

Equal Justice Initiative Community Remembrance Project

Overview: The Equal Justice Initiative of Montgomery, Alabama, is a civil rights non-profit which has a number of different projects, including the Community Remembrance Project. I am a member of the Roanoke Valley (Virginia) coalition that submitted a successful Expression of Interest application to the EJI in July 2021 to participate in the Community Remembrance Project.

The Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) was founded in 1989 by Mr. Bryan Stevenson, an acclaimed public interest lawyer, in Montgomery, Alabama. The EJI is most widely known for the Netflix documentary titled “Just Mercy” (2020) which was adapted from the book of same name by Stevenson in 2014. The book and the film are about his courtroom efforts to exonerate black men who had been incarcerated unfairly using rationales and tactics that belong to the Jim Crow era but still exist in America.

The EJI’s website can be reached by entering “Equal Justice Initiative” or eji.org in your internet search engine. The EJI is a private, 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that challenges poverty and injustice, advocates for equal treatment in the criminal justice system, provides legal representation to people who have been illegally convicted, unfairly sentenced, or abused in state jails and prisons, and creates hope for marginalized communities. The EJI challenges the death penalty and excessive punishment and provides re-entry assistance to formerly incarcerated people.

The EJI is committed to changing the narrative about race in America. In 2018, EJI opened the Legacy Museum in Montgomery (built on the site of a warehouse where enslaved black people were imprisoned while waiting to be sold) and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice as part of its national effort to create new spaces, markers, and memorials that address the legacies of slavery, lynching, and racial segregation.

The Community Remembrance Project (CRP) is colloquially known as the “lynching project.” Its purpose is to record and commemorate every lynching of a Black man, woman and child in the U.S. that can be documented between 1877 and 1950. To date, the EJI has documented over 4,000 racial terror lynchings in America between the end of Reconstruction and 1950. The EJI collaborates with communities to memorialize documented victims of racial violence and foster meaningful dialogue about race and justice. The EJI’s Community Remembrance Project is part of a campaign to recognize the victims of lynchings by 1) collecting soil from lynching sites (two jars worth will be collected, one destined for the EJI Legacy Museum and one for a local museum); 2) installing historical markers and monuments at the lynching sites; 3) creating a space in the Legacy Museum where one can visit and see the hanging plinths on display, each of which represents a location where a Black person was lynched; and 4) hosting a racial justice essay contest for public high school students.

At the local level the CRP works this way. A community in any location in the United States that had a lynching must create a local coalition and submit an Expression of Interest to the EJI to participate in the CRP. The EJI does not automatically accept applications when they are received. The Expression of Interest must be thorough, broad-based and inclusive in terms of the individuals and organizations in the community that are involved. The organizations and individuals in the local coalition must sign a pledge committing themselves to the mission and credo of the CRP. The coalition must document what the local community has done regarding educating the local public about the true history of slavery and Jim Crow including lynchings, efforts to promote racial reconciliation, and what the community has done to address racial injustice over the previous decade.

In the Roanoke Valley coalition, we currently have 31 individuals and 34 organizations, including non-profits, churches, colleges, schools and school districts, and governmental units. We continue to actively seek out additional coalition members, both individuals and groups/organizations.

Roanoke, Virginia has two lynchings in its past. On February 12, 1892, Mr. William Lavender was killed, and on September 21, 1893, Mr. Thomas Smith was hanged. Individuals in the Roanoke Valley coalition began a series of conversations in August of 2019 to explore participation in the CRP and commemorate and honor the two gentlemen who lost their lives to lynch mobs in our city. The Covid pandemic put a hold on actualizing our coalition via convening

meetings, holding small group discussions, and writing the Expression of Interest until the spring of 2021, but the groundwork had been laid.

We held six group Zoom meetings between March and the end of July, recruited and gathered coalition members, a writing committee drafted our Expression of Interest, the full group had the opportunity to proof the Expression of Interest, and members of the coalition signed the Community Remembrance Project pledge. We submitted our Roanoke Valley Expression of Interest to the EJI in late July, and it was swiftly approved within two weeks. The first hurdle has been crossed. Still, our work has just begun, and we continue to build out our coalition membership.

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