



The Activist Files Episode 17: RIP - Justice for a Historically Black Cemetery

Josh:

For the last 12 years, Janice Dickerson has been in a civil rights battle against Westlake, also known as Axial Chemical, one of the largest vinyl manufacturing facilities in North America. Janice is fighting to get possession of the Reville Town Cemetery in Plaquemine, Louisiana, that's been in her family for more than a hundred years. Janice's third great grandfather, Robert Taylor and other former slaves purchased the land in 1881 under the Mount Zion Baptist Association. However, Westlake says it has maintained the cemetery located within its property since 1990 so the company is the rightful owner. Janice said West Lake wants the property on which the Reville Town Cemetery is located to expand the chemical plant. Janice and her attorney, Christopher Meeks are with the activist files to talk about the nepotism and corruption in Louisiana courts, the racial dynamics in this case and the struggle to maintain black owned land. Welcome Janice and Christopher.

Janice:

Thank you.

Christopher:

Hello. Thank you,

Josh:

Janice. I'm hoping that' you can tell us a bit about the history of the Mount Zion Baptist Association and the Reville Town Cemetery to get us started.

The Activist Files Episode 17: RIP - Justice for a Historically Black Cemetery

Janice: Okay. First of all, the um, cemetery was purchased in - The property for the cemetery was purchased in 1881 by a group of slaves, former slaves who needed somewhere to bury their people. It's been in the community since 1881 and people have been - first documented burial we have is 1917 that of Robert Taylor. Prior to that, death certificates were not required in Louisiana. Most of the bodies are buried in the ground. The first concrete vault was in 1946. Georgia Gulf came there initially, Georgia Pacific in the 19-, 19- about 1975-78 and of course we had no problem with them claiming ownership of the property. In 1990 they allege that they own the property because they've been, well, they possessed the property because they've been cutting the grass. Had we not cut the grass on 1881 to 1990 it would've been an overgrown wooded area.

Janice: Let's get one thing very, very clear. That property is not on Georgia Gulf, that cemetery, not on Georgia Gulf's property. What Georgia Gulf did is they closed off a public access road called McNeil Street that we used to go down from, uh, Louisiana Highway LA 405 straight into the graveyard. They forced us to cross a road called McNeil Street, cross their property to get to the cemetery that creates an illusion of the property being on their property. I have a copy of the only deed. I also have the property registered in Iberville Parish Clerk of Court's Office under a tax-exempt status. In order to get that you have to have a bill of sale. And the deed, again, I have copies of both. So far, Georgia Gulf has not been able to produce any bill of sale, nor have they had been able to produce a deed.

Janice: The attorneys that represent where Georgia Gulf/Axial/Westlake is first cousins to the sheriff of Iberville Parish. All these people are interconnected. Racism has always been prevalent. They want the property to destroy it, bulldoze the cemetery, and expand the plant. And I put together a couple of bullet points and I'm gonna go through these bullet points. Uh, we've been threatened by the, Iberville Parish Sheriff's Office. Every time we've tried, many times when we've tried to enter the grave, they threatened to take us when we went to the grave to jail if we did not leave the cemetery. The plant on numerous occasions forcing us to go across their property, they refused to open up the access gate to get to the cemetery. We've been intimidated. The sheriff's office, whenever we go, the sheriff's or the plant will call the sheriff's office.

The Activist Files Episode 17: RIP - Justice for a Historically Black Cemetery

Janice:

They come with their big guns, got their hands on their guns, and again, intimidating us to try and leave the property. Numerous times they've locked us out of the cemetery. They simply refused to open the gate. that would allow us to cross their property to get to the property we own that the cemetery's set on. They've destroyed graves. They've destroyed flowers. Their attorneys actually filed several false documents in the clerk of court's Office claim trying to claim ownership of the grave. It was allegedly bills of sales where they bought three plantations and a cemetery was part of each one of those plantations. And I'm trying to still figure out how in a real world and other than a banana republic, you can buy a property from three bill from white property owners. The Parish president allowed the infrastructure in the Parish to be destroyed by the plant, McNeil street so that they can build their plant over the road and thus prevent us from using a state highway, a state road to go down a Parish road to access the cemetery.

