

Fulfilling a revolutionary idea



Virginia Racial Healing Institute board members Fred Liggin, Laura Hill, Kimberley Hundley and Rebecca Parsons stand with speakers Karen Williams Gooden, second from left, and Prinny Anderson, second from right, at the Fifth Annual Journey to Racial Healing Ceremony. Virginia Racial Healing Institute

Nearly 100 people gathered at the Stryker Center in Williamsburg recently for the fifth annual Journey to Racial Healing Ceremony presented by the Virginia Racial Healing Institute. This VA250 and Juneteenth event was co-sponsored by Sentara Health, Let Freedom Ring Foundation, Williamsburg Christian Church, Greater Williamsburg Movement and St. Martin's Episcopal Church and featured powerful presentations by Karen Williams Gooden and Prinny Anderson, descendants of Thomas Jefferson, third president of the U.S. and primary author of the Declaration of Independence.

Two hundred and fifty years ago, a revolutionary idea was born when Jefferson wrote that all people are created equal, endowed with unalienable rights — life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness — and that government only exists by the consent of the governed.

However, Jefferson penned those fateful words while enslaving more than 100 people, including a young girl named Sally Hemings. Furthermore, the “consent of the governed” excluded more than 500,000 people who were enslaved throughout the 13 colonies.

These truths were tackled head-on by the two speakers — one Black, one white — who share bloodlines with Jefferson, his wife Martha and Hemings.

Gooden, an accomplished attorney, public administrator, historian and author whose work reflects a lifelong commitment to public service and the preservation of African American history, shared a PowerPoint presentation based on her new book, “They Came ‘Cross Salt Water: Faith of Our Mothers and Fathers — A History of an African American Family,” that methodically retraced her family history back eight generations.

“As a descendant of Thomas Jefferson and an enslaved African, I approach this 250th anniversary neither with blind celebration nor with despair. But with truthfulness to the commitment to the unfinished work of American democracy. Thus we cannot speak of history without confronting the central contradiction at the heart of the American founding,” she said.

In 2006, Anderson was a founding member of Coming to the Table, a national racial reconciliation organization with more than 40 chapters nationwide. Recently she became a founding member of the International Federation of the Descendants of Enslavers and the Enslaved, which launched in April 2026 in Nantes, France.

“Facing up to my family’s ties to slavery changed the direction of my life.” she began. “There was involvement with the institution of chattel slavery in all my family lines, and it was never discussed. ... As I grew up I began to learn about slavery. One summer after graduating from college when I was helping my mother sort through history books, papers and photos that had piled up in her attic I read and saw evidence that my mother’s ancestors had enslaved people.”

Gooden and Anderson’s participation in the Journey to Racial Healing Ceremony is the living blueprint for the future. While Jefferson wrote the revolutionary idea, his descendants and courageous Americans today are on a journey toward healing and repairing the structural damage to educational, financial, health care, governmental and criminal justice systems that are legacies of slavery.

Admittedly there has been progress. However, the racial disparities that still exist in wealth, health, policing and educational and employment opportunities are the glaring evidence that America has yet to live up to the ideals of equality and unalienable rights for all Americans.

So, how do we transform a 250-year-old national promise into reality?

First, by recognizing that racial healing is the necessary ingredient for the fulfillment of Jefferson’s revolutionary idea. Secondly, by understanding that healing is facilitated by having dedicated and safe places where diverse people can come together to engage in truth-telling and build authentic relationships. Third, by earmarking resources — time, money and personnel — to address the harm done by centuries of racial injustices.

By committing to truth-telling, relationship building and restoration today, we bridge the historic chasm between America’s founding words and its actual practices.

When we come together to build more truthful and just communities, we all win!

Laura D. Hill is the executive director of the Virginia Racial Healing Institute, which manages Coming to the Table-Historic Triangle. Learn more about her work at varacialhealinginstitute.org.