



A theology of redemption: How Jazmine Brooks has inspired a movement in Staunton

Her words at a prayer vigil inspired a protest in Staunton, and a big neon sign of Stonewall Jackson went forever dark.

By Monique Calello, mcalello@newsleader.com

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STAUNTON – Jazmine Brooks steps on the stage in her small Southern city’s park — which used to be the park for whites only — and looks out at the people sitting in lawn chairs.

“[George Floyd’s murder](#) was inevitable,” she tells the largely white crowd.

She’s Black, an ordained reverend, an inclusivity expert at the university in Staunton, Virginia. She’s 26.

Brooks is representing the AME Church [at this prayer vigil](#), so she wears her reverend’s collar — along with a favorite African print skirt and a pair of Nikes. She projects an almost-athletic intensity, but it’s words that leap from her.

Poised on the edge of the park's stage named after a Confederate general, the reverend in sneakers tells them, "Until we are willing to grapple with the policies and politics that are born out of Black enslavement, we will see countless more George Floyds."

A young man in the crowd listens.

Less than a week later, he begins to protest every afternoon outside a local hotel named after that same Confederate general. Others join him. They stand outside, rain or shine. They write letters to city council and the hotel's owners. They are approached on the sidewalk across the street from the hotel by guests both supportive and combative.



Above them a giant rooftop neon sign glows nightly with a name that protesters say represents slavery, treason and white supremacy. [STONEWALL JACKSON, in all caps](#). From a mile away drivers entering the city can see the name floating above the rooftops like a signature.

[The protesters show up](#), every day for seven weeks. The reverend with the sneakers is with them. She's proud of Aaron Barner, the young man she inspired.

They aren't the first to complain about the hotel's name. There've been rumors that the parent company was already working on a switch, that historic building code might make removing the sign difficult. But nothing happens. So they keep showing up.

On July 27, the name Stonewall Jackson is removed without fanfare from the awning by the guest entrance. Downtown residents wonder: will the lighted sign atop the hotel be turned on that night? No one is sure if it's been on lately.

That evening, the large neon letters are dark.

'I think this moment that is becoming history is fueling the fight'

Brooks isn't interested in talking about how she felt after George Floyd died.

How did she feel about Breonna Taylor? Freddie Gray? Tamir Rice?

"It was a cut-and-paste story with a new name — no new face, no new enemy, no new issue, just a new name and a few rearranged details," says Jazmine Brooks.

"My feelings were the same as everyone else who lives under the constant threat of white violence and had to witness yet another state-sanctioned murder."

The second-youngest of seven children doesn't have time for feelings that don't translate into movement. "To be honest, the question about how Black people feel after watching these public executions, on display for public consumption, is capricious, to me."

Brooks was already deep into community action.

The [Stonewall Jackson Hotel sign](#) is the least subtle reminder of the layers of history Stauntonians must confront. The community lost its only Black member of city council in June. And Brooks had run unsuccessfully for school board in the same election.

Brooks doesn't let the reality of an all-white city council and majority-white school board slow her drive to amplify her city's Black voices. She built a team to address racial discrimination and economic inequities in Staunton schools.

Everything she does flows from her theology of redemption. All people can be redeemed, she says, but until systemic and structural racism is dismantled entirely, Black deaths are predestined.

Though things look bleak, she says one night on the phone after a long day, "I don't think I've ever been more hopeful about what's possible than I am now. There's a lot of pressure for everybody right now.

"I think this moment that is becoming history is fueling the fight. It is opening more eyes. More people are joining the cause. More people are showing up."



What Brooks believes needs to happen in Staunton

Jazmine Brooks says that whatever eventually happens in Staunton will be a result of the entire community's intentions and actions, not the suggestions of one person.

“These steps are not the answer to creating a more just world,” she says. “They are intermediary steps. The final answer is a complete overhaul of the systems and politics we currently engage.”

- **Step 1:** Redistribution of power by way of public commissions and committees. Publicize openings on these boards as well as the applications.
- **Step 2:** Implement a Staunton commission on equity and achievement with outlined authority over issues of equity within the council, the public schools, city committees and throughout the city. This should be an independent body.
- **Step 3:** Desegregate the public schools — racially and economically. Implement an accountability system for racism in public schools as opposed to teacher training that does not center anti-racism.
- **Step 4:** Implement a policing oversight committee — an independent body with official authority.
- **Step 5:** Implement the Marcus Alert, which would mobilize mental health professionals along with police when appropriate.
- **Step 6:** Put an end to forced and exploited labor in Middle River Regional Jail — incarcerated citizens cannot be the city's slaves, Brooks says.