Janice:

The governor of Louisiana appoints the members of the cemetery board. The cemetery board has refused to enforce their laws that say cemeteries must have unrestricted access in Louisiana. The Louisiana Attorney General's office represents the cemetery board that he's their legal representative. They've issued cease-and-desist orders against the chemical plant and the church for illegally charging for burials in the cemetery. We've never charged for burials in that cemetery ever since it's been there. It's been a community graveyard and people were buried for free. Subsequently, because of the cemetery's and the cease-and-desist order issued to the church and the chemical plant, the Attorney General's office stopped burials in the cemetery, which I'm still trying to figure out how that happened. Again, the plant wants the property to bulldoze it, to build their plant over it. What I'm looking at right now is a case of domestic violence, terrorism, a hate crime and everything else. And then doing, looking up the definitions of this, clearly the plant has created all of these things. So my question is there is no justice in the court system. They've got a kangaroo court system, 18 judicial district court and uh, we've been ruled against by every judge in that district. They're all a bunch of banana republic elected officials.

The Activist Files Episode 17: RIP - Justice for a Historically Black Cemetery

Josh: And Janice, can you talk a bit about, uh, how your, how the, the community cemetery has been operating, uh, you know, for the past hundred years, more than a hundred years and why it came to be that, that your ancestors purchased that land.

Janice: Okay. The, again, it was purchased in 1881 by former slaves who left the cemetery after slavery ended. And of course the former masters would not let them be buried in the plantation cemetery slave cemetery anymore. So what they had to do was purchase a piece of property to ensure that they had a place to bury the people from the Reville Town Cemetery. Well, once the ex-slaves left the plantation, they established a small community call the Reville Town community. Subsequently they had to buy a piece of property for the graveyard. And if you travel up and down the river in Louisiana, everywhere you will find a small black community, you will also find that community's graveyard. I mean from 1881 up until they stopped burials, all of my relatives are buried in that cemetery on both sides of my family. And as we know, allegedly, cemeteries are supposed to be sacred sites except for when you come to a black cemetery, dealing with a bunch of folks who I call corrupt clansmen, who decide they're gonna take the local government and the parish state government and try and turn it into a piece of property owned by the chemical plant, uh, for their own use.

Janice: And of course it's sacred. Could you imagine having your Mama, your daddy, your grandparents, your great grandparents and everybody else and a place and you got a bunch of no good report, uh banana republic white people trying to tell you you don't own it. And ever since you've known yourself, you've been going back there for burials. We put flowers back there religiously. We paint the graves, we do everything to upkeep the grave. And it's kind of like a generational thing. My earliest recollection of going to that graveyard when I was four and we would go back there and even as a child, they give us a paintbrush and we had the paint what we could. So it's a very sacred place. In addition to that, the cemeteries rich in black history and black culture. And as you know with integration, we lost a lot of our history and culture.

Janice: We can go back there and one of the few places you can pack, check, track generations of black people through info

The Activist Files Episode 17: RIP - Justice for a Historically Black Cemetery

generations, black back. You don't need to go to a ancestry.com you know from oral histories that who's buried in there. They are military veterans buried in there. But again, in this country, black people have no value. So it's a very sacred place. It's a place that was developed for the burial of ex-slaves. It's the place we've kept. We've maintained, we respected our dead and we did, we've done everything in the world to preserve that burial ground. And if you go back to history, to the history of the African continent and various burials have always been very sacred in the black community. And cemeteries are placed in fact that black folks always respect.

Josh: And what would happen today if you tried to, to visit your parents or visit this land that's so sacred, not just to your family, but to your whole culture.

Janice: Uh, it's no telling. It depends on whether or not the plant discerned - uh, the plant attorneys decide to call their cousin, the sheriff who decides to threaten us with guns and arrests, or if the chemical plant decide they're going to use their security guards and not open the gates from day to day to day. We go back there. We never know what to expect. That's why opening that public road that was used for over a century to access the graveyard is so important to get it back open because again, they are controlling our access because we have to cross their property to get to our property. And Chris can elaborate this on this more. In Louisiana law, they said that if you're part property is bounded by somebody else's property, you will have to have access to your property. But of course, being black and dealing with an entire corrupt governmental structure, they don't enforce the law. They make up their own stuff as they do kind of like they do in Venezuela. Uh, some other kind of banana republic. Laws that apply to black people don't apply to white folks. Cause if this would've been, would have been a white graveyard we never would have these problems, but they figured they can do anything to us given the racist history that has always existed in that Parish. So we never know what's going to happen every time we go back there, we don't know if we're going to jail or what's going to happen.

