

# A New Avenue

Faced with a proposed \$11 million investment to revamp Monument Avenue, local leaders consider the future of the historic corridor

By Rodrigo Arriaza

**A**fter a summer defined by nightly protests against racism and police violence, state and local officials now seek to reimagine a swath of Monument Avenue that has been anchored by Confederate symbols for more than a century.

In the wake of George Floyd's killing in Minneapolis last May, protesters took to Richmond's streets for months to rally for reforms, including slashing the Richmond Police Department's budget and forming an independent civilian review board with subpoena power to examine acts of police misconduct.

Citywide marches also turned their attention toward Confederate and Colonial symbols, with protesters toppling statues of Confederate President Jefferson Davis, Christopher Columbus, Confederate Gen. Williams Carter Wickham, the Richmond Howitzer monument on the campus of Virginia Commonwealth University and the First Virginia Regiment statue in Meadow Park in June.

Their actions got results: Starting on July 1, city-owned Confederate >



Philonise Floyd spoke at the Lee Monument on July 28, 2020, during an event that showcased a holographic artwork that features his late brother, George Floyd, whose death sparked protests around the country this past summer.



A Virginia Supreme Court decision on the fate of Monument Avenue's Robert E. Lee statue is expected between February and April. Gov. Ralph Northam ordered it to be taken down in June 2020, but a series of lawsuits has delayed the removal.

LEFT: LONDON SHRODER; RIGHT: JUSTIN VAUGHAN

statues along Monument Avenue and elsewhere were removed and taken into temporary storage under an emergency order by Mayor Levar Stoney, citing a public safety hazard. As of October 2020, the city had received 22 proposals from museums, historical societies and private individuals to acquire the monuments, City Council Chief of Staff Lawrence Anderson explained at a Council organizational meeting. Recommendations for their disposition are expected sometime this year, he said.

Meanwhile, Gov. Ralph Northam called for the removal of the state-owned statue of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee that has towered over Monument Avenue since 1890. Although the governor's effort has been mired by lawsuits, Northam Chief of Staff Clark Mercer says a Virginia Supreme Court decision on the issue is expected between February and April.

**'Welcoming to Everyone'**

As part of the final proposed budget of his term, Northam announced plans in December to invest \$25 million in Virginia historical sites. Included in the proposed spending plan is nearly \$11 million to kick-start efforts to design, build and install replacements for the Confederate iconography



**"Preserving these forms of protest is important to documenting and contextualizing recent historic events."**

—VMFA curator Valerie Cassel Oliver

long associated with Monument Avenue. The effort would be spearheaded by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

"We really want to move forward in partnership with VMFA to bring people to the table and make Monument Avenue, which is a beautiful road, welcoming to everyone," Northam said.

The governor's proposed budget also calls for \$9 million to preserve the Lumpkin's Jail site with planned investments in a new slavery heritage site and improvements to the Slave Trail in Shockoe Bottom, as well as \$100,000 to support the Virginia Emancipation and Freedom Monument project on Brown's Island.

If the proposed budget is approved by the General Assembly, the VMFA would begin convening experts and consultants including art historians, historic preservation experts

and urban planners to conceive new installations along Monument Avenue, VMFA Director Alex Nyerges explained at Northam's December announcement.

"Inclusivity is going to be the No. 1 watchword, [followed by] healing," Nyerges said. "One hundred thirty years of having those monuments scar the landscape and scar the souls of the people that have lived in this city and in Virginia is going to take a great deal of thought and effort."

He expects the multiyear process to begin in fiscal year 2022 and adds that the project would likely require additional funds, calling the initial \$11 million investment a "down payment."

Mayor Stoney says the project could leverage state and city dollars, with

Renderings for a proposed museum on the Lumpkin's Jail site in Shockoe Bottom. The governor's budget calls for \$9 million to go toward this project.



