of the injustices done to McCoy and Thomas' into the future.

Since the beginning of 2022, ACHS students have aided ACRP as we acknowledged and remembered the racial terror lynchings of Joseph McCoy and Benjamin Thomas. The program has grown under the leadership of ACHS teachers Leslie Jones and RaAlim Shabazz.

Superintendent of Schools Melanie Kay-Wyatt sent remarks read by School Board Vice Chair Jacinta Greene that recognized the connection between Alexandria's Remembrance Project and ACPS. Just as the Remembrance Project seeks to center the African American experience, ACPS 2025 Equity for All Strategic Plan places racial equity at the center of every decision made by the school division.

More than 40 students have lent their talents, time and hope to ACRP's Remembrance Ceremonies, Soil Collection, Pilgrimage, and the 50th MLK Celebration. Some appeared on panels, others produced an award

winning film, and several participated in the Office of Historic Alexandria's oral history project.

Mayor Justin Wilson commemorated the students' contributions with [a proclamation](#), deeming them Alexandria's "Remembrance Students."

"These students will continue to represent Alexandria and the Remembrance Project and honor the lives of Joseph McCoy and Benjamin Thomas after graduation, by telling the whole truth of our history and working to further the cause of equity and social justice for all people...so that our city may be an example for all," Mayor Wilson said as he read the proclamation to a crowd of 60 people.

Essay Contest Committee Co-Chairs Rose Dawson, Director of the Alexandria Library and Sarah Whelan, Social Studies Specialist for ACPS, recognized Alem Alem, Ayesha Anwar, Rena Cooper, Neema Dillard, Miracle Gross, Mahdia Hashemi, Zahra Hashimi, London Jones, Naeem Scott and Christle Wobil.

These students spent time researching some of the darkest aspects of our history to unearth truths that must be told and retold, interpreted and reinterpreted, to ensure we learn from them and create a better future. That is difficult to do, it requires vulnerability, it requires speaking truth to power.

EJI's Damtew took the podium next to announce the finalists. Third place went to Ayesha Anwar, a freshman at ACHS who aspires to be a doctor, for her essay about the fatal consequences caused by "[Racial Disparities in Healthcare](#)." Anwar moved to Alexandria during the last academic year and said she entered the contest because she wanted to use her writing skills to fight injustice.

Ayesha's journalism teacher, Kamilah Lawson, said "to speak with her, you would not readily assume she's a freshman in high school because she is wise beyond her years. I've witnessed Ayesha find her voice in class this year." And her AVID teacher, Rhea Butler said that Ayesha's "ability to express herself verbally and through written expression is beyond her years."

Anwar said winning felt surreal, but doing the research would have been worthwhile even if she hadn't snagged third place. "While I was writing my essay, I read about a lot of incidents where Black people were exposed to racism. It made me realize that even with us living freely today, racism still exists."

Anwar is grateful to EJI for making her "realize the importance of words."

Second place went to another ACHS freshmen, Rena Cooper, for [her essay that links historic racial terror lynchings to today's racialized murders](#). A native Alexandrian and a MacArthur alum, Cooper is studying Black History with Olivia White and aspires to be a professor of Jewish literature. White described Cooper as intelligent, diligent, and exceptionally hard working, "she has a deep desire to learn and a passion for understanding the complexities of history and how it has shaped us today." White said Cooper also has a "profound understanding" of racial injustice and has motivated others, including White, to "work towards a more inclusive and fairer world."

Cooper chose to write about lynching, which she characterized as "one of the most physically brutal acts of racism since the end of the civil war." The fact that it is still happening today, but is called something else and is rarely punished, is "unjustifiable and barbaric," she stated.

EJI awarded Cooper \$1500 that she has tucked away into a 529. Cooper, who plans to study social justice and global majority studies next year, "is sure to continue the fight against injustice," according to her mother, Babette Cooper.

When EJI's Damtew announced that ACHS Junior London Jones won first place and a \$2500 scholarship for [her essay "How Did We Get Here."](#) Jones had not been expecting it.

"I was confident in my essay, but it was still definitely a shock!" Jones said.

Jones moved to Alexandria from Washington, D.C. at the start of 10th grade. Described as a gifted artist by her teacher Sarah Kiyak, who said, "London's talent is palpable."

After attending the launch party for the EJI Contest, Jones, a member of the Black Student Union, said she was inspired to write about the historic and present plight of Black teenage boys accused of crimes they did not commit. She used the Central Park Five and Trayvon Martin to illustrate the problems with our justice system, our media and our national narratives that misportray Black boys and men.

ACRP asked Jones to read her essay. She later explained that she hadn't any public speaking experience. "I was nervous, but I was able to calm down and joke with everybody in the audience and deliver my speech. I was tearing up a bit through the speech. It was the first time I read it out loud to anybody, let alone a room full of people. But seeing everyone's reactions, and them being so moved by my essay, really solidified this success for me."

Jones wrote powerfully about an "American epidemic" that stems from "centuries of discrimination, stereotypes, brutality, and false media, African-American citizens are being killed at a staggering rate with no rhyme or reason, purely out of hate. It is ingrained into our community, into our media, into our government, and in every single aspect of our lives. But as dire as our situation is, I still believe that there is hope for the U.S. We need to educate everyone of all ages about Black history in depth, implement effective laws, and truly try to understand the systemic racism that is involved in our lives."

