

Building a bigger table: We all win when we come together

By Laura D. Hill
Virginia Gazette

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This is the first article for my new column, “Building A Bigger Table.”

Now, you may be thinking, that’s an odd name for a column. What does it mean? Glad you asked.

When I think of building a bigger table, I reflect on Thanksgiving dinners during my childhood. In anticipation of being joined by extended family and friends, my dad would add a leaf to the dining room table to create more space. When our guests arrived, we sat down together to enjoy

a mouthwatering Butterball turkey and Smithfield ham, along with southern soul food mixed with lively discussions.

In the 1970s, there were no cell phones or hand-held electronic gadgets competing for our attention. Everyone was present and engaged in mostly pleasant conversations. Yet, there were times when the conversations turned to politics, and adult voices grew louder and contentious.

One conversation that I fondly remember was a discussion about president Richard Nixon's Watergate scandal. I was baffled when I heard the term "watergate." My 8-year-old mind kept trying to picture a gate made out of water.

Regardless of the conversation topics, we left the table satisfied. Our bulging stomachs were full; we had spent quality time face-to-face with loved ones; we gained a better understanding of one another's views and we looked forward to the next opportunity to come together.

"Building a Bigger Table" is dedicated to creating space for more voices and issues impacting the Historic Triangle community. As the leader of Coming to the Table-Historic Triangle, I design community programs to bring diverse people together to have civil conversations about race. This column is my way of extending our table.

We can all agree that the past couple of years have been challenging times. Americans have navigated national, political and social unrest that threatened the unity and democracy of our nation, while, at the same time, endured a global pandemic that claimed the lives of nearly 1 million of our fellow Americans.

As the light at the end of the coronavirus tunnel comes into view, many are longing to get back to "normal." However, the pandemic uncovered racial disparities in health care, education, housing and employment that clearly demonstrated that normal was not working for millions of people. We now have an opportunity to redefine what "normal" becomes, not only for ourselves but for future generations.

Some people are driven by fear to build walls that further divide us. I challenge you to build a bigger table!

You see, each of us has the ability to make changes in our thinking and behavior that could propel the Historic Triangle to become a more racially just and equitable community. The starting point is making space for voices that have been intentionally left out. These are the marginalized voices that Dr. Martin Luther King was referring to when he said, "a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it America has failed to hear? ... It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met."

Through my column, I am inviting you to take your seat at the table. As you read, I hope that three things will occur. One, you will become motivated to step out of your comfort zone; two, you will be inspired to live in solidarity with community members who are suffering and three, you will become eager to learn more.

When we come together to create more inclusive and welcoming spaces, we all win!

Laura D. Hill is the founder and director of Coming to the Table-Historic Triangle, the local chapter of a national racial reconciliation organization. Learn more about her work at [Comingtothetable-historic triangle.org](http://Comingtothetable-historic-triangle.org).

Building a bigger table at William & Mary

By Laura D. Hill
Virginia Gazette

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A rendering of William & Mary's Hearth: Memorial to the Enslaved. Courtesy of Baskervill (HANDOUT)

Today marks the dedication of the College of William & Mary's Hearth: Memorial to the Enslaved. This is an important milestone in the college's 329-year history, especially in today's climate. Lately, there has been an alarming increase in legislation to stop teaching about America's racial history.

Since 2009, William & Mary has been uncovering its nearly 170-year history of slavery. But it wasn't always this way.

I first toured the sprawling campus in fall 1985 while preparing to submit my admission application. I do not recall hearing anything about slavery, despite the fact that there was a provision for slavery in the college's 1693 royal charter and some of the Africans that William & Mary enslaved built parts of the campus.

I was perplexed. How could the oldest college in the south and second oldest college in the nation not have ties to slavery? Moreover, what did this obvious omission say about its commitment to excellence?



Fast forward to 2009.

I was living in Greater Williamsburg with my husband and two school-aged children, when I learned that William & Mary's Board of Visitors had acknowledged its slavery history, which spanned more than half the number of years of its existence.

My mouth dropped! This represented a 360-degree turn; one I am proud that William & Mary's leadership chose to make. It would take Harvard University, America's oldest college, another 13 years to follow their lead.

Last week Harvard's president, Lawrence Bacow, acknowledged Harvard's nearly 150-year history of slavery dating back to its founding in 1636. In an effort to make amends, Harvard is earmarking \$100 million to create a reparations fund. This decision comes one year after the Virginia General Assembly passed a law requiring five Virginia public colleges to provide reparations to descendants of people the colleges enslaved.

At both William & Mary and Harvard, African American women are leading their institutions along paths of truth-telling and reparative acts. Jody Lynn Allen is the director of the Lemon Project, William & Mary's reconciliation initiative, while historian Tomiko Brown-Nagin chaired the newly released report, "Harvard & the Legacy of Slavery."