TOP: JAY PAUL; BOTTOM: COURTESY SMITH GROUP

Dustin Klein's and Alex Criqui's Lee Monument art projections have received international attention.

added funding from private donors. He has also stressed the importance of soliciting community input once the planning process for the redesign gets underway, emphasizing that the city is working with a clean slate regarding possible replacements. New 2nd District City Councilmember Katherine Jordan, who represents much of Monument Avenue, says it's critical to include the wider Richmond community in those conversations.

"We need to have robust community engagement [with] neighbors, throughout the district and throughout the city," she says. "I think everyone feels a degree of ownership of Monument Avenue and interest in seeing a successful next generation of it."

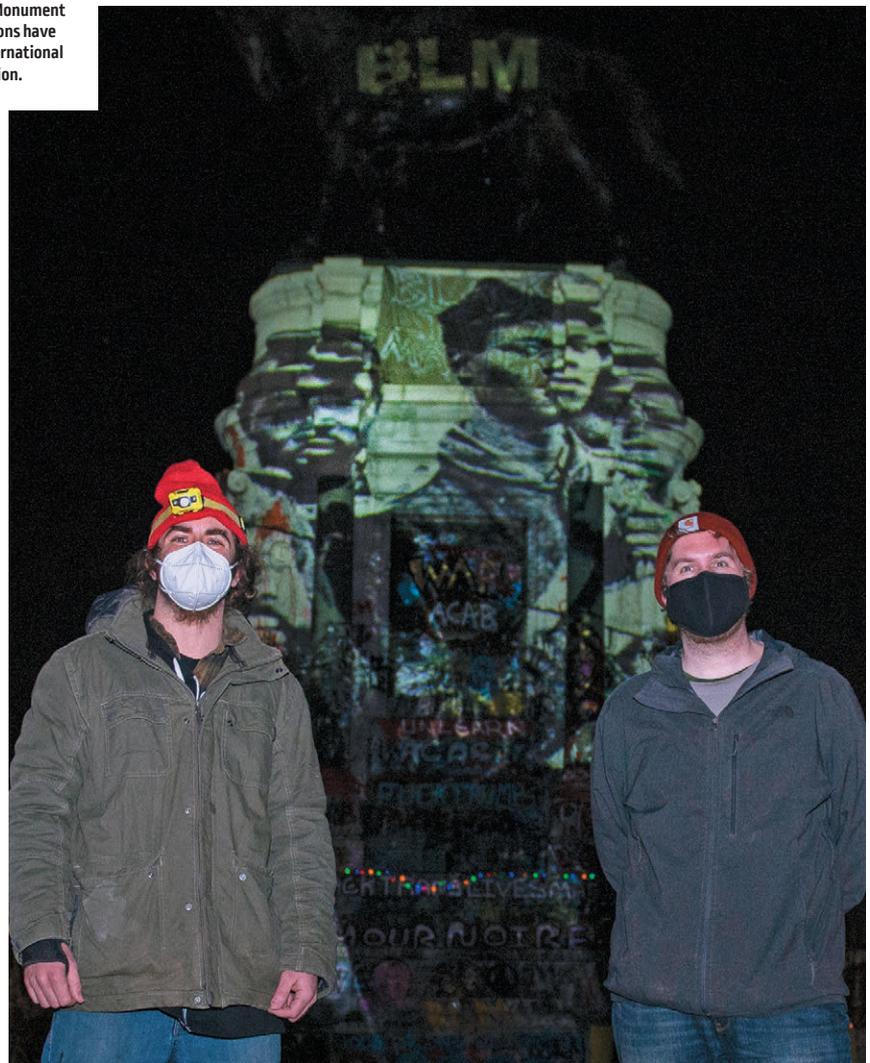
### Lee Monument Resolution

While Confederate symbols have mostly been scrubbed from the historic avenue, the fate of the 12-ton bronze Lee statue and the grassy median it occupies remains uncertain. It has been reclaimed by demonstrators as an impromptu public park, named Marcus-David Peters Circle after the local teacher who was shot and killed by Richmond Police officers in May 2018 while experiencing a mental health crisis.

