



# Through a museum and memorial, Bryan Stevenson '85 fosters conversation on criminal justice and America's original sin

## By Cara Solomon / Photographs by Beth Perkins

NA BLUE-SKY autumn day in Alabama, you sit in a field, your head tilted to the trees. You are wondering if they stood here 81 years ago, when Wes Johnson was hanged from the limb of another tree, very near where you sit. Did he look across this county road and see the grace of those branches, hold onto it, with the mob in motion below?

It is quiet where you are. A pickup truck passes slowly by with white people in it—a man at the wheel, a boy by his side. A few minutes later, the driver circles back and pulls into the field; he has seen your car parked in a ditch down the road.

"Can I help you?" he asks.

"Oh, no, I'm fine," you say, smiling.
But then you remember the photograph, back at the Legacy Museum in Montgomery, of the legs of a lynched man dangling at the top of the frame.
Below is a mass of white faces. Smiling is not what you do when you are sitting in this field.

"I'm just here because this is where someone was lynched and I wanted to pay tribute," you say.

The man jerks his head back.

"Someone was lynched?!" he says.

"Many years ago," you say. "His
name was Wesley Johnson."

PRECEDING SPREAD:
Bryan Stevenson
at the National
Memorial for Peace
and Justice, which
his organization,
the Equal Justice
Initiative, created to
honor the thousands
of lynching victims
in the United States

Enslaved African men and women in a sculpture by Ghanaian artist Kwame Akoto-Bamfo

And then:

"How did you find out?"

man would see soil from this field in a acy Museum, which the Equal Justice realized the work couldn't wait. Initiative, a legal advocacy nonprofit, Memorial for Peace and Justice, he be told," he says. would see 800 rusted steel columns name is there, too.

But in this empty field near the small town of Abbeville, there is still nothing. So it makes sense when the man says it. "I didn't know."

and director of EJI, who

terrorizing black people.

It had traveled down the years from slavery, inspiring a white mob in 1937 to lynch Wes Johnson for a relationship with a white woman; pushing his cousin James out of Alabama in 1965 for inteto death in 1986 for a crime he didn't commit.

Slavery was to blame for that narrative. But nobody had started a national conversation about that. On a panel one day, Stevenson suggested it was time.

"I remember people looking at me like: What is wrong with you?" says Stevenson. "All these issues, and you want to talk about that?"

countries create space for truth-telling tives, and in song. in the aftermath of atrocities—Rwanda, South Africa, Germany. In the questioning and conversations that followed, there was a way forward for all.

tell the story of how slavery seeded the another for Little Judy. To their right,

myth of racial difference—and how that lie led to lynching, which led to Jim Crow If he drove 100 miles or so north, the segregation, which led to mass incarceration, which led to the projection that mason jar with Wes Johnson's name on one in three black boys will go to jail or it, one of 300 that line shelves in the Leg- prison in their lifetime. Then Stevenson

"I just felt like there was a community opened last spring. If he walked another of people who were ready, who were will-10 minutes from there, to the National ing—even desperate—for their stories to

EJI had already been investigating one for each county in the United States lynchings all across the South, combing where EJI documented lynchings. Wes' through archives, confirming reports through news sources, sitting in people's homes for hours to hear their accounts. The report from that research led to EJI's Community Remembrance Project, with relatives and strangers visiting the lynching sites, collecting soil, then sharing their experiences at events. From there, the memorial to the lynchт some point, Bryan Ste- ing victims began to take shape, along venson '85, the founder with the museum.