The audience stood and applauded at the conclusion of Jones reading. "She was a beautiful speaker," said Babette Cooper, adding, "She is a natural and we were in awe of her. I hope she will continue to speak up."

"I'm so lucky to have shared the stage with so many talented essayists," Rena Cooper said.

Jones hopes to attend an HBCU and major in the humanities before pursuing a master's degree on her way to a career directing films. Like the other winners, Jones said she is thankful to EJI for offering Alexandria's public school students this opportunity.

In closing, Audrey Davis, ACRP co-chair and Director of African American History, talked about the importance of the EJI Truth Telling Initiative. "For many years, Alexandria's Black community knew about the lynchings of Joseph McCoy and Benjamin Thomas, but EJI's Remembrance Project helped us make their story known to all Alexandrians. Perhaps most importantly, our students now know their stories and they know that McCoy and Thomas' history had to be resurrected in order to be acknowledged, honored and memorialized."

In parting, Davis told the students, "Keep speaking truth to power."

[Please read](#) the Remembrance Student Proclamation and winning essays, as well as view photographs from the May 20th award ceremony, on our website.

In The News

[Read the Out of the Attic article](#) that ran the week of the Remembrance for Joseph McCoy, "The Lynching of Joseph McCoy," Alexandria Times, April 20, 2023.

On April 22, 2023, ACRP held a public meeting in Remembrance of Joseph McCoy on "Transformational or Restorative Justice." A video of Thurgood Marshall Center for Civil Rights Managing Director Biliquis Wilkerson's remarks on the subject can be viewed [here](#).

On Sunday, April 23, Alexandria remembered the 1897 racial terror lynching of Joseph McCoy with a procession from the doors of the old police station at City Hall where he was kidnapped by a white mob to the corner of Cameron and Lee Streets where he was lynched. The remembrance concluded with a wreath-laying and [can be viewed here](#).

Upcoming Events

Conversations on Race and Belonging

Wednesday, May 24 7:00-8:30 p.m.

Alexandria Country Day School

2400 Russell Road Alexandria, VA 22301

Fee: Free

Register [Here](#)

On Wednesday night parents of K-12 students are invited to attend a 90 minute session exploring how to have tough conversations about race. Open Horizons, a family foundation dedicated to ensuring opportunity is available to all, is leading the conversation and will be holding a series of workshops in the fall for

Alexandria's parents called Conversations About Race and Belonging.

MLK Bench Unveiling Ceremony

June 10 - unconfirmed, information coming soon

George Washington Masonic National Memorial

Free

ACRP Steering Committee Member McArthur Myers and George Seghers, executive director of the George Washington Masonic Association have been working together to bring a bench dedicated to Martin Luther King Jr. Alexandria and place it on the grounds of the National Memorial. The bench will face King Street, Old Town and the Potomac River.

Footprints and Roots

Saturday, June 17, 2023

10 a.m. -3 p.m.

Virtual Meeting, register by calling Carolyn Rowe (301) 292-2751 or Jane Thomas (301)292-1207 or

[On the website and click RSVP.](#)

Free

The annual Juneteenth Seminar is sponsored by the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society, Inc. Prince George's County, Maryland Chapter, and the Chairman of the Prince George's County Planning Board Peter A. Shapiro. The Key Note Address: Freedom Ain't Free: Juneteenth and the Continuation of Slavery After Emancipation Day, will be delivered by Dr. James Thomas Jones III. Learn more about the event at the website.

Upcoming Committee Meetings

Planning Committee for Benjamin Thomas Remembrance Event will meet on the following dates and times in person at the Lloyd House: *June 7 (3pm to 4pm), July 11 (1pm to 2pm), August 3 (3pm to 4pm)*

Alexandria Community Remembrance Marker Committee, will meet *Thursday, May 25, 7 p.m.* on Zoom, [Register here.](#)

Alexandria Community Remembrance Steering Committee will meet *Tuesday, Aug. 1, 2023, 5 p.m.* in-person at Alexandria Black History Museum.

Committee Meetings

The **Alexandria Community Remembrance Marker Committee** (formerly soil and marker) met virtually on Thursday, April 20, at 7 p.m to discuss and consider an EJI Historic Marker. At the meeting the possibility of erecting a new Benjamin Thomas marker at the site of the old jail house was raised and a subcommittee formed to consider it and report back to the full committee at the next meeting.

Alexandria Community Remembrance Steering Committee met on May 16, 2023 and discussed the EJI Essay Contest Award event, a new Benjamin Thomas marker, upcoming events through the fall, a potential workshop series and ongoing plans for an endowment for a scholarship in the names of McCoy and Thomas. [View the meeting notes here.](#)

[Joseph McCoy Benjamin Thomas.](#)

[For more information](#)

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ACRP@alexandriava.gov

The Alexandria Community Remembrance Project (ACRP) is a city-wide initiative dedicated to helping Alexandria understand its history of racial terror hate crimes and to work toward creating a welcoming

community bound by equity and inclusion.

**Office of Historic Alexandria
City of Alexandria, Virginia**



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