FROM **SLAVERY** TO MASS **INCARCERATION**

A civil rights attorney seeks to right the ramifications of a history of racism through a new museum and memorial *by* CARLA BELL

ON A LATE SPRING AFTERNOON in Montgomery, Alabama, a new chapter of American history was written. Bryan Stevenson was the author.

The founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), the organization behind the new National Memorial for Peace and Justice and the Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration, Stevenson, 58, is a renowned civil rights attorney, a professor at New York University School of Law, a best-selling author, and a social justice activist with the mind and energy of a marathon runner and a heart for the heavy-laden.

The middle child of three grew up "in a little Black ghetto village" on the outskirts of Milton, a very small town in Delaware. "We were in the country, and the town was pretty racially segregated," he recalls.

But then, "lawyers came into our community and made them open up public schools." Stevenson, a student in "colored school," made a decision to believe that he could go far, despite structural inequities that told every Black child otherwise.

"The idea that lawyers could force people to do something that I know, politically, they would not have voted to do, never left me, and that planted a seed around law," he says.

From president of the student body and straight "A's" at Cape Henlopen High to scholarships at Eastern University in Pensylvania and Harvard Law School, Stevenson stewarded his young life and saw victories in quick succession, forming the EJI at just 29 years of age.

He was raised in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) faith, "in a country church that was actually built before emancipation by enslaved people," he recalls. A principle of his AME upbringing is that each person in our society is more than the worst thing they've ever done.

"That's what redemption and recovery permit: the idea that you can be defined by something more than your worst act," Stevenson says. Once he began working with condemned prisoners, the reality, necessity and truth of this became clear to him. So he chases after redemption on behalf of those who cannot. For him, this is an orientation of the Gospels.

To date, EJI has secured exonerations for some 140 formerly incarcerated people. Next year, the organization will celebrate 30 years in operation. EJI's social consciousness framework is like the spirit of Stevenson's maternal grandmother, Victoria Baylor Golden, the daughter of once-enslaved parents. She created a critical consciousness for her grandson that has been as valuable to him and to EJI as his degrees in political science, public policy and law.

The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration uses technology to illustrate slavery, lynching and racial segregation. Both the museum and the memorial, which is also known as the National Lynching Memorial and is situated on six acres of lush green in Montgomery's downtown core, opened April 26. With its suspended monuments of weathered steel bearing more than 4,000 names of victims and the dates and counties where they died, the memorial is both breathtaking and chilling in its representation of this nation's history of "racial terror lynchings." By lynching, one is "put to death (as by hanging) by mob action without legal approval or permission."

"We use 'racial terror lynching' because straight murder is held accountable in the criminal justice system," Stevenson explains. "Racial terror lynching, and those who participated in this violence, had no fear of accountability, and that's what allowed Black communities to be tortured and traumatized in this way. These things would happen in public, sometimes on the courthouse lawn with crowds; sometimes [with] thousands of people watching; and that's why we characterize this violence as racial terrorism."

Bryan Stevenson, founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative

PHOTO BY RICKY CARIOTI/THE WASHINGTON POST VIA GETTY IMAGES

Summarizing, Stevenson concludes that our American history of racial terror lynching is an extension and evolution of slavery.

The investment has been substantial. The memorial and the museum are the culmination of six years of research. EJI staff members visited hundreds of counties throughout the region, digging into archives and reading through Black newspapers from across the nation.

Their findings, detailed in EJI's Lynching in America report, are the source information and the documentary basis of the memorial and the museum that stand today.

"We all have to say 'never again' to make this a reality—beyond just a handful of people who have a consciousness about it," Stevenson says. "That's the point of this. We have to motivate everybody to recognize the horrors of our history of racial inequality—to see the burden and unacceptability of bigotry and discrimination so that whether we are Black or not Black, we are prepared to say 'never again' in the same way that we say we won't ever again tolerate the rounding up religious minorities to be exterminated. That for me is the goal: to create this consciousness among all people, not just folks who are directly impacted by this legacy."

Stevenson was one of a number of scholarly contributors to Ava DuVernay's Oscar-nominated documentary, *13th*. His memoir, *Just Mercy*, being brought to the big screen and to star Michael B. Jordan, is set for a 2020 release, and he will consult on the film.

He's modest about it, with a case of nerves. "[The movie is] definitely not something I expected I'd ever be doing, but I'm excited about it. I'm hopeful that it does the story justice and that people get to see and hear what the book presents in this new way."

Stevenson's work is great and deep and painful and loving. He has both created and become a significant cultural landmark for us all—a monument man for our time.

Carla Bell is a Seattle-area freelance writer whose work focuses on social and restorative justice, civil and human rights, culture and arts.