Since last summer's protests, it's also become a symbol of 2020's national reckoning with race after photos of gatherings at the circle, graffiti left there by protesters and an improvised projection art series at the Lee statue became popular on social media.

The projection art project began in early June and is the brainchild of Dustin Klein and Alex Criqui. The two friends say they were drawn to the statue after they noticed protesters adopting the median as a nightly gathering spot. Their work has featured images of Black victims of police violence like George Floyd and Breonna Taylor alongside civil rights icons like John Lewis and Martin Luther King Jr.

"This whole project is really just



us reacting, along with the rest of the nation, to the tragedy of George Floyd's death and this rampant, systemic problem of police violence and violence toward Black people," Criqui says. "It's been interesting to see how what's been happening in Richmond has resonated with people all over the world."

The project has garnered widespread acclaim. *T: The New York Times Style Magazine* ranked the graffiti-covered monument and its projected art among the 25 most influential works of American protest art since World War II, while a photograph of the Lee statue enveloped by projected images of George Floyd and "BLM" graced the cover of *National Geographic* in December.

Finding ways to preserve that potent imagery will be among the issues that the

governor's proposed Monument Avenue redesign commission will need to address, says Valerie Cassel Oliver, the VMFA's Sydney and Frances Lewis Family Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art.

"The graffiti and projections are a testament to the power of the visual 'voice' and a significant way for people to reclaim these public spaces," says via email. "Preserving these forms of protest is important to documenting and contextualizing recent historic events centered around the monuments in Richmond, which to many enforce racism and oppression.

"We've collectively a big task ahead of us in how we treat these spaces [and] what remains. We will attempt to remain a part of the local and national dialogue on this issue." ■

## JUSTICE

# 'A PROFOUNDLY RACIST INSTITUTION'

Virginia repeals the death penalty after more than four centuries, highlighting the practice's history of racial disparity

**F**or Rachel Sutphin, the execution of her father's killer didn't bring a sense of solace or retribution. Instead, it only reminded her of past trauma and uncovered what she now sees as an immoral institution.

"The death penalty itself has never felt comfortable for me because it's the state killing someone as punishment for killing someone, in hopes of preventing more killings later," Sutphin says. "Instead of there being any justice and redemption, there's just more death."

Her father, Montgomery County Sheriff's Deputy Cpl. Eric Sutphin, was one of two men who were killed in 2006 by William Morva during an attempted escape from state custody. After learning that Morva suffered from severe mental illness, Sutphin began advocating publicly for ending the death penalty when former Gov. Terry McAuliffe denied his petition for clemency in 2017.

With advocates like Sutphin in mind, the Virginia General Assembly approved legislation to end capital punishment in the commonwealth, with Gov. Ralph Northam signing the bill into law on March 24, more than four centuries after the first execution in American history took place at Jamestown. Virginia is now the 23rd state to ban the practice.

More than 1,400 Virginians have been executed since 1608, more than in any other state. However, there hasn't been a new death sentence in Virginia since 2011, and Morva was the last person to be executed here, in 2017.

Del. Mike Mullin (D-Newport News), who introduced one of two bills seeking to end the practice,

says the risk of executing an innocent person through his work as a prosecutor in Hampton has kept him awake at night. According to the Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC), 185 former death-row prisoners in the U.S. have been exonerated of all charges since 1973.

"First and foremost, this is a profoundly racist institution, and you cannot extricate the death penalty from racism," Mullin says.

Virginia's record of executions reveals a history of racial disparity. According to DPIC, state laws in the 1800s codified capital crimes by race so that Black Virginians could receive a death sentence for a much broader range of crimes than white defendants. Virginia executed 73 Black men for rape, attempted rape or robbery from 1900 to 1969, a period in which no white men were executed for those same crimes.

LaKeisha Cook, criminal justice reform organizer for the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy, says Virginia's racially uneven history with executions can be directly linked to slavery and lynchings during the Jim Crow era. Cook coalesced the support of hundreds of Virginia churches to advocate for death penalty abolition, including broad support from the Black faith community. Cook and others hope to see the end of the death penalty spur further moves toward a more equitable criminal justice system.