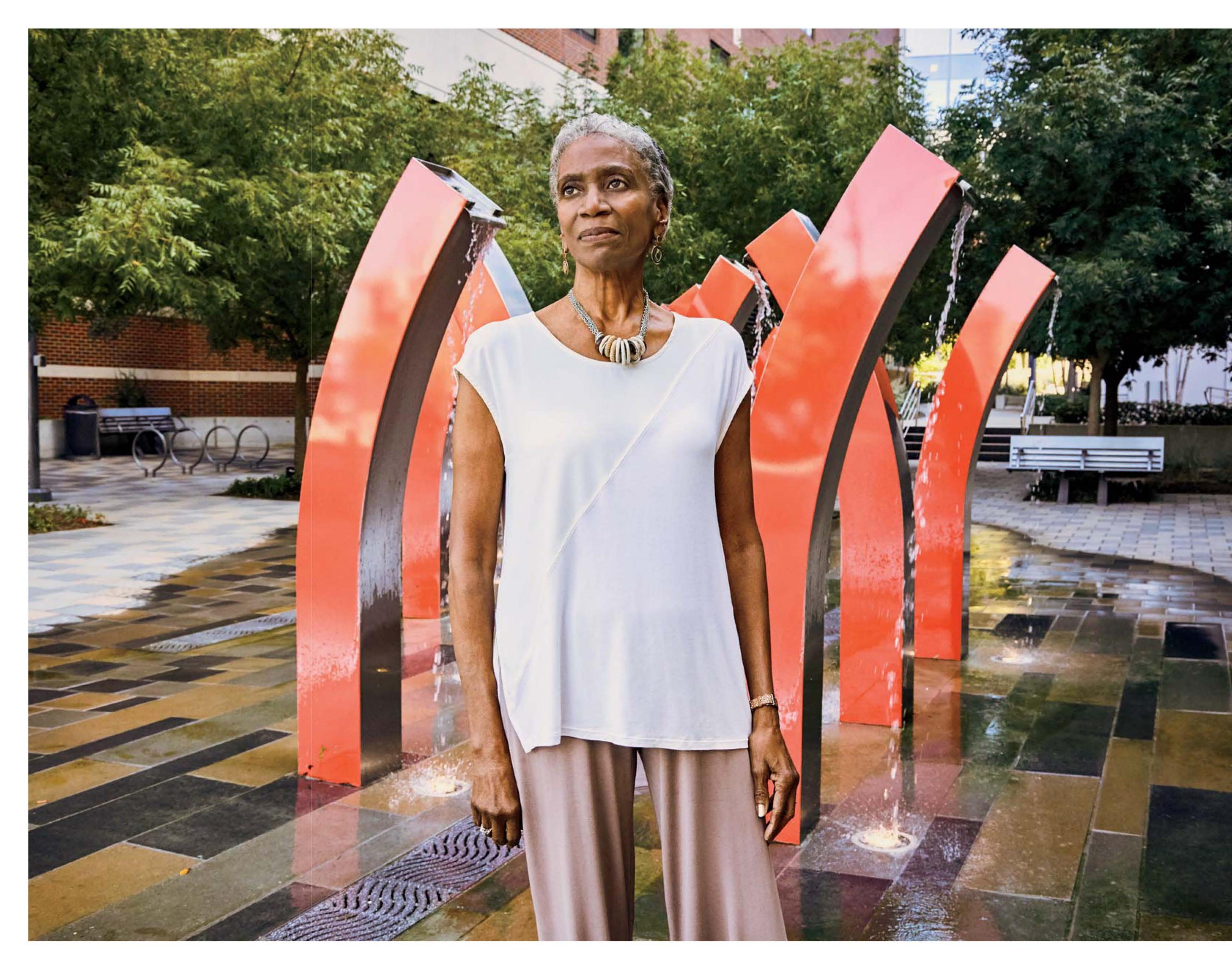
Originally, Stevenson hired historians has helped win reversals, and museum experts to guide the muserelief or release for more than 125 death- um project, but they pushed for a more row prisoners, came to a realization: The academic kind of telling. And working law would not be enough. No matter how on death-row cases, in the state with the much bias he exposed, there was a nar- highest per-capita execution rate in the rative of racial difference at work—in the country, Stevenson knew the power of courts, and in American life—and it was personal stories. He was set on telling them, in ways as small and powerful as a letter from prison. So the team at EJI pushed forward on its own.

And in April, it opened: a narrative museum that draws a straight line from slavery to mass incarceration, and a megrating a cafe; encouraging an all-white morial with the names of 4,400 lynching jury to condemn Anthony Ray Hinton victims—and the states and counties where they were killed—engraved into steel monuments at the center of a 6-acre

> "I don't know if I can make it to the end," said a middle-aged man at the Legacy Museum recently, turning to his wife.

They had already walked down the darkened corridor of the former slave warehouse, with its series of pens, where actors projected as holograms animated He did. Stevenson had seen other the words of slaves—in pleas, in narra-

Before them were mounted news clippings showing thousands of people at a lynching. Behind them, banners hung from the ceiling, listing dozens of sale For years, he waited for a museum to notices—one for Tilla, another for Isaac,



### JUDGE VANZETTA PENN McPHERSON

She grew up in Montgomery, walking the same streets as Ku Klux Klansmen. When she heard Stevenson was planning the memorial, she had one reaction: "Oh, I was so happy," she said. "The story was going to be told."



### ANTHONY RAY HINTON

Exonerated after 28 years on death row, he has described his conviction as a modern-day lynching, in which "they took off the white robe and put on the black robe." He is now a community educator with EJI, which represented him.

further down the timeline, the image of a smiling white boy, holding a sign: We won't go to school with negroes.

"One of the brilliant things that the Legacy Museum does is it paints the picture of cause and effect," says Vanzetta racial and gender discrimination cases. "It's all right there before you, and if you go from the beginning to the end, if you are a reasonable person, you have to be convinced."

work, Stevenson says, some thought than you, he tells them. You can survive. this focus on slavery was a detour. Not You can overcome. Look at the history McPherson, who grew up in Montgom- and you will see the heart and the will and ery walking the same streets as Ku Klux the strength of your people. Klansmen in their robes.