'This moment has become a catalyst'

It's a few days after [the Stonewall Jackson sign came down](#). As Jazmine Brooks leaves the Mary Baldwin University campus where she teaches, she checks to make sure the campus flags are all flying at half-staff [for Sen. John Lewis](#), whose body is lying in state in Washington, D.C.

It's another day that could be bleak but which to her holds great promise.

“I think this moment has become a catalyst for a shift,” she says. “Though the work is long and hard, I think what we’re working toward is within reach.”

When she’s done teaching or preaching, she often takes refuge back out in the community. Like tracking down a good place for steak and potatoes on a Friday night in downtown Staunton.

Or a glass of wine with a small group of friends. Sometimes it’s just a nap. Sometimes it’s a trip to Hampton Roads to visit family. Seeing her sister and five brothers and her nieces and nephews recharges her.

She admits she’s uncomfortable being the focus of the story, to the point she’s talked about it with her mentors. “There are folks who do more than I do.”

She realizes while this is not about her, it’s a defining time for her in her own life.

Now here she is, on the phone again, answering questions about what she thinks the next year holds for Staunton.

“To be clear, Staunton is a microcosm of the rest of America. What we see in Staunton is the maintenance of the white supremacy, economic exploitation, colonialism and imperialism that exists across our nation.”

Her focus is accountability in government. While she believes people can be redeemed, she has no such patience with systems that have perpetuated racism.

Brooks de-emphasizes her role in the community’s evolution while underscoring the possibility she can feel in the air, that puts some additional bounce beneath her sneakers.

“I am just one, lending my gifts where they fit and being present when and where I can.”



The family who wouldn't sell: Staunton's Barrister Books resists courthouse-expansion plan.

It was the end of July when an anonymous person sent a real estate agent to buy properties surrounding the Augusta County Courthouse.

By Monique Calello, mcalello@newsleader.com

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STAUNTON – It was the end of July when a real estate agent from Cottonwood Commercial started to approach property owners surrounding the Augusta County Courthouse.

One of the properties the agent visited was Barrister Books on 1-3 Lawyers Row. An historic building that once housed law offices, a home and even a barber shop, the bookstore isn't just a business. It's the next chapter in Staunton's history and now home to the Arnold family who live above the store.

Dave Arnold, a WWII veteran who was lead engineer for the first space shuttle launch, said, "Seventy-five years ago, if somebody told me that someone would try to take my home in this country, I wouldn't have believed it."

The visit from the real estate agent happened unexpectedly.

"The doorbell rang, and I opened the door," Dave Arnold said. "And there was this man with these envelopes in his hand. And he said he had somebody interested in buying our property, our building. And I said, 'Really? Who is it?'"

“He said, ‘Well, I can't tell you that. If you exercise this option, you will know in 72 hours.’”

After that, he started to quiz Dave Arnold to find out who owned the properties surrounding the courthouse and if he knew how to get a hold of them. Dave Arnold said he felt certain he must have been one of the first ones he contacted because he didn't know anybody lived in the building.

“He had done zero homework. And the offer was laughable.”

Dave Arnold told the agent, they weren't interested in selling. The agent gave him the contract, left and then came back again in a couple days.

“By then, you don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure this out,” he said. “Within a day or two, it was obvious that the county was on the move again to take all this property and bulldoze it and tear it down.”

Dave Arnold told him to just go away.

“That's about the last time I heard of him. Anthony's heard from him a couple times. I blocked his number.”



The next time the agent returned, he met with Dave Arnold's daughter Amy Arnold and his son-in-law Anthony Baker. The Arnolds and Bakers are co-owners of Barrister Books and the home at 1-3 Lawyers Row.

At first, Baker and Amy Arnold wondered what was going on when their dad handed them a contract from an anonymous person and told them about the agent stopping by.

Over the years, individuals have approached them about buying the building, and this offer didn't come close to ones they've turned down in the past, they said. The property's current assessed value is \$263,700. The anonymous offer was for \$275,000. They dismissed it as odd given the

purchaser wouldn't even reveal their name and somewhat insulting that whoever it was hadn't stepped foot inside the building to see the immense investment and renovation done.

But their initial bewilderment soon diminished when they realized the agent was putting offers in to all of the other properties. Dad was right, they said. The county was on the move again.

“The last we had heard, the plans were a pretty reasonable collaboration with the City of Staunton, where they were going to move to the elementary school and renovate the building across the street,” said Amy Arnold. “And I was actually really proud of the city and county to get to that point, for being able to make an agreement like that, that respected the historic context of the courthouse and solved the problem. So I was surprised.”

While the contract didn't identify the buyer, after Baker spoke to the agent a second time and said they knew it was probably the county, the agent confirmed.

“It took a while. But he did admit to it being the county,” said Baker.