When the community gathers to celebrate the dedication of William & Mary's memorial, I will be nearly 3,000 miles away. For the past three days I have been in Sacramento, California, attending a Coming to the Table leadership retreat. As I prepare to board the flight to go home, thoughts about missing this history-making event have already been tossing around in my mind.

Will the unveiling of *Hearth: Memorial to the Enslaved* be another "kumbaya moment?" Will people gather to reflect on racial injustices, shake their heads, walk away and do nothing? Or will they embrace the "journey of reconciliation" that embodies the mission of William & Mary's Lemon Project?

The transforming journey of reconciliation begins with the decision to build a bigger table. It involves offering people who don't look like you a seat at the table. Along the way, it calls for being open to re-educating yourself about America's history, which is marked by racial injustices. It ends with making and fulfilling tangible commitments to "do something" to help those who are still tasting the bitter fruit of disenfranchisement, based on the color of their skin.

Former South African president and civil rights icon Nelson Mandela rightly said, "It is in your hands to make a difference."

When I return home I will be refreshed and ready to create more opportunities for civil discussions and programs aimed at equipping people to experience racial healing and reconciliation. I hope to see you at the “Table!”

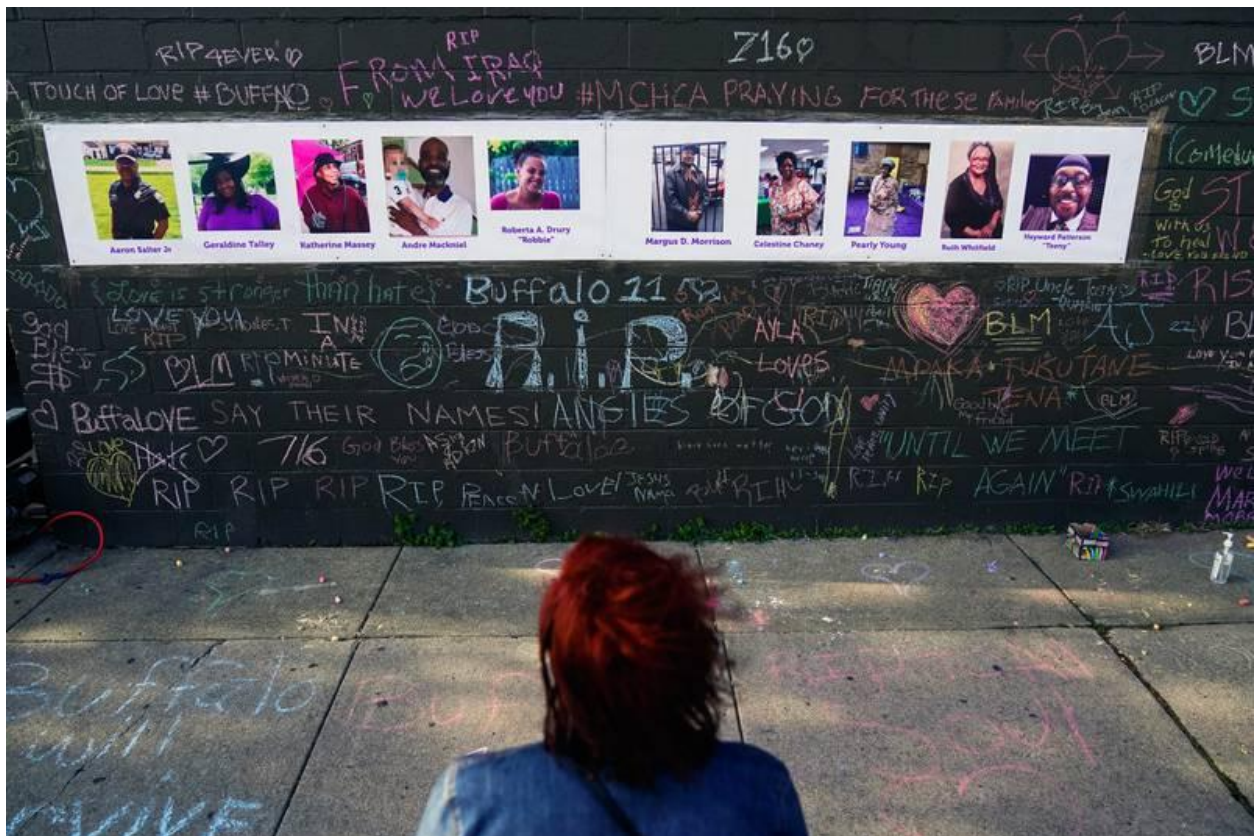
When we come together to create a more just and welcoming community, we all win!