"When our faith leaders understood that direct connection and were armed with the statistics of how many African Americans have been disproportionately impacted by capital punishment ... they [agreed to] join voices with everyone else in saying that it's time for abolition," Cook says. —**Rodrigo Arriaza**



VICTORIA BORGES

Richmond has seen monumental shifts since Black Lives Matter protests turned the spotlight on racial inequity and police accountability last summer. Has that progress led to meaningful change one year later?

BY RODRIGO ARRIAZA

PHOTO BY ERIC FOSTER

# T H E STRUGGLE C O N T I N U E S



**B**efore Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin murdered George Floyd last May, sparking outrage and a wave of national protests, there was Marcus-David Peters.

Another Black man killed by police, Peters was a teacher and VCU alumnus who was fatally shot by a Richmond Police officer in May 2018 while he was experiencing a mental health crisis. Area

organizers decried his killing at the time, and Peters became Richmond's local symbol of the Black Lives Matter movement as nightly protests rocked the city last summer following the deaths of Floyd, Breonna Taylor in Kentucky, Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia, and others.

A broad coalition of Richmonders took to the streets for months as they demanded an end to systemic inequities and racially motivated violence against Black people. Protesters called for seven key

changes that included slashing the Richmond Police Department's budget and forming an independent civilian review board with subpoena power to examine acts of police misconduct.

A year later, a drive down Monument Avenue is all that is needed to see that one big change has taken place: Nearly all of the statues of Confederate leaders are now gone, marking a new chapter for the former capital of the Confederacy.



But beyond that powerful symbolism, have local and state leaders enacted lasting, tangible reforms for Richmond's marginalized communities? Will last year's reckoning with Virginia's racist past produce a more inclusive future?

City leaders say steps are being taken, but that undoing centuries of discriminatory practices takes slow, intentional work. "We listened, we learned, and we've improved," Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney said in an

interview. "The improvement isn't over, and it may not come as rapidly as some will want it to, but it's happening, and that's progress. Sometimes progress can be slow, but it's progress just the same."

Activists who were on the ground last summer are skeptical. They argue that steps such as the removal of Confederate statues were symbolic gestures meant to appease protesters, while local policing practices continue largely unfettered.

"Reform is taking the same pieces and

putting them in a different order," local organizer Chelsea Higgs Wise says of Stoney-mandated changes following Floyd's murder, which included updates to the police department's duty-to-intervene policy and a ban on chokeholds. "It's a change of the language versus [changing] their capacity and their scope."

One year later, we tracked key demands from protesters to see whether they have translated into policy changes. >



Mayor Levar Stoney spoke at a June 1 "Call to Action" event at the Slavery Reconciliation statue in Shockoe Bottom after protests resulted in looting and Gov. Ralph Northam declared a state of emergency for the city last summer.

## DEFUND THE POLICE AND FUND BLACK FUTURES

Protesters urged city leaders to strip funding from the Richmond Police Department (RPD) and channel that money into social service programs.

RPD has the second-highest budget of any city agency behind public schools, receiving \$96.4 million in the city's budget for the current fiscal year — an amount activists say should be reevaluated, with money being reallocated to affordable housing and other community initiatives. In his proposed budget for the upcoming fiscal year, Stoney allocated nearly \$96 million toward police while funding for the Affordable Housing Trust Fund would remain level at \$2.9 million, with the goal of raising contributions toward the trust fund to \$10 million by 2026.

Explaining the need to reduce the police budget, Wise says it's critical to "[transfer funds] to other community resources that [we] are heavily divested from right now ... it's important to truly understand the way that we ... redress harm is truly within our budget framing."

On July 1, 2020, city councilmembers Michael Jones of the 9th District and Stephanie Lynch of the 5th District introduced a resolution requesting a report to find funds in RPD's budget that could be reappropriated to community mental health and social service programs. The Task Force to Reimagine Public Safety convened by Stoney last year also identified creating a similar report in its list of recommendations to the city. In both cases, officials appear hesitant to act.

