



Otis Clark, 105; Dr. Olivia Hooker, 94; and Wess Young, 92, take some time out during a visit to the Inkwell Beach on Martha's Vineyard in 2007. L.A. lawyer Reggie Turner chronicled the race riot survivors' quest for justice for a new documentary.

HISTORY REVISITED

A new documentary chronicling Tulsa race riot survivors' quest for justice has spurred a renewed dedication to reconciliation in Tulsa. BY JOY JENKINS

Reggie Turner felt an instant connection with these people, a commitment that deepened over five years into almost an extended family.

Which is a surprise considering that these people were more than 80 or 90 years old, lived in a city thousands of miles from his own hometown and experienced what some say was the worst race riot in history.

But when Turner first met them in 2003, he was struck by their experiences, their personalities, their longing for nothing more than for their stories to become part of the historical record.

But there was something else that bonded them — they had all experienced racism so extreme that it changed their lives forever.

Growing up in East Palo Alto, Calif., in the 1950s and '60s, Turner was a product of segregation. His neighbors and friends had built their own all-black community, with a black doctor, a black dentist and black-owned businesses. But with these amenities also came crime and drugs, and "juke joints" dotted some corners.

In retrospect, Turner realized his community actually shared similarities with early 20th century Greenwood, an area in

Tulsa dubbed "Black Wall Street" because of the dozens of black-owned and operated businesses, as well as a library, postal substation, hospital and two newspapers that had sprung up there as a result of forced segregation.

When busing began in the late 1960s, Turner took the opportunity to attend Menlo-Atherton High School, at the time one of the top high schools in the country. What he experienced there shocked him — demonstrations by black students frustrated that no bus would take them to school, race riots, violence, broken windows, bomb threats.

Then, when Turner began attending nearby Stanford University, he encountered more intolerance. Although Turner was a student council president, athletic letterman and top student, white students did not consider him and the other black students to be good enough because of their race.

It was not until 30 years later that Turner met a group of people with a shared experience, people who also had experienced racism first-hand.

"God delivered this opportunity to me, and it's been the best thing I've done," he says.

MEN ON A MISSION

This opportunity came in the form of a documentary entitled "Before They Die." An entertainment lawyer, Turner had never intended to enter the film business. But that all changed when his best friend Charles Ogletree, a law professor, called him while visiting Tulsa to receive an award for a book he had written.

While here, Ogletree had met a group of seniors whom he later learned were survivors of the Tulsa race riot, an event he never even knew existed. Turner was equally unaware of the riot. A few months and conversations later, Ogletree, along with a "dream team" of lawyers including the late Johnnie Cochran, was set to defend the group of race riot survivors. Turner, with help from angel investors and other collaborators, had signed on to chronicle their journey through the court system to the Supreme Court and eventually to the U.S. Congress.

Turner says he was immediately struck by the group — from the moment then-100-year-old riot survivor Otis Clark drove himself to their first meeting, topping a curb along the way.

"There was nothing special, nothing about them to separate them from my

ancestors, my grandparents,” Turner says. “They were common people, but they had something unique about them as a result of their mutual experience ... I just thought it was a wonderful story that needed to be told, and I just thought they had been done such an injustice that to not tell their story only furthered that.”

Eventually, Turner’s motive moved beyond merely telling their story. As he realized that the courts were not going to issue a legal mandate to rectify the situation, and that the process of introducing a bill would take longer than many of the survivors had left, he adopted a new mission.

“I became less concerned about the law and became completely consumed by the people and the cause,” he says.

So consumed that he vowed to help the survivors receive some financial compensation to make the remainder of their lives, and the lives of their descendants, easier.

“If these folks had this, they could make determinations of how to better their own lives, and I would just like for them to have that option,” Turner says.

However, when the Californian asked the survivors what they hoped to receive as a result of the film, most did not request checks; they simply wanted their story to reach a broader audience.