Josh: Can you elaborate a bit on, on the racial history of that Parish and of the area and do you think something like this could ever happen in a predominantly white community or

The Activist Files Episode 17: RIP - Justice for a Historically Black Cemetery

is it only because of the historically black community that they're able to get away with this?

Janice:

It's big. They're able to get away with making up their own laws, refusing and enforce the law that's on the book because it is a black community. This would never happen to a white cemetery, and if you go back and you do the history, look at the history of black cemeteries, not only and in Iberville Parish, but throughout this country. Currently people are bulldozing black cemeteries to make way for industrial development, pipelines, highways, different kinds of roles. Whatever white people decide they want to do, they just bulldoze a black cemetery. They bulldoze them for parking lots and shopping centers. They bulldoze them for subdivisions and everything else. Go back to the, I went back to the 1850s in Iberville Parish. They had about, I think eight or ten lynchings in that Parish. There's a history of stealing black folks property in that Parish.

Janice:

It had one of the worst battles in Iberville Parish during the 60s for equal equal rights and voting rights. That has probably occurred anywhere else. If you hit the internet and just put the Plaquemine civil rights movement, you will find that there was a black church called Plymouth Rock, Plymouth Rock Baptist Church during the civil rights era where the sheriff, legislators and white elected, officials actually rode horses through the Plymouth Rock Baptist church to bust up a civil rights meeting. They also hosed people down with firehoses. It's a place where white folks reap benefits and Black folks are given hell. This is reminiscent, reminiscent of living in the Jim Crow era and actually what I call Iberville Parish and living there and having to go through there. It's part of the second Jim Crow era and it's not getting any better. This is a Parish where you have a majority black population, but all of your elected officials are white.

Janice:

This is a Parish where there's one judge in 18 judicial district, and in order to get that judge, they carved out a large portion of the black population and put in one district what we call back during the day gerrymandering- well, they gerrymandered that district. If no reason in the world, the school board is controlled by white people. You have a majority black school district, black student population there. The large majority of their administrators in the

The Activist Files Episode 17: RIP - Justice for a Historically Black Cemetery

school system are white. You have a slight majority black teacher ratio. The ratio of educators in that Parish should represent the student population. We know people take off their robes at night and they come to the class and they'll attempt to teach your children. These people have never had the interest of these black children at heart. And thank God I graduated from a segregated school cause I probably wouldn't have a high school diploma today.

Janice:

People were beaten they're trying to try to register the vote. It's no different than anywhere else in the South and maybe a little bit worse. Uh, you look at employment and in Parish offices, majority of the people employed are white. A majority of the people locked up in prison from there are black. Even when I was a detective in '74 white kids would shoplift during the summer, they call their parents. Black kids shoplift, they would give them a juvenile record. I told them back then, if you're going to call white people, children, white parents to pick up the children, you're going to call black parents to pick up their children. Nothing has changed in that Parish. It's still an outdated racist environment where you have to fight neck and tug just for survival. The police now they'll stop black people on the road and give them tickets. White people keep going. White people commit crimes. They don't go to jail. Black people commit crimes, whatever the maximum sentence is for whatever they did, that's what they're going to give them. It's one of the most racist environments I've ever seen.

Josh:

And can you talk a bit about the, um, the chemical company Axial Chemical and, and what do you think it wants to do with this land? Why it's fighting so hard for so many years for this land and, um, also about the chemical companies in the surrounding area and what they've been doing to the predominantly black communities all around Louisiana.

Janice:

Basically what they want this with, with Axial/Westlake the cemetery is sitting in the development in the middle of any growth they may possibly have. I know what they want to do with it. They want to bulldoze it and build their chemical plant over it. It's not all just like I go, yeah, this is what's happening all over the country. So this will be the expansion project. The plant has always been a bad actor. Back in 1987 they were gassing us like we were in concentration camps, you know, running from chlorine

The Activist Files Episode 17: RIP - Justice for a Historically Black Cemetery

explosions. PVC was, polyvinyl chloride, was dumped on us and on a daily basis we filed a suit against them for a long-term health study. Their attorneys came back and we negotiated a buyout. That's how I ended up in Brulee leaving Plaquemine a because of that buyout. So they've always been bad actors.