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Building a Bigger Table: Becoming catalysts for change

By Laura D. Hill
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A person visits a makeshift memorial near the scene of Saturday's shooting at a supermarket, in Buffalo. A series of killings of Black Americans wrought a heavy emotional and mental toll on Black communities that have already been burdened and traumatized by centuries of oppressive systems and racist practices. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke, File) (Matt Rourke/AP)

Last Saturday I attended a memorial service held on the steps of historic First Baptist Church in Williamsburg. Holding back tears, I listened as community

leaders paid tribute to 10 victims who were killed while shopping at a grocery store in Buffalo, New York.

They were ordinary people, leading ordinary lives — a grandmother, a sister, a son, a father, a cousin, a daughter and a mom. The common denominator was they went shopping on May 14th at their neighborhood grocery store and they had brown skin.

As the church bell rang out 10 times in honor of each person, I looked around and noticed downcast faces in the diverse crowd of about 40 people who were on hand.

I had mixed feelings. On one hand I was proud that the community stood in solidarity with a nation mourning after another hate-fueled tragedy. On the other hand, I found myself wondering, “How can Americans respond to racial violence with mourning, yet not take concrete steps to help prevent it?”

After all, this was not an isolated incident. Nearly seven years ago, 21-year-old Dylan Roof, an admitted white supremacist, walked into a historic Black church in South Carolina and murdered nine members who were attending a Bible study. The nation mourned. President Obama visited Charleston to offer condolences, as family members buried their loved ones and sought to rebuild lives torn apart by racial trauma.

Yet, racial violence reared its head again. In October 2018, there was a mass shooting at Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh where 11 Jewish people were killed. A year later, 29 Hispanic and Black lives were cut short after shooting sprees in Dayton, Ohio and El Paso, Texas. Then last year, six Asian women in greater Atlanta were hate crime victims.

That's 55 people gunned down while shopping for groceries, attending religious services, walking down the street and visiting a spa. Add in the hundreds of survivors, recovering from gunshot and/or emotional wounds, and a fuller picture emerges of a national crisis. According to FBI 2020 statistics, 61.9% of hate crime victims were targeted because of their race, ethnicity or ancestry.

How do we become catalysts for change, as our nation groans under the heavy weight of racial violence?

First, resist the urge to remain silent or neutral. This is the wide path that many people find themselves on due to fear, indifference or the misguided notion of keeping peace. Living in denial won't make this go away.

Human rights activist Bishop Desmond Tutu warned, "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor."

Next, support legislation to restrict the purchase of assault weapons. Surely, enabling people to walk around with loaded assault rifles to murder innocent adults and children was not what the framers of the Second Amendment had in mind.

Next, adopt the HGTV mantra — start at home. Educate yourself and family about racism and the many forms of racial hatred that it has spawned. Then build a bigger table by intentionally looking for opportunities to enjoy authentic relationships with people who don't look like you.

Next, build a bigger table in your workplace and community by hosting discussions about racial issues. Make space at the table for those who have experienced harm and listen to their truths. Just in case you're feeling a little apprehensive, Coming to the Table-Historic Triangle can provide experienced facilitators to tactfully guide you through this process.

Finally, support local organizations that are advocating for racial justice and equity, such as the Village Initiative for Equity in Education, NAACP, Williamsburg Action and the WJCC Coalition for Social Justice.

When we come together to create a more responsible community, we all win!

Laura D. Hill is the founder and director of Coming to the Table-Historic Triangle, the local chapter of a national racial reconciliation organization. Learn more about her work at Comingtothetable-historictriangle.org.

Building a Bigger Table at Juneteenth

By Laura D. Hill
Virginia Gazette

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The Juneteenth flag commemorates the day that slavery ended in the U.S. (AP Photo/Nati Harnik) (Nati Harnik/AP)

Last June, the signing of the Juneteenth National Independence Day Act made June 19th a national federal holiday. While Juneteenth has been celebrated by African Americans for more than 150 years, it was once one of America's best-kept secrets.

The story of Juneteenth began 2½ years after President Lincoln signed the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, liberating about 4 million enslaved Americans. Some Texas enslavers resisted complying with the executive order. On June 19, 1865, 2,000 Union troops arrived in Galveston Bay, Texas, to enforce compliance. A handful of Texas communities continued to observe June 19th as America's true "Independence Day," dubbing it "Juneteenth." Gradually the celebration began to pick up steam.

Fast forward to 2016.

Opal Lee, a 90 year-old retired Texas teacher, brought attention to the need for a national Juneteenth celebration by walking 1,400 miles from Fort Worth to Washington, D.C., and momentum grew! But it was the outcry in response to former president Donald Trump's plans to hold a campaign rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma, on June 19, 2020, that brought Juneteenth into the national spotlight. When Trump agreed to reschedule the rally, millions of people started asking, "What's Juneteenth?"

