



COMMENTARY

Given a chance to apologize for the theft of a Black man’s heart, House Republicans declined.

By laying SJ 274 on the table, some lawmakers laid bare their insensitive and inappropriate response to acknowledging past racist wrongs

| SAMANTHA WILLIS

FEBRUARY 21, 2023 12:06 AM



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Black laborer Bruce Tucker’s body was violated in the name of a medical miracle after his accidental death in 1968. (Richmond Times-Dispatch)

In what can only be characterized as a stunningly callous decision, last week members of a Rules subcommittee of Virginia's House of Delegates killed a resolution to acknowledge and apologize for the state-sanctioned medical misuse of Black bodies in Virginia, a common practice in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Four of the subcommittee's five members – including House Majority Leader Terry Kilgore, R-Scott, Speaker Todd Gilbert, R-Shenandoah, Del. Barry Knight, R-Virginia Beach, and Del. Kathy Byron, R-Bedford – voted to lay [SJ 274](#) on the table, politi-speak for postponing any action on the legislation indefinitely. The