



## Hallie Q. Brown Community Center, Inc.

**May 31- June 1, 2022**

### **Dear Friends of Hallie Q. Brown,**

On May 30, 1921, Dick Rowland, a Black shoeshiner employed at a Main Street shine parlor tripped while entering the elevator in the nearby Drexel Building, on his way up to the top floor to use the "colored" restroom, and fell into Sarah Page, the white elevator operator, grabbing her arm. She screamed in surprise. A white store clerk, who did NOT witness the event, reported it as Rowland trying to assault Page. The story became more exaggerated from there, and what happened next led to one of the largest and worst massacres in American history and the first time that bombs were dropped on American soil, the Tulsa Race Massacre: 35 city blocks destroyed, 800 people injured and 300 people killed. But until three years ago, most Americans were not aware of this atrocity and would not have known had it not been for a television series called Watchmen.

On May 24, 2022, Salvador Ramos shot his grandmother before speeding away in a pickup truck to Robb Elementary School. He crashes into a drainage ditch and when two men from the funeral home across the street come out to investigate, he jumps out of the truck with an AR-15 and shoots at them. He then shoots at the school before entering it and going into two adjoining classrooms and engaging in one of the worst mass shootings and school massacres in American history. He kills 19 children and 2 teachers while police wait in the hall over 40 minutes, breaking protocol, before a Border Patrol agent kills him. The truth of what really went on is still being revealed, but we would not have an inkling about the truth were it not for the television media coverage happening right now.

These are two, seemingly unrelated events, but at their core are commonalities which link them together through the tragedy that is "American exceptionalism."

American exceptionalism is the notion that the United States is inherently qualitatively different from other countries, that our values of liberty, equality before the law and individual responsibility, along with our political system, and historic development set us apart from all the rest. The perception arising from this is that both domestically and internationally, our country is superior to all others and

therefore endowed with a mission and purpose to transform the world.

While this may sound like, "with great power comes great responsibility," in reality, it is laden with privilege, entitlement and colonization as well as an overall avoidance of accountability or substantive acknowledgement of our flaws, limitations and failures.

In 1921, the racist media did everything it could to fan the flames surrounding the powder keg of Jim Crow, jealousy, white supremacy, and land lust that was smoldering beneath the surface in Tulsa, printing sensationalist claims and accusations that stirred the anger in the white community. Emboldened by their privilege and entitlement, white residents of Tulsa, including police officers, tore through the Black community of Greenwood leaving 10,000 people homeless, 191 businesses destroyed and the equivalent in today's dollars of \$32M in personal and property damage in addition to injuries and death mentioned earlier. The police imprisoned all Black residents not already confined, with over 6000 held at the Fairgrounds and Convention Hall, for more than a week for some. Despite all of this, not a single person was convicted for any of the damage, injuries or death; acquitted by all white juries who blamed the groups of Black residents defending themselves for the riot and the police for failing to prevent it.

In 2022, seven police officers entered the school minutes after the shooter and approached the classroom and were shot at. They pulled back, in fear they might be hit, leaving the shooter in the classroom where he continued his murderous spree. Inexplicably, even though they soon numbered 19, they stood idly by in hallway for 40-50 minutes doing nothing to subdue the killer and save lives. Other law enforcement officers who arrived on the scene, restrained parents trying to enter the school to save their children. All the while students in the classroom repeatedly called 911, begging the police to come help them, while they merely stood in the hallway. Another very distressing detail is that the story has continually changed as law enforcement attempts to cover up their catastrophic mistakes from the shooter being confronted by the school resource officer to the officer not being on campus at the time; from the teacher leaving the door propped open to her closing it but it not locking; from the shooter have body armor and being barricade in the classroom to him being in regular clothes and merely behind a locked door; from officers running towards gunfire to them standing out in the hall for 40-50 minutes not acting. Except for the attempts to blame teachers, there has been no accountability for the inaction that is responsible in part for the 21 lives lost that day, least of all from the school district police chief.

These events seem so different, yet they are linked by two core issues that we, as a country, refuse to fully acknowledge and address: gun violence and systemic racism.