DIVERSE RESPONSES

So far, that hasn’t been difficult. Turner has received enthusiastic responses where he has already screened “Before They Die” — including the National Reparations Convention in Chicago and Harvard Law School, where Supreme Court Justice **Stephen Breyer** admitted to Turner that the film had brought him to tears.

The response in Tulsa, though, was somewhat different. Although Turner says he generally felt comfortable in Tulsa and was never treated disrespectfully, he could not get Tulsa officials, except for the city attorney, to respond to his requests to appear in the film.

And after a screening of the documentary May 31 during events tied to the 87th anniversary of the race riot, he says he viewed many negative comments posted in response to the riot and to any efforts to aid riot survivors.

“There is still bitterness here (in Tulsa),” he says. “There is still hatred here. There’s still denial here. There’s still racism here.”

However, an early-August screening of the film with selected stakeholders in the



Top left, Otis Clark and Charles Ogletree, Harvard law professor and lead counsel for the race riot survivors, with Chicago City Alderman Dorothy Tillman on the steps of the Supreme Court in March 2005. Top right, cameraman Bob Lott and “Before They Die” director Reggie Turner at the Inkwell Beach on Martha’s Vineyard. Above, Eddie Faye Gates, Tulsa historian and riot commissioner; Otis Clark; Wess Young; and Sen. Barack Obama walk the halls of Congress in March 2005.

Photos courtesy of Reggie Turner.

Tulsa community rekindled Turner’s hope that some good could come as a result of the film. He was particularly struck by the reaction of Mayor **Kathy Taylor**, who issued a personal apology and an apology on behalf of the city to Tulsa and riot survivor **Wess Young**, who was in the audience.

Turner says this response is a step in the right direction.

“It didn’t happen on our watch, it didn’t happen on anyone’s watch down there (in Tulsa), no one had a hand in doing it, but once you know this story, the only way to cleanse your hands of any paint is to take a step forward ... and extend your hand to helping people,” he says.

That’s exactly what a few local organizations are hoping to do.

A CHANCE FOR CHANGE

When **Michael Johnson** first viewed “Before They Die” at an Executive Leadership Council event in June, the retired senior vice president and chief administrative officer of Williams had not

heard of the project before. Noticing how moved others in the organization were by the story, he immediately knew his city needed to get involved and host a screening of the film, along with other cities that had signed on, such as New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C.

“I felt we shouldn’t be at the end of the parade but leading the parade,” he says.

Fellow Williams employee **Alison Anthony** considers herself a student of the Tulsa race riot, having studied it extensively for her job as director of diversity and community relations. Even so, she says she learned even more about the event by watching it from the perspective of the filmmaker, who is not from Tulsa, and hopes that it will better inform others about a tragic incident in Tulsa and U.S. history — an event that she describes not so much as a riot but a massacre.

“People who hear ‘Tulsa race riot’ have a certain image in their mind,” she says. “But if you really start learning about it, you see there was something else going on. ... It’s an opportunity to say, ‘How

does Tulsa respond to that? Are we a part of continuing reconciliation as a solution?,’ or do we say, ‘That’s history.’ I think we have to ... use it as a tool to continue the dialogue.”

Mana Tahaie, director of racial justice for YWCA Tulsa, says that when she saw the film, she was at once inspired by the way in which it told the survivors’ story and optimistic that the film could become a tool for beginning to heal “a long-standing history of racial tension in Tulsa,” she says.

There have been previous efforts to address the riot. Tahaie notes work done by the Race Riot Commission, convened by the state Legislature in 1997. After gathering information, interviewing witnesses and examining documents, the commission made five recommendations in a 2001 report: direct payment to survivors, direct payment to descendants, creation of a scholarship fund for those affected by the riot, development of a historical district in the Greenwood area and a search for unmarked graves. Tahaie says the film provides an opportunity to revisit those ideas and reconcile the past.

“There are few times in history where you really have a chance to truly rectify a wrong, and it just seems like this is one of those times,” she says. “It’s time to rally around it.”