Until EJI erected historical markers in 2013, Montgomery had 59 markers or monuments to the Confederacy, and not a single one to acknowledge its past as one of the biggest slave

ports in America. The city's two largest high schools, which educate primarily African-American students, are still named after heroes of the Confederacy. When McPherson heard Stevenson was planning the memorial in Montgomery, she had just one reaction.

"Oh, I was so happy," she said. "The story was going to be told."

For the most part, Stevenson also had the support of his clients, many of them people of color—from children sentenced to life in prison to adults with severe mental illness condemned to death. Sometimes, when they are struggling to understand how they got there, Stevenson uses history to explain.

"The essential question that most clients ask me is: Why?" says Stevenson, whose best-selling memoir, "Just Mercy," examines systemic racism in the criminal justice system through his clients' stories. "Why does nobody care? Why am I being thought of in this way?"

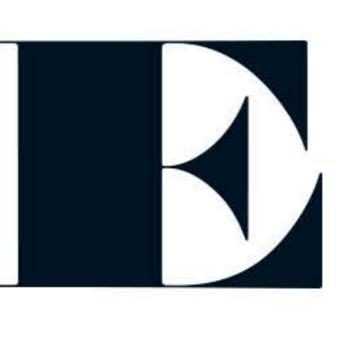
Some of the answers are in that museum. The more people visit, Stevenson hopes, the more a consciousness will Three years after Stevenson secured grow.

black people not burdened by the pre- memoir, "The Sun Does Shine." He is the sumption of dangerousness and guilt," best friend of Lester Bailey, who visited says Stevenson. "I would love to see a him every month for 30 years, and the generation of people, both black and proud son of Buhlar Hinton, who died

white, not constrained by the weight of this history, as they currently are today."

Since April, more than 300,000 people have visited from across the country and around the world. EJI is working on a visitors center across from the memorial; Penn McPherson, a retired U.S. mag- developing a curriculum for educators; istrate judge well-known for litigating and expanding its website to include even more videos, data and stories from the museum.

When young people say to Stevenson that there's never been a harder time in this country, he pushes back and points Given the urgency of EJI's legal defense to the past. People endured far worse



VERY MORNING, Anthony Ray Hinton rises at 2:45, as he did for nearly three decades on death row. He

makes himself a stack of three pancakes and cooks himself four pieces of bacon in the comfort of his own home. He decides on a book from his shelf, then settles in to read it. But before any of that, Hinton, 62, sets his mind to thinking.

He just sits there on his living room couch and tries to work it out: How can we get rid of this racial hatred?

"I truly believe there's an answer right at our fingertips," he says. "And if we can figure out the right way to present it, we can wipe out racism."

In the Legacy Museum, at the heart of the mass incarceration exhibit, Hinton tells his own story in question form. Sit down at one of the prison visitation booths, and you'll see him there on a screen, blinking at you until you pick up the phone. Then come the questions he would like you to consider:

What would you do if you were sentenced to almost 30 years on death row for a crime you didn't commit?

How would you survive?

Who would you be?

his freedom, Hinton is a community "I would love to see a generation of educator with EJI. He is the author of a

# Bryan Stevenson had waited years for a museum to tell the story of how slavery seeded the myth of racial difference. Then he saw the work could not wait.

before she could see him released.

And in the name of no one else sufstory, even when it hurts.

on the basis of flawed evidence, poor reptake to review exonerating evidence, head high. There is hope. leaving Hinton on death row for 16 years after Stevenson brought the new evidence to light.

And it is the story of how, as Stevenson likes to say, slavery never ended; it simply evolved.

Hinton chooses to be joyful despite it. He chooses not to hate the arresting officer who told him it did not matter if he committed the crime—that he back room of a restaurant, with browas black, that the jury would be white, ken-down tables and chairs, separated that the judge would be white, and that from white life by a door? it would all add up to a conviction. Hating that man, and so many others, would only keep him up at night.

Instead, every night at 10:30, he walks out into his yard to look at the moon and the stars. Such a beautiful painting, he thinks. He carries an image of it on his phone, so that when he's speaking outside of Alabama, he can pull it up and admire it.

"The joy I have, the world didn't give it to me, and the world can't take it away," he says.

As soon as Hinton heard that EJI was creating a museum and a memorial, he wanted to be a part of it. Some people think it's opening an old wound; Hinton thinks it's closing one.

path of that memorial, and those 6-foot- ticipation, someone had pulled the seats tall steel monuments rise above his head like so many men and women lynched, Hinton thinks of their sacrifice.

"If you got any kind of soul, any kind of feeling for humanity, you can't help but

to shed a tear," Hinton says.