City Council rejected Jones and Lynch's resolution in a 2-7 vote, while Stoney says defund-

ing the police department wouldn't be effective: "I think our officers need to be better trained on how to handle different situations when it comes to interacting with the community, particularly Black and brown communities ... but I'm not a believer in defunding the police," he says.

## REMOVING MONUMENTS TO WHITE SUPREMACY

Protesters acted quickly during the early days of the summer protests, toppling at least five statues of Confederate and Colonial figures throughout the city. Most notably, they removed a sculpture of Confederate president Jefferson Davis that is part of a larger statue on Monument Avenue.

Citing the public safety risk posed by protesters attempting to tear down heavy statues, Stoney issued an emergency order to remove all city-owned Confederate statues on July 1 using his powers under an extended state-of-emergency declaration. Within days, Confederates such as Gen. Stonewall Jackson, naval commander Matthew Fontaine Maury, J.E.B. Stuart and others were lifted away by cranes and taken to city storage. After receiving 22 offers for the statues, city administration and council chief of staff employees will solicit public input and develop a plan for the disposition of each city-owned monument following a resolution passed by council on May 10.

Statues weren't the only thing to go: In December, City Council voted to rename Jefferson Davis Highway as Richmond Highway.

While most Confederate symbols have been removed from city property, scrubbing a statue

of Gen. A.P. Hill from the intersection of West Laburnum Avenue and Hermitage Road has been more complicated because the monument is also Hill's gravesite. Stoney says his administration has been in contact with Hill's descendants and historical experts, and he aims to remove the monument and reinter Hill's remains by this summer. In April, Stoney also introduced a resolution that would amend the city code to ban hate symbols on city property, which includes white supremacist iconography and the Confederate flag. That resolution hadn't yet been voted on by Council as of press time.

## MARCUS-DAVID PETERS CIRCLE AND THE LEE MONUMENT

Though Gov. Ralph Northam ordered the removal of the 12-ton bronze Robert E. Lee statue last June, the case has been mired in legal challenges from a group of Monument Avenue residents and a descendant of the signatories of the deed that gave the state control over the monument in 1890. The case awaits action from the Supreme Court of Virginia after the plaintiffs appealed a ruling from Richmond Circuit Court Judge William Reilly Marchant, who sided with Northam. The cases will be heard by the state Supreme Court on June 8.

After marches ended each night last summer, protesters and others spent their days in

the grassy median that surrounds the Lee statue. Informally dubbed "Marcus-David Peters Circle," it was the site of cookouts, teach-ins and impromptu basketball games, while the statue and pedestal were covered with graffiti and memorials honoring Black victims of police violence. It grew to become an international symbol of the protests after photos of light projections onto the Lee statue by local artists Dustin Klein and Alex Criqui circulated on social media, and images of the circle were later featured by National Geographic and *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*.

But the circle has sat empty since the state's Department of General Services installed tall chain-link fencing around it in January in preparation for Lee's removal. "We always called it a healing circle. You come feeling some kind of way, and you leave feeling better. Now it feels like they took it away," BLM RVA member Bee the Gardener said on

civilian review board became a key demand from protesters. A state law passed in 2020 now enables localities to establish civilian review boards, and City Council also passed resolution to form the investigatory body last year. However, that process bogged down as Council members debated whether current or former members of law enforcement should be able to serve on the task force.

While the task force was expected to present its recommendations by March 1, its nine members didn't begin meeting until March 15. Working feverishly to first develop a budget for the CRB, the task force recommended that the city supply the review board with \$1.2 million in its first year, or 1.25% of RPD's annual budget. Those funds would go toward staffing an executive director and investigators, among other expenses, task force co-chair and RTAP member Eli Coston says.

While the city's budget for fiscal year 2022

instead of killing him.