The rectification will begin with a 3 p.m. screening of the film at the Tulsa Performing Arts Center Oct. 19. A sponsors’ reception at 1:30 p.m., hosted by Mayor Taylor at the Crowne Plaza Hotel, will precede the showing. But that’s only the first step. Representatives from the YWCA, the Metropolitan Tulsa Urban League and the Oklahoma Center for Community and Justice are discussing a variety of programs and initiatives to capture the momentum the film could create and use it to enact positive change in the community.

The YWCA is calling the larger reconciliation initiative “Tulsa’s Journey to Healing.” Tahaie says the initiative “will help move us forward and will involve discussing a variety of racial issues including but not limited to the riot.” It will include an online social network that will help bring all of Tulsa’s efforts toward

racial reconciliation together and provide a space for people to connect and explore opportunities, she says.

INCREASING AWARENESS

For **Marla Mayberry**, executive director of the Urban League, the first step is education. She says that although she grew up in Tulsa, she heard nothing of the race riot until she was a student at Langston University. It was then that she realized that some of the challenges Tulsa faces stem directly from that event.

“Nobody has ever made that wrong right,” she says. “... It’s just been that issue of mistrust. Does it (stem) from 1921? I would say most certainly. I would say throughout the generations it has just compounded upon itself.”

Mayberry says the city should start the healing process by issuing a formal apology, to survivors and to the city as a whole, and that the premiere is a good opportunity to do this. Because, she says, to truly make change will require the entire city of Tulsa to come together, not merely a segment.

“I really don’t want it to be a northside meeting because it’s not only about north Tulsa,” she says. “This is about Tulsa, the city of Tulsa.”

Tahaie takes inspiration from an initiative launched in Birmingham, Ala., in response to events that occurred there during the civil rights movement. In that city, citizens created The Birmingham Pledge, “an effort of the Birmingham, Ala., community to recognize the dignity and worth of every individual, no matter what race, religion or sex,” according to www.birminghampledge.org.

Tahaie says the same type of response could help Tulsa reconcile its past with its future.

“I think this is a great opportunity for a lot of people,” she says. “... So I’m hoping that with the energy surrounding this film, we’ll be able to channel it into things like that.”

Johnson says he knows some people will assume that an event that occurred so long ago doesn’t apply to them yet, but to be inactive will not help Tulsa move forward.

“My intention is in acknowledging

the event publicly, apologizing to the survivors and recognizing the survivors through some form of compensation,” he says. “Once we’ve done that, we should quickly move to building a bridge to the future, to reconciliation.”

Turner says he initially did not know how to respond when screening audiences asked him what is happening in Tulsa in response to the riot. Now, though, as he works on an epilogue to the film that will bring attention to recent efforts, he has plenty from which to draw, including development of a John Hope Franklin Education Center in Tulsa and John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park.

Additionally, the YWCA continues to offer educational kits with books, worksheets, videos and other materials to local schools and home-schooled students so they can learn about the riot.

Even if it did require a Los Angeles entertainment lawyer to get the story in the public eye once again, Anthony, Williams’ diversity director, is looking forward to the positive ramifications the screening of “Before They Die” could offer.

“No one’s going to love every part of the film,” she says. “Everyone’s going to find some of it uncomfortable, but we learn from that discomfort. We have to face that. We have to understand, ‘Why does that make me uncomfortable?’ and ‘How do we learn from this and have the community be better and stronger moving forward?’”

Turner’s primary focus remains securing financial compensation for the riot survivors, but he is proud that his film has helped spur a renewed energy for reconciliation in Tulsa.

“If I can change the climate in Tulsa even a little bit, that’s positive change,” he says. “If I can raise a dollar for a survivor, while that may be small change in terms of its denomination, it’s a huge change in that there are people from the public who are saying, ‘We’re sorry; let us help.’ So if I can be the agent of change for that, then I’m in a good place.” ■

EDITOR’S NOTE: To read a three-part series TulsaPeople published on the Tulsa race riot in 2000, visit www.tulsapeoplemagazine.com/RR.pdf.

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