

THE VIRGINIA GAZETTE

Building a bigger table for justice and democracy

By Laura D. Hill
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Janice Canaday spoke at a conversation series by William & Mary's Community Engagement Office called "The Daily Work of Justice." Courtesy of Laura D. Hill

Bringing diverse people together to engage in dialogue is my livelihood and passion!

So you can imagine the joy I felt when I learned that William & Mary's Community Engagement Office had planned "The Daily Work of Justice," a conversation series that invites people to share their lived experience, as a way of creating opportunities for others to engage.

Recently, I joined more than 75 people from all walks of life — community leaders, students and residents — who gathered at William & Mary's Sadler's Center for dialogue about the intersectionality of justice and democracy.

Janice Canaday, supervisor of Colonial Williamsburg's Peyton Randolph House, set the tone for the evening by kicking off the event with ground rules, which included speaking from lived experiences, listening well and respecting silence as people take time to reflect upon the conversations.

She also shared insights about what democracy looks like to her.

"It's about creating an environment where people can live and be true to themselves without backlash," she began.

"A system of democracy and justice should be for everyone and protect everyone. At 65 years old, I am still seeking democracy."

The takeaway was clear: Democracy and justice are joined at the hip. How can you fully experience one without the other? I tossed these thoughts around in my mind while seated at a table with six other people and facilitator Melody Porter, who was leading a lively discussion.

In the past couple of years, we have witnessed unprecedented attacks on democracy culminating in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol. On Nov. 2, 2022, President Joe Biden addressed this grave issue and admonished Americans to stand up for our democracy. He said that "recent polls have shown that an overwhelming majority of Americans believe our democracy is at risk, that our democracy is under threat."

Threats on democracy impact justice because a democracy is built upon justice systems organized at all levels — federal, state and local — for the good of the people and by the people.

It's also important to note that there is a difference between legal systems and justice systems. Legal systems focus on interpreting and enforcing

laws, whether the law is just or not. For example, Jim Crow laws legalized racial segregation in the South for more than 60 years, resulting in segregated public schools, buildings and neighborhoods, which gave rise to separate but unequal facilities, redlining and disenfranchisement.

However, justice systems focus on equality and morality. There has never been a more critical time for democracy and justice than right now. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s words still ring true:

“Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God’s children.”

I left the meeting asking myself, “How can we ensure that our communities reflect democracy and justice?”

The first step is to continue to “come to the table” to both organize and participate in honest discussions about issues impacting our communities.

Secondly, make space at the table for the most vulnerable people in the community and those who have been historically marginalized.

Third, partner with people and organizations that are taking collective action to dismantle systems that perpetuate injustices and oppression.

When we come together to build a more just 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-historictriangle.org.