Their sacrifice led to the end of lynchfering as he did, he will keep telling his ing, is how Hinton sees it. So maybe his own sacrifice will matter, too. Maybe it It is the story of a 29-year-old black will educate free people to push back man wrongly convicted for two murders against the death penalty—just another form of lynching, in his mind. And mayresentation and a weak expert witness. It be it will help his friends still waiting on is the story of state officials twice refus- death row. One day, he plans to go back, ing to spend the hour they said it would and pass along a message: Hold your

> NTHE SMALL TOWN of Abbeville, James Johnson grew up wondering why. Why did he have to climb the side stairs of the movie theater, and sit in that separate space?

Why did he have to eat in the hot, dingy

The answer came back simple: That's just the way it is.

"And I could not accept that," says Johnson, now an educator at a local school for at-risk youth.

When Johnson was just a boy, his mother told him about his cousin Wes, who was hanged for dating a married white woman. Johnson can still remember how tightly his mother held his hand as she said those words.

It was a warning passed down from one generation to the next, and it kept him quiet for a while. Then, as the resentment grew, it didn't.

In the summer of 1965, Johnson walked with a friend through the front door of the Star Cafe. They had tried to When he walks the downward-sloping integrate the pharmacy earlier, but in anfrom the stools, leaving only spikes.

The Star Cafe was not expecting them, so Johnson walked right into a world he never knew existed.

"Real clean, nice music, big picture



### JAMES JOHNSON

He grew up with the story of his cousin's lynching and left Alabama after being threatened for integrating a cafe. He returned to teach at the high school that was whites-only when he left.



### WAITING

Each monument has a replica laid out in the field below. EJI has invited counties to claim theirs and install them on their land. So far, hundreds of counties have expressed interest.

windows for you to look out of," he recalls. "It was: OK, so this is what we've been missing."

When his grandmother got the anonymous call, advising her to "chastise" her grandson, they both knew what it meant. For her sake and his, Johnson left, joining the millions of African-Americans pushed out of the South by what Stevenson calls racial terror.

Those years in the North changed him. He worked for a man with a number tattooed on his arm, a Jew who understood the pain of oppression. He learned from the mob of 50 men pulled the teenager international students and professors, broadening his idea of what life could be. And when he came back to Abbeville in the late '70s, a college graduate, Johnson was different.

"The hatred had gone," he says.

He became a teacher at Abbeville High School, which was whites-only when he left. He created the school's first black history program and, at the students' request, helped them to integrate their

He still sees some of those students today, many of them white. They call him Brother Johnson. They embrace him openly on the street.

"It was hell when I was growing up," says Johnson. "But this is home."

When he first visited the memorial. Johnson gravitated toward the life-sized sculptures of men and women straining in chains. He walked up to them. He took pictures of them. He wept.

Then he wandered over to the grass where replicas of the steel monuments white woman, approached Johnson are laid out in rows like coffins. EJI to say she was sorry for what had haphas invited each county to claim its replica and to install that monument on its land. Nearly 300 counties have already expressed interest—far more than Stevenson expected.

Johnson was looking for the name of his county that day when he met a woman looking for the name of hers. He listened to her story, of finding her father shot dead by the side of the highway, the father's success. The woman was 5 years lieves it. old at the time.

you can cry on each other's shoulder," Johnson says.

Americans come to the memorial to find else you know.

their county, knowing they have some distant family tie, only to discover the name of a relative cut into the steel.

"You see these people wrapping their arms around these monuments and just sobbing," says Stevenson. "And I've seen white people find their county, see the names, and be utterly destroyed by it and just sit there and weep."

For so many years, Johnson never knew what happened to his cousin on that county road outside of Abbeville. It took a relative's research to tell him how out of jail, drove him down to the house of the husband, shot him several times, then hanged him.

The idea of it haunts Johnson every time he drives by.

"I try to imagine the expression on his face, the thoughts in his mind, what he might have been trying to say," Johnson

Last January, Johnson and his family stood with Stevenson where it happened. Beside them was Oprah Winfrey with a camera crew, filming for a "60 Minutes" segment. Stevenson said a few words in Wes' honor, then handed a small shovel to Johnson to dig the soil that would make its way to the Legacy Museum.

After all these years, Wes' story would finally be heard; Johnson could share it with the world. But it meant just as much to him to share the story with the people of Abbeville. In the days after the segment aired, a county employee, a young pened. That she had no idea.

"It just gives you some closure," John-

When his former students got in touch to apologize, Johnson reassured them it wasn't their fault. Don't hate your grandparents, he added; they got caught up in the frenzy of things.

"Each of us is more than the worst thing we have ever done." It's something target of a white man who didn't like her Stevenson often says, and Johnson be-

But for the sake of the future, Johnson "It's sort of like being at a wake, where had something else to say to his former students. Now you know better, he told them. And it's up to you to pass that Stevenson has seen older African- on—to your children, and to everyone

HARVARD LAW BULLETIN