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# **Building a bigger table for relationship building**

By **LAURA D. HILL**  
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Darrell Hairston (L) and Will Hairston were the featured speakers at the second annual Journey to Racial Healing on June 24, 2023. (Courtesy of Laura D. Hill)

**“The truth sets you free. The lie keeps you in bondage.”**

Decades ago, I heard a minister utter these words. I pondered them in my heart as I listened to Darrell and Will Hairston, who visited Williamsburg last Saturday to share truths about their family history.

In case you missed the second annual Journey to Racial Healing ceremony held at the Stryker Center last week, imagine this: You are at work and pick up your company directory. As you skim the listings, you come across a co-worker with the same last name as yours. You decide to give him a call and invite him to lunch. So begins a brotherhood that is still going strong nearly 30 years later.

That's the short version of Darrell and Will Hairston's story. The long version includes their discovery that they are linked descendants — connected to one another through American slavery.

The Hairston family is considered the largest family in America. It encompasses thousands of people throughout the U.S., both Black and white, who descend from one of the South's wealthiest slave-owning families. During the 19th century their 40 plantations spread from Virginia to Mississippi, where more than 10,000 people, including Darrell's ancestors, were enslaved. Darrell grew up in Martinsville, a small industrial community that is home to NASCAR's Martinsville Speedway. During his childhood, the Hairston name was very common. "I remembered the telephone book containing 2 1/2 pages of Hairstons," Darrell said. "I knew white Hairstons existed, but they had moved away to distance themselves. I never met any white Hairstons," he added.

At least, not until that momentous day in 1994.

After graduating from Radford University where he earned a bachelor's degree in psychology with minors in sociology and mathematics, Darrell accepted a position in the Multicultural Affairs Office at Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg.

Will's first encounter with the Black side of the Hairston family had come more than a decade earlier, when he was 18 years old. His father was invited to speak at the Black Hairston clan family reunion in Washington, D.C. "I was uncomfortable about being the only whites in a room of 800

Black people who descended from people my ancestors enslaved,” Will admitted. “Although they called everyone ‘cuz’ and tried to make us feel welcome, I felt angst and guilt.” Sitting with that discomfort inspired Will to embrace opportunities to form meaningful relationships with Black people. As a college student he took advantage of an opportunity to visit Kenya. After graduating from Virginia Tech with bachelor degrees in agricultural economics and horticulture, he went to work at EMU.

When the phone rang and Will invited him to lunch, Darrell hesitated to accept the offer. “Meeting with Will required me to look at the past and the pain,” he said. Growing up, Darrell had watched Alex Haley’s Emmy award-winning mini-series “Roots.” The horrific living conditions, and lack of respect and freedoms, caused Darrell to ponder what his great-great grandparents had endured.

Nevertheless, he accepted the offer and the meetings continued. Darrell began to gain a level of comfort with Will and their relationship blossomed. “I was taken aback by his heart for healing and consistency.” Darrell said, as they began to have in depth conversations about their shared history. This eventually led to sharing their story during a chapel service at EMU.

Darrell would go on to earn his master’s and educational specialist degrees in counseling from James Madison University. He currently works at North Carolina A&T State University as the academic program coordinator in the Honors College, where he advises and teaches freshmen studies courses, recruits and prepares students for graduate and professional school.

In 2006, Will co-founded Coming to the Table, a national racial reconciliation organization with more than 50 chapters nationwide. I am honored to lead the Historic Triangle chapter.

Darrell and Will’s relationship shows that racial healing and reconciliation are possible when we prioritize truth telling over feeling uncomfortable learning painful truths about our family history. I am thankful that they sought racial healing and that their journey brought them to

Williamsburg. When we come together to build a more truthful and welcoming community, we all win!

Laura D. Hill is the founder and director of Coming to the Table-Historic Triangle, a program of the Virginia Racial Healing Institute. Learn more about her work at [Comingtothetable-historic triangle.org](http://Comingtothetable-historic-triangle.org).