Janice:

Um, Martinville, which is located next to Dow chemical, they bought out - Dow, bought out the Martinville community. A lot of the people settled up in the area where I am in Brulin. There was another plant called SNL, Flo Pam. They bought out a small community called the Ella community and this is what they do. They get, they come in, they gas you to the point where you have no choice but to leave. The other choice if you decide to stay there. Had I stayed there, uh, I probably would be dead and would not be talking to you right now because they would've killed us from exposing us to their chemicals. We go to the graveyard now to put new flowers on the grave, pick up the old flowers. They are full of polyvinyl chloride and polyvinyl chloride is easy to see. It's like a little white powdery substance.

Janice:

When you pick up a, and I buy all silk flowers. I never buy live flowers. You pick up a silk flower and you leave out that grave. You full of PVC. The flower is full of it. So they are bad actors. You call the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality and report releases. They'll tell them, oh, that's on our property. We can release. You try and tell them it's not on their property. I have a deed, another corrupt department in there. They just give them a blanket permits they're supposed to look at, and of course there is no monitoring. If they were monitoring the air in that area, they would know what they're releasing. At one point, Georgia Gulf released phenol in the Mississippi River and most Parishes get their drinking water supply from the Mississippi River and they contaminated it. They ended up getting a fine, it's always been a bad actor on the scene, and of course black lives have never mattered from day one when they came there, federal regulations as close as that chemical plant is to that cemetery.

Janice:

Federal law actually prevent that. Nobody, and of course we didn't know they couldn't do what they were doing at that point. We didn't know there were federal laws that protected cemeteries, various and everything else. So they

The Activist Files Episode 17: RIP - Justice for a Historically Black Cemetery

built it. That plant should never expanded that close to that cemetery prior to black folks being in that area, prior to white folks being in that area. Acadiana Acadians. Anybody else? Native Americans inhabited that area when they first came. I'm sure. I'm sure because it was inhabited by Native American. I'm sure they destroyed many many Native American burial sites. And of course nothing has happened to date. Uh, whatever they do they have to do in an archeological study and who knows, they may still be destroying them. They destroyed Native American burial grounds. What you think they will do to the Reville Town Cemetery if they got their hands on it.

Josh: Can you talk about the communities fighting back against the sorts of environmental racism that you described? And you know, you've described uh, one, one plant releasing PVC a number of years ago, but, but uh, this is an ongoing fight, right?

Janice: Uh, it's an ongoing fight since the Reville Town community's no longer there. After we sued them in '87, we settled the case in '88. Uh, we took a monetary settlement that people sued. The other people built a little, they, they bought properties. It's just like on a plantation. They bought a little piece of property and gave them through a little three or four different little homes and select from, they could select that. So they build that in my understanding, if the people had a mortgage on the property, then Reville Town they made arrangements with the lending institution to have that mortgage payment, follow them to whatever little house they had built on. They've just always been a bad actor.

Josh: Right. And, and can you talk about the relationship, the historic relationship between the local government and the chemical company too?

Janice: Uh, the, the chemical company ever since they came, they always by their politicians, actually the current sheriff and the current Parish president, I pulled their financial campaign disclosure statements. And of course the plant is in fact large contributors to their, their campaigns. So they are actually bought - they're already bought and they've been buying them ever since they've been there. There's no laws to prevent them from buying the candidates. And as long as, I mean the public officials I guess as long as they

The Activist Files Episode 17: RIP - Justice for a Historically Black Cemetery

give them contributions within the legal limits, they can continue to buy the sheriff, the Parish president, the governor and the attorney general and whomever else is connected with that, with that place. And of course, um, with a, a majority of white people on the council planning and zoning regulations, they can actually put a chemical plant anywhere they want. They can dump it on top of you if they want, just like they did us. Laws haven't changed. Racism hasn't changed. Everything has remained the same.

Josh:

Chris, can you talk a bit about, uh, the legal history of the case, where it stands now, all of the developments that have led up to the current fight and where you hope that it will go in the coming month?