Juneteenth is a time to celebrate both freedom from America's oppressive 200-year-old slave laws and the hope that America will live up to its pledge of liberty and justice for all.

While the struggle to ensure that Americans are free to enjoy their constitutional rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness still lives on, I am encouraged by the future implications of a local initiative, the Juneteenth Community Consortium.

Formed in early 2022, this group of leaders of Greater Williamsburg area organizations (<https://www.juneteenthcc.org/>) is transforming our Juneteenth celebrations. The primary goals are to educate, commemorate and celebrate Juneteenth, as well as coordinate celebrations and create a website to make people aware of scheduled events.

Upon joining the consortium, I was struck by how our diverse group exemplified key principles of Building a Bigger Table — welcoming, inclusive and working together for the good of the community. I found myself thinking,

“What would happen if this spirit of collaboration spilled over into the community and helped to transform our health care, legal, educational, housing and policing systems?”

Imagine what living in the Historic Triangle would look like if we took to heart the words of business magnate Henry Ford who said, “Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success.”

Today we can gather to partake of the fruit of the consortium and its members’ labor — a wide variety of Juneteenth events, including an eye-catching art exhibit at the Stryker Building, a Saturday morning motor parade and free admission to programming at Colonial Williamsburg.

On Sunday, there will be an Interfaith religious service, a celebration at the Triangle, once the business hub of the Black community, and screenings of the educational documentaries “History Half Told is Untold” and “Only Us” at historic First Baptist Church.

Monday, June 20th — the “official” holiday observance — will be relatively low key. Federal and state offices will be closed, giving people a chance to rest from a weekend chock full of stimulating events.

On Tuesday, June 21st, community members are invited to attend a virtual Juneteenth “After Party” sponsored by Coming to the Table-Historic Triangle. This is an opportunity to come together for civil discussions about what Juneteenth 2022 meant and to discover new ways to improve the 2023 celebration and our community.

I hope to see you at the “Table”!

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Building a Bigger Table: Working toward equality for all

By Laura D. Hill
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(Charles Haire // Shutterstock)

Millions of Americans are looking forward to a three-day weekend to celebrate the 4th of July. Two weeks ago we celebrated Juneteenth, a national holiday recognizing enslaved Americans' freedom from oppressive slave laws. Now, we recognize the brave signers of the Declaration of Independence and the pursuit of freedom.

Americans have several types of freedoms. The Bill of Rights outlines our freedoms of speech, religion, keeping and bearing arms, press, assembly, and the right to petition the government. But, with freedom comes responsibility.

For example, the Second Amendment gives Americans the right to bear arms. Yet, we understand that the recent mass shooting of 19 school children and two teachers in Uvalde, Texas, was not what the framers of the Bill of Rights had in mind.

The First Amendment grants freedom of assembly, which allows for peaceful gatherings and protests. The January 6th violent attack on the U.S. Capitol that resulted in multiple deaths and injuries and the arrest of more than 700 people was not what the framers of the Bill of Rights had in mind.

Exercising freedom responsibly means that we use our freedoms as an opportunity to reach out to help ourselves and to help others. Actress Audrey Hepburn once said, “you have two hands, one for helping yourself, the other for helping others.”

Opportunities to help others abound! In fact, this is the purpose of building bigger tables. By making space for those who have been historically disenfranchised, you are using your freedoms to benefit others. Furthermore, you are ensuring that all people have opportunities to live and work in communities where they are seen and their voices are heard.

Inherent in freedom is power, which must be exercised responsibly too. The signers of the Declaration of Independence understood the power that came with being free of Great Britain and King George III’s tyranny. By becoming “free and independent states” they could self-govern, thereby controlling their own lives and destinies.

The problem was they failed to use their power to benefit enslaved Americans, who were in bondage due to legalized slavery, which existed in all 13 colonies.

When asked to speak at a 1852 Independence Day celebration in Rochester, New York, abolitionist Frederick Douglass highlighted this dilemma by asking,

“What to the American slave is the 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim.”

Our freedoms are interconnected. In his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, civil rights icon Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. reminded us to live in solidarity with one another. King said, "No one is free until we are all free." Notably, the first freedom fighter and casualty of the American Revolution was Crispus Attucks, a man of African and Native American (Wampanoag) ancestry, who was killed in 1770 during the Boston Massacre.

Today, millions of Americans believe their freedoms are on the chopping block and our democracy is under attack. Voting rights are the cornerstone of a representative democracy. Efforts to strengthen and restore provisions of the 1965 Voting Rights Act stalled in Congress in 2021 and the Freedom to Vote Act failed to get the required votes needed in January 2022. Meanwhile, state legislatures across the nation enacted laws to make access to voting more restrictive.

What better time to "come to the table" to work towards realizing the self-evident truth that all are created equal and endowed with unalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

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