McEachin agreed to review the case and released a 10-page report last November. The review followed a 2018 report by Michael Herring, her predecessor. The report detailed how the officer, Michael Nyantakyi, tried to stop Peters' vehicle after seeing him driving recklessly, and after failing to stop Peters with a Taser, Nyantakyi shot Peters at least twice when he lunged toward the officer. Nyantakyi completed a week-long Crisis Intervention Training course in 2011, and the department's CIT coordinator concluded that he acted appropriately. McEachin concluded that the shooting was justified.

### MARCUS ALERT

The Marcus Alert, a crisis response system that aims to enable police to coordinate emergency response efforts with mental health professionals to de-escalate situations involving mental health crises, was signed into law by Northam in December 2020. Blanding has called the law a "weak, watered-down" version of the legislation that she and others advocated for last summer. She says issues with the legislation include language that dictates behavioral health experts respond to emergencies whenever "feasible" rather than making them mandatory, along with a lack of uniformity in how the program is implemented across localities and a phased statewide rollout that extends into 2026.

"As we're dragging our feet, we're already racking up bodies," she says. "The incidents of mental health [crises] are going up, and we are still calling police officers to answer these calls, and we [continuously] see those results when you're dealing with a Black or brown community member."

The Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS) is required to develop a statewide framework for the program by July 1, while Richmond — one of five areas selected to pilot the Marcus Alert program — will be required to begin rolling out the program by December. The Richmond Behavioral Health Authority will lead the local Marcus Alert effort.

"I'm sure that the Marcus-David Peters Act is going to make a difference and make improvements, and I'll say I'm cautiously optimistic that it's going to be at the level that we're all seeking," says Lisa Jobe-Shields, deputy director of community services for DBHDS. "It's much too important for us to get it wrong, so we're trying our best to pull all these pieces together and come up with something that makes sense." >



Protestors gathered at the Lee Monument last June.

a recent weekend while giving away food and clothing at another median close to the circle. "[But] the community's still growing. I guess in some way, [the fence] was designed to deter us from getting stronger, but I don't think that's possible."

If the statue is removed, Northam has said he would invest nearly \$11 million in a Virginia Museum of Fine Arts-led effort to design and install replacements for the Confederate iconography long associated with Monument Avenue.

### CIVILIAN REVIEW BOARD

Since 2017, local groups such as the Richmond Transparency and Accountability Project have asked for an independent review board with subpoena power that operates separately from the RPD to investigate claims of police overreach and misconduct. Last summer, a

wasn't finalized by print time, City Council members and Mayor Stoney appeared hesitant to back the full amount requested by the task force, though they support funding the civilian review board's work. In the coming months, the task force aims to solicit public feedback on its plans through surveys and virtual and in-person meetings and expects to deliver its recommendations to City Council by August.

### REOPENING INVESTIGATION INTO MARCUS-DAVID PETERS' DEATH

Protesters demanded that Richmond Commonwealth's Attorney Colette McEachin reopen an investigation into the death of Marcus-David Peters. His sister Princess Blanding and other activists say the police should have directed Peters toward the urgent mental health support that he needed

IN THEIR WORDS

# ONE YEAR LATER



## PRINCESS BLANDING

Sister of Marcus David Peters and independent candidate for Virginia governor

[I feel] disappointed and activated. The decision to add police reform and the Marcus Alert on the [General Assembly's 2020] special session agenda was due to people power. That's it. It was due to people hitting the streets to demand that our local and state government take immediate action to not just say that Black lives and Black liberation matters, but to show it.

Not surprisingly, they did not deliver. What we received was weak, watered-down legislation or their refusal to make any moves, such as with the bill to end qualified immunity. I feel very empowered to continue to enlighten our community members across the commonwealth, to empower them [and] to help them understand that they [can] be part of the change.

When we come together, the people have a lot of power ... to take those bold actions. I believe that our actions can't just be in the streets and protesting. It's definitely time that we expand [our fight] from the streets to these key legislative seats, because our elected officials that are in place have shown us time and time again that they refuse to be the fearless, progressive leaders that we need to ensure liberation for all Virginians.

