

Freedom
 Born from blood, sweat, tears
 Freedom
 Took so many years
 In a country that's called The Land of the Free
 For so long, no freedom if you looked like me
 Freedom
 A sacred human right
 Freedom
 For this so many still fight
 Freedom
 Rejoice, but do not forget
 That battle is over, but the war's not won yet
 For Freedom is but one of many Rights
 Equality, Justice and Truth—
 For these we still fight
 So Yes, Celebrate Freedom—Free at Last!
 And work for the good future, and remember
 The Past

By Renée Leverette

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the holiday. I started a small fundraiser on Facebook and raised \$295 for The Equal Justice Initiative, which works to end mass incarceration, excessive punishment and racial inequality.

The Equal Justice Initiative is committed to ending mass incarceration and excessive punishment in the United States, to challenging racial and economic injustice, and to protecting basic human rights for the most vulnerable people in American society.¹

I chose this organization because of the correlation between the mass incarceration of African Americans, and slavery, and the holiday's focus on freedom. Let us not forget that so many of us are behind bars, many wrongfully so. There is a reason the phrase, "preschool to prison pipeline" exists. There is still much work to be done, and good trouble to be made. The money raised was not a huge amount, but it still made me feel good as my friends and family donated what little they had to support the organization and its good work.

Intrigued and fascinated by Juneteenth, I researched it. Juneteenth.org, describes the holiday as follows:

Juneteenth is the oldest nationally celebrated commemoration of the ending of slavery in the United States. Dating back to 1865, it was on June 19th that the Union soldiers, led by Major General Gordon Granger, landed at Galveston, Texas with news that the war had ended and that the enslaved were now free. Note that this was two and a half years after President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation — which had become official January 1, 1863. One of General Granger's first orders of business was to read to the people of Texas, General Order Number 3 which began most significantly with:

The people of Texas are informed that in accordance with a Proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This in-

JUNETEENTH

BY RENÉE J. LEVERETTE, ESQUIRE

Okay, brace yourself. I only recently heard about Juneteenth. I had no idea it was a thing. I know this will shock some people but considering I grew up in a predominately white school district this should come as no surprise. The partial history I learned concerning African Americans was a brief lesson taught in fifth grade. To summarize, we were taught that black people used to be slaves, but then President Abraham Lincoln freed them after the Civil War. I still remember the burning feeling of humiliation as every white student in the class turned to look at me when we began covering the subject; it has never left me.

It was only this past year, in the wake of what I will call the country's long overdue racial awakening following the horrific murder of George Floyd that I first heard about Juneteenth and participated in

volves an absolute equality of rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and hired laborer.

The celebrations that followed the reading of the proclamation by General Gordon Granger began a tradition that has lasted for one hundred and fifty five years, and today is hosted in cities across America and beyond.²

The celebration of June 19th was coined “Juneteenth.”

On a personal level, learning about Juneteenth was like a reframing of the shameful history I learned so many years ago in fifth grade. Since then, I have been learning more and more about the beautiful and amazing history of Africans and African Americans. In college I had a professor, Dr. Christian Van Gorder, who was instrumental in helping me to gain a better, wider knowledge of the rich, fascinating, beautiful, and often tragic history of African Americans in this country. He took the class on a field trip to the Blacks in Wax Museum in Baltimore, Maryland. It was my first time there; like Juneteenth a short while ago, I had not even known it existed. Professor Van Gorder gave me books from his personal library about African and African American history and I began to understand that the legacy of slavery in this country is not about a people’s shame, but a people’s triumph over incredibly torturous and horrific experiences. Slavery did not break the spirit of those who were a victim of it; it showed the true strength of the African people.

Juneteenth is a way of focusing on the positive. It is a celebration of the country’s inevitable recognition of the equality of *all*. For all of those who suffered through the kidnappings, the rapes,

RENEE’S FUNDRAISER FOR EQUAL JUSTICE INITIATIVE³



\$295 RAISED OF \$250



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the Middle Passage, the brutality, and slavery; Juneteenth says, “Thank You. It was not in vain. Our humanity has finally been recognized. We honor you for your strength. We shall celebrate you and carry your memories proudly with us into the new age of FREEDOM!” Juneteenth.com provides several ideas on how to celebrate the holiday which include parades, rodeos, races, Miss Juneteenth contests, barbecues, school essay and poster contests.

Juneteenth should be a recognized National Holiday. According to history.com, 47 states recognize Juneteenth as a state holiday, and there are efforts underway to get Congress to declare it a national holiday.⁴ The idea would have seemed inconceivable to me not too long ago; but it feels like the time has finally come for the nation to recognize and honor the sacrifice and the strength of its African American ancestors and current citizens. This nation was literally built on the backs of our ancestors. Juneteenth is a way of recognizing this history and the day the yoke was removed from those backs. Every Juneteenth is a celebration of the nation’s ability to recognize a great wrong and to take steps to rectify that wrong. We must keep marching on to the day when this nation can finally proudly proclaim, without any hypocrisy, that this is a country that stands for Liberty and Justice for *all*. 🇺🇸

Notes:

1. “About the Equal Justice Initiative,” February 1, 2021. <https://eji.org/about/>.
2. “Juneteenth World Wide Celebration.” Accessed May 13, 2021. <http://juneteenth.com/>.
3. “Renee’s Fundraiser for Equal Justice Initiative,” June 18, 2020. https://m.facebook.com/nt/screen/?params=%7B%22fundraiser_campaign_id%22%3A695470747944271%2C%22source%22%3A%22feed%22%7D&path=%2Ffundraiser%2F&efsrc=https%3A%2F%2Fm.facebook.com%2Fdonate%2F695470747944271%2F&_rdr.
4. Nix, Elizabeth. “What Is Juneteenth?,” June 19, 2015. <https://www.history.com/news/what-is-juneteenth>.

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