Christopher:

Sure. Um, the case has actually a very complicated legal history. Um, initially, you know, so as Janice mentioned, this property was bought by freed men back in the 1880s and at the time, you know, coming out of slavery without any education, um, they really didn't know how to form, um, I guess corporate entities. And so when they bought the property in the name of the church or in the name of the Mount Zion Baptist Association, sorry, um, they hadn't done what they, I guess they hadn't done. Um, I guess with the formal legal requirements are to form an association, they just called themselves association cause that's what they thought you had to do. And so without having any formal legal entity formed, um, what our opponents have done in many cases has challenged our ability to bring any kind of suit because there's, they say that, well no entity exist or if one did exist, well then you, we aren't the correct people to bring the suit and the name of the entity because in Louisiana, the, the members of the association would have to get together, vote on who has the legal right to or who's going to act on behalf of association to move forward.

Christopher:

And so and the courts of kind of bought into that and so it has been a problem. Um, but otherwise, if that's the case and we had to get all of the members of original association to get together and vote on who can bring suit on behalf of the association, and that's a huge problem because they're all dead. And so what do you do in that situation now? What we've discovered, I guess, following, um, you know, probably in the early 1900s there were some laws that came about in Louisiana that allowed you to bring suit on

The Activist Files Episode 17: RIP - Justice for a Historically Black Cemetery

behalf of a religious organization that had not been formally incorporated. And so we've, we've been trying to use that to our advantage, but the courts have kind of kicked it back at us. And so recently what we've done in Louisiana, there's, um, possession and there's ownership and you initially start with a possessed reaction whenever you're, whenever someone has I guess has challenged your right to use property or they've kind of evicted you from the use of the property.

Christopher:

And so we've brought a possessed reaction in. Janice and all of her relatives, they will all tell you that they'd been burying individuals and that cemetery since it was initially purchased in 1881 by the association and they'd been using it at the association's permission because that was, that was what it was bought for. That's what every member of the Reville Town community has used it for. And so what we've done is we've filed, um, a possessor reaction, but as precarious possessor. Precarious possessors anyone is that, let's say if I own a piece of property and I lease it to you, well the person that leased it from you would be your precarious possessor. He's essentially using the property on your behalf. And so, and that's exactly what Janice and all of her relatives and the other individuals who have ancestors buried in that cemetery, um, they're all essentially precarious possessors. So we brought suit in that regard and we've, the chemical company said, well, no, we interrupted your possession a long time ago. And so what you have to do is from the moment of I guess eviction or, um, some kind of interruption in your possession, you have with him one year to file suit. And what they've claimed is that they erected a fence around the property in early two thousands, right after, I think, 9/11. And since they, they did that so long ago, we had to bring suit a long time ago to prevent that. Well, it's not, you know, and the court actually bought into that. And the problem with that is they didn't actually interrupt any possession of the cemetery. They just blocked, as Janice talked about, there used to be a road that led into the cemetery and the chemical companies tore it up.

Christopher:

And so for them to get into the cemetery, they had to go an alternate route and crossover the chemical companies property to get into the cemetery. And so what we said is like, no, they never, they never interrupted their possession of the cemetery. They, all they interrupted was their ability

The Activist Files Episode 17: RIP - Justice for a Historically Black Cemetery

to cross the property to get into the cemetery. There's what's called a Louisiana pretium right of passage, which means if you have a landlocked piece of property, you and you can't, there's no, it doesn't border on essentially a highway. Well then you have to give someone a right of passage to get their own property. And so what we've said is no, and what I think is right and the law is no, they've, they just interrupted their right to cross the property to get into the cemetery. Now the reason possession is significant and why we're fighting that battle now instead of maybe over ownership is because if, if they can establish that they've, they've been possessing the property well then they can ultimately say, oh, we've possessed it long enough so such that we own it because in Louisiana what happened, you know, and as Janice said, you know, that they don't have any title to the property.