## MICHAEL JONES

9th District Richmond City Councilmember

Daunte Wright [a 20-year-old Black man who was fatally shot by a Minnesota police officer during a traffic stop in April]. That's how I want to start my statements. The protests began because of the killing of a Black man by the hands of the police. George Floyd was at the epicenter, and the police all over the country in part and parcel still have not learned. Daunte Wright and [Caron] Nazario [a 27-year-old Black U.S. Army lieutenant who was pepper-sprayed and held at gunpoint by Windsor police officers during a traffic stop last December]. What did we really learn? We could say, "What if they just complied?" or "It's how they're dressed." [Nazario] was in his military uniform. People thought we were gaslighting the situation, but it's true. This brother graduated from Virginia State, an officer in the Army, and that's how he's treated up front. A year later, we have two incidents. One in Virginia and one back in Minnesota. We're one incident from another George Floyd.

Last summer was not about the statues, last summer was not about anything other than Black lives mattering and how encounters with police end Black lives, and that's tragic. This is not about defunding the police. A fundamental shift needs to take place within law enforcement. Everyone got caught up on defunding the police, [but] that's not fully the issue. Our law enforcement system is broken. It just is. There are steps to this, and so I don't want anyone to think, "Oh, the [protesters] stopped, they weren't organized." No, they were very organized around one principle: Black lives matter. What more organizing principles do you need? That is the organizing principle: Black lives matter. You're not going to kill unarmed Black men and women and get a pass.





## CHELSEA HIGGS WISE

Local activist and co-host of “Race Capitol” on WRIR

I was really inspired and taken away by the energy last summer, and the people’s energy is still here right now, but what is different from then is there have been pieces of legislation that have passed and things that have gotten started, such as the Richmond local Civilian Review Board Task Force, [and] the Marcus Alert was passed in the General Assembly, [though] unfortunately the police are very much still involved in the Marcus Alert as the state passed it, so we are continuing to look at shrinking the involvement and participation with cops at all.

As someone that’s been participating in direct actions in Richmond for years, I felt validated [during last summer’s protests]. Many of us did. And at the same time, I felt challenged because I am turning 37 this year, and young folks were leading this movement in the summertime and taught me a lot as well. We have had some monuments removed in the state’s capitol as well, [though] I would say most impactful removals were done by the people and not by [the city], and anything that was done by the state actually was done by the people, remembering that it was the people that brought this pressure right now, and as we are here today, what we’re seeing as a continuance of the same violence that created an uprising here in Richmond particularly. There are still more shootings of Black young people, and what this shows to us is that we [must] continue to respond very differently systemically, and it goes more into truly divesting from policing and shrinking the funding of police. ■

## JEWEL GATLING

Executive director of Brown Virginia and community outreach chair of Richmond’s Civilian Review Board Task Force

I think what we saw in Richmond was a reaction to modern-day lynchings of Black men and Black women by police officers. But we have our own issues here in Richmond, so it wasn’t a big flame that ignited us, it was a little match. It was bound to happen. Richmond PD has a history here of being purposely traumatizing, purposely inflicting measures to intimidate the community, specifically the Black community. So there was a reason, there was a purpose and there was a set of demands that we collectively agreed on and we collectively espoused.

[I joined the CRB task force because] I just wanted to make sure it was done right. I watched my friends sacrifice money, time, health, I watched my friends be harassed, I watched my friends be doxxed, and so when the application process came up, one of my friends [sent me] the link. I’ve been here for four years, I realize I am new to the area of Richmond, however, I am not new to police brutality, and I’m not new to politics. I can say this much about the task force: We really, really all care. Whether or not we agree, we really all care, and we all want this to be done correctly and kept safe for us. We don’t want it to be manipulated by anyone, especially by law enforcement [and] officials, we want the citizens to have something because it’s been stated a thousand times — who polices the police? We have no one. We really care, and we want this done for us because we deserve this.



FROM LET: KATE THOMPSON; JAY PAUL