Baker sensed the county had covered their bases and everyone got contracts around the same time. It wasn't long before he found out the building on 11 S. Augusta St. owned by Chip Clarke was also on the chopping block.

“They got Chip's. He was going to renovate it, but they got him,” said Baker.

Then they learned the owner of the Echols building agreed to sell.

“It was a bit difficult getting the Echols building because the guy wanted to make a boutique hotel there,” said Baker.

But when the county offered the owner \$200,000 above the assessment value, the option agreement was signed by the end of August.

Baker said suddenly all of the buildings became available for purchase.

“It was interesting how it all happened,” he said. “A little eerie,” Amy Arnold chimed in.

Only two other properties across from the Arnolds are not part of the nine buildings now secured for purchase.

Kimberly West, a lawyer by trade and trustee for the American Shakespeare Center, recently purchased the property at 17-19 Barristers Row and told the Cottonwood agent she had no intention of selling.

West was getting ready to start extensive renovations with architect Carter Green at Frazier Associates when she had to stop everything until they could fully determine the structural impact a \$59-million-dollar courthouse-expansion construction project would have on her historic building, she said.

The other building at 21 Barristers Row is owned by multiple heirs. There is no record that Augusta County tried to purchase it.

Eminent domain

Twice, the Cottonwood agent brought up the words: eminent domain. First to the Arnolds and then to West.

It wasn't predatory, said Baker, but it still felt like a veiled threat delivered in a sly manner. The agent told them that by selling, they wouldn't have to be concerned about eminent domain.

"They said, 'Your dad's getting old,'" said Baker. "'And his wife needs a walker, and they need to live on a first floor.' So he was hinting that maybe it was in our best interest."

"Which is ridiculous," said Amy Arnold.

When West told the agent she wasn't interested in selling, the agent called her back and said he could disclose that his anonymous client is a governmental entity, she said.

"You had mentioned you wanted to do a renovation, and I didn't want you to proceed forward without knowing that I represent a governmental entity," he told West.

"He used the precise words eminent domain. His tone was serious," said West.

She reminded him that she is a lawyer and not averse to litigation.

"I took it as a threat. I don't know the intent, but I took it as a threat."

According to both property owners, when it was clear they wouldn't sell, the agent and Augusta County Administrator Timothy Fitzgerald returned to show them the county's expansion plans in advance as a courtesy, and Fitzgerald clarified that they weren't interested in pursuing eminent domain.

Historic preservation

On a personal level, Amy Arnold is focused on saving the bookshop, saving her parent's home and saving the investment they have in the building. From the perspective of a landscape architect and advocate for historic preservation who also was the city planner for Staunton for six years, she said the current plans are heartbreaking.

"Landscape architecture is all about context. And for me, the idea of saving the courthouse without the context, makes the courthouse into this odd sort of little artifact, in particular, if your intention is to build around it or add additions to it. So, that to me is heartbreaking to think about this context going down and it really changing the historic perspective of the 1901 courthouse."

Amy Arnold often thinks about all of the deals that must have gotten done on Lawyers and Barristers row in the 1800s, even the 1700s, and the people walking around here, she wondered aloud.

“Thomas Jefferson practiced law for four years here,” added Baker, who then shared a gem from one of Jefferson's first cases in Augusta County that he keeps to show visitors to the bookstore.

Now this history is in jeopardy, said Amy Arnold. “And that I find heartbreaking.”

If the county’s courthouse-expansion plans, now under review by the Staunton Historic Preservation Commission, are approved by Staunton City Council, life won’t be the same for the few families that remain.

“It would really be difficult to be here through the construction, particularly for my parents,” said Amy Arnold. “While they are vital, active people, I think it would still be grating on anyone. But if that means we save the building, I guess that's what we're going to have to do.”

The family said they have so much invested in the building emotionally and financially, in terms of ways integrated into their lives.

“We really, genuinely, put our heads together and can't come up with a way to do what we do here any other way,” said Amy Arnold.

Preserving its history is a given, she said.

“We wouldn't be even interested in being here or on Barristers Row or next to the garden, or any of that if we didn't believe in preservation,” she emphasized.

It will permanently alter things quite a bit, said Baker.

“One thing we liked about the building was, it's basically a freestanding building right in the middle of downtown,” said Baker. “All three sides and part of this side.”

Dave Arnold, a painter, has an art studio on the first floor surrounded by walls wrapped in windows and light. If the plans are approved, a five-story building will be five feet away from their property line and tower over them.

The family walks outside and stands on Barristers Row and looks down the street to South Augusta. The street closure is also part of the plans.

Baker said he sees people outside walking around the area, peeking inside the windows and taking pictures of the buildings as if soon the only part of their history that will remain is a photograph.