Christopher:

And so really their only route or their, I guess their most valid route to get to ownership is to say, no, we've been possessing it for more than a year, which means we have the right to possess in the end, we've been having, we've had possession of it either 10 years or 30 years or two, two time periods in Louisiana. If you possessed 10, uh, 10 years of just title, which is just any kind of document that says, Oh, I'm transferring ownership to you. Um, or if 30 years, if - it doesn't matter, you just evict whoever's on the property and you keep it and you use it for 30 years then you get ownership. So that's why it's significant because if they can establish it, they've been possessing it, well then they're going to try and establish that they're the owners of it. And then if after the possession issues are litigated, of course, and then you can fight, you go fight over ownership.

Christopher:

And the reason you kind of avoid an ownership battle initially why we haven't got to ownership yet in this case is because whoever's deemed in the person who is not in possession of it will then has to go show that they have title going back all the way to the sovereign, meaning the first land grants in Louisiana back when the United States first acquired it in 1812, I believe. Um, and so that's, that's difficult to do. However we can do that. And so if we have to fight the ownership battle, we will, we're just trying to avoid that. And you know, you never, you never want to have to give yourself a harder burden than you, they need, um, is necessary, of proof. So that's, that's where we are right now. Currently. Um, we had a trial on our, you know,

The Activist Files Episode 17: RIP - Justice for a Historically Black Cemetery

as I said before, the chemical company said, no, we've been possessing it for more than a year.

Christopher: And you know, we interrupted your possession a long time ago. So we had a small trial on that and the judge, the judge agreed with him. And so now we're our, we have an appeal before the Louisiana First Circuit Court of Appeals. And that's what's pending right now.

Josh: And what was that trial like? What was your experience with their lawyers? I mean, how did they try to prove that, uh, that they've been in possession of the land for over a year?

Christopher: It was a very tough trial, you know, and because they're so, they're very difficult procedural issues involved and very difficult um, legal assets. Property law is very complicated in Louisiana. And so it was difficult, you know, part of it was educating the court on here's what the law is, here's the complicated history of this. But then all, you know, the other hard part is, look, it's, you know, we, it's kind of like a David and Goliath battle here.

Christopher: You know, it's us. And you've got five lawyers sitting on the other side of you. And you know, me and Janice sitting at a table doing our best and fighting as hard as we can, you know, cause the cemetery means a lot and there's a lot of stake here. So it was very difficult. Um, and I guess what they've, they tried to say as I said before, is that, you know, they built the fence a long time ago and they've been forcing Janice and all of her relatives to ask for permission to go as the cemetery, which is an indication that they, that they might possess it. But like I said, you know, having to explain to the judge now they just interrupt their right of passage.

Janice: Let, let me add one thing, Chris. Um, that's why McNeil Street is so important because until they closed off, that infrastructure, we didn't have to cross their property. Had they not illegally closed off a public road, we would never ever have had to cross their property. That road has never been abandoned in accordance with Louisiana Law. And that's why it's important that we sued the Parish to make them open that road back up. Um, one other thing in searching the Clerk of Court's office, the first documented case, uh, title, uh, organization unincorporated use was

The Activist Files Episode 17: RIP - Justice for a Historically Black Cemetery

1874 and that was the Mount Zion First Baptist Association of Louisiana. Even though it's unincorporated, they still have that document in the clerk's office. And the other thing that we hadn't touched on because all our ancestors bought it, I don't know if we need to take out a succession on the property, but in Louisiana you have a right to inherit property.

Janice:

There are two constitutional issues I looked at. One is a civil rights act of 1866 that gave ex-slaves the right to buy property own property, have contracts and the heirs to inherit the property. So we have, in addition to dealing with these full, there are a couple of constitutional issues that we hadn't even gotten gotten yet. And so far as the fence is concerned: prior to, they are pulling up our fence, which was a barbed wire fence long before the plant came there. We had a barbed wire fence around the property, they pulled up that fence and put another fence around it on their property. So if once they tore up the road the Parish didn't intervene, they tore it up illegally. We didn't have no other way to get to the cemetery but to cross their property.

Christopher:

Yeah. And just another difficult challenge, and I don't want to go too far into this, but you know what, we have of course elected officials, but are our judges are also elected. So that's another, um, political aspect that we have to deal with and consider. And so that's another challenge I guess, that we're facing. I don't want to get too much into that or suggest suggest anything, but that's just another aspect of it that we have to deal with and, you know, and, and there are a lot of, I guess, inherent biases in the courts, uh, here in Louisiana. And, you know, we do have a long stretch of, um, racism and, you know, that kind of thing to contend with.