Now, this isn't about "taking away anyone's guns" or that "all white people are evil and their kids should feel bad," but rather about actually recognizing and understanding these two issues that are so woven into the tapestry of our country that when you challenge or criticize them, people think you're criticizing America and rush to defend the false narratives that have been brandished as testaments of individual freedom, when in actuality they are indoctrination into outdate ways of

thinking. This is about the myths that have been maintained over time to preserve the systems in place, namely that the Second Amendment is about gun rights and that systemic racism doesn't exist.

Now, there is nothing wrong with owning a gun. Many people have them for protection, for sport and even for unique collections. There are many people who are responsible gun owners, who practice gun safety and proper gun handling. What is an issue is the escalation and excess that goes beyond the normal number and type of gun, and the way the Second Amendment has been intentionally misrepresented in order to justify this escalation and excess and hide away its true racist origin and purpose. You see, the Second Amendment was never created to provide for the individual right to own a gun, much less many guns of assault caliber.

The true purpose of the 2nd Amendment was to provide the ability for slave owners to quell any rebellion without interference from the federal government. James Madison took two drafts to get it into a single sentence, but by establishing the connection between militias and the right to bear arms instead of just presenting the right to bear arms, Madison was protecting his state's ability to create a militia as necessary to quell slave rebellions and not have them be unarmed, by having the right to bear arms restricted. So when you invoke the 2nd Amendment, what you're really doing is reinforcing systemic racism and the normalization of measures to retain or memorialize Slavery...just like when you fly the Confederate flag claiming it as your heritage...or allow racist stereotypes of everyday food items like syrup, rice or molasses.

In this same vein, systemic racism permeates our society so thoroughly that opponents will use scare tactics and conspiracy theory to keep us from abandoning it, and often don't recognize it when its exposed. The Tulsa Race Massacre is a major historical event that until recently had all but been omitted from school history books. Juneteenth is the oldest known celebration of the end of Slavery, yet most people were unaware what it was until it was made an official holiday last year. All across Minnesota, and the country, many deeds still have racial covenants that while not currently enforced, still exist and could be invoked at any point. All across the country, conservative politicians have used Critical Race Theory as a campaign platform to rally support and raise funds by proposing and passing legislation to prevent it from being taught in elementary, middle and high schools; which is a very easy measure of success to achieve because it CAN'T be taught in elementary, middle and high school because it is a graduate school level framework that academically cannot be taught below college level. It's like promising not to allow Peter Pan to teach 4th grade...mission accomplished before it even started.

And so we come to this point of looking at these two incidents and these two major issues, separated by over 100 years and seemingly so different; yet both are immense tragedies involving gun violence, both involve law enforcement not doing what they were supposed to do to the detriment of the communities they were in, both involve people in positions of power avoiding culpability for their actions, both involve systemic issues that a minority segment of our society pushes back against resolving in a reasonable and rationale way because it erodes the power and control they have, both involve things that we must change if we're ever going to advance as a country.

The lesson from Tulsa is that we must face up to our past, acknowledge it fully so that we can heal together as a country and make amends for the past. The lesson from Uvalde is that we must pass sensible gun safety legislation that prevents massacres like they had from ever happening again. We must integrate the teaching of true history and the acknowledgement of systemic racism into our classrooms, our practices and our daily lives in society. We must stop "negotiating into a stalemate" on the issue of gun safety. We need sensible gun safety legislation that provides for background checks, waiting periods and common-sense guidelines around purchasing and legalization of assault classes of weapons.

We must make our community safe and equal for ALL of our citizens and truly hold these truths to be self-evident that all people are created equal and imbued with the rights to life, liberty and happiness.

Amen.

Conservative media has done everything it can to shift the debate away from the core issue of gun safety and try to position the notion of "hardening schools" and resurfacing the ideas of arming teachers, new trainings on how to spot and react to school shooters, new "cognitive decision-making models for assessing and acting under duress." The arguments around mental health surface as well.

Sincerely,



Jonathan Palmer  
Executive Director

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