Josh:

Janice, you've talked a bit about how your particular struggle and, and your community struggle for access, um, to the cemetery where your family is buried and how it fits into the greater struggle for black land and in particular, black cemeteries. I'm hoping you can talk some more about that. Uh, that ongoing struggle and also this sort of national conversation that we're having now about, um, reparations for, um, this theft of black land and black wealth that I think a lot of folks assumed, you know, ended when slavery ended. But I think that your, your struggle in your cases is

The Activist Files Episode 17: RIP - Justice for a Historically Black Cemetery

an example of how that theft is ongoing. And I'm wondering how you see, um, your case fit into the conversation around reparations and whether we should be understanding the theft of black land as an ongoing occurrence rather than something that ended, you know, 150 years ago,

Janice:

America as racist as it is, even though following slavery, they promised 40 acres and a mule. If they gave it, they took it back. And, and in many instances, if white people wanted the land that black folks not, not to, um, given away property of white folks decided they wanted a piece of land that black folks owned they just lynched the people who, black folks who owned it, they'll kill them, shoot them or chase them out of town. The next thing they'll go file a quick claim deed in the court, this has been going on. They don't do the physical lynching as much now as they did following slavery but that was the white people acquired black people's property. And like I say, there's a guy named, um, Michael Trinkley and, and he's an expert, one of the few in the country who can actually track black cemeteries, the loss of black cemeteries and how people have stolen black cemeteries for their personal land use, government land use ever since the end of slavery.

New Speaker:

Reparations, like I said, we'll never get in this country given the racist history in this country. Nobody's going to give black folks anything. As a matter of fact, they owe us. If there's anything we all should be taking, uh, be given money by this country for the free labor our ancestors provided, particularly to build the South. It's not going to happen. You know, they gave the Japanese some reparations for placing them in internment camps. And I go back to the Native Americans. Look how they took this whole, white people took this whole country from Native Americans, place them on reservations. And my daughter was telling me the other day that Native Americans could go to any state supported college in America. That's not reparations. Native Americans have never received anything. And if they were originally took everything from Native Americans, what do we think we going to get from them?

Janice:

All they've given Native Americans is a hard time. The only thing, like I said, we, we've got the one hope, I don't know with Trump if it would work. And of course this is up to the

The Activist Files Episode 17: RIP - Justice for a Historically Black Cemetery

lawyers. Well of course we have these civil rights acts supposed to be enforced. And of course we have something in the Constitution, 14th amendment called due process. And we know those documents are as flawed as they could be, too and then force them in interpreting like the wrong, like Chris said they enforce and interpret the law like they want to enforcing and interpret. And my whole thing with the possession thing is if we've continuously buried people in that cemetery, how can they possess it? If we've continued to cut the grass, how can they possess it? They're operating on an affidavit from one white man that say they cut the grass when we've got tons of people in that community or from that community who's given affidavit saying, we've always cleaned that cemetery.

Janice:

Uh, they even lie and say that bought the flowers. I know they've never bought a flower for any of my relatives and they, I like to know who they put them on. And the other part is they claim they love the veterans. How in the world you're going to bulldoze American veterans who fought back as far as world war one that we can document in, in that cemetery up to the Vietnam War. It's just, it's part of the racist history and he, and we're going to continue to fight. I don't know what's going to happen, but I'm going to lay down in that cemetery. I'm gonna lay down, they're gonna have to kill me. One of the other things, you're always fearful for your life when we go out there because you never, never know if he's going to get shot. Like my granddaughter told me one time, she wasn't going to leave me back there with those deputies because I might disappear because it's in a wooded area and I wouldn't put that past them.

Josh:

All right. Thanks for sharing that. And thank you both so much for uh, for talking with me and joining us on The Activist Files. I think it's such an important example of the intersections of so many issues with racial justice and the racist history of this country with Native American, the treatment of Native Americans and environmental racism and the ongoing theft of black land and the possibility or, or lack of reparations in this country. So thank you both so much for joining us and we'll stay tuned with your struggles for sure.

Janice:

Thank you for doing this.

The Activist Files Episode 17: RIP - Justice for a Historically Black Cemetery

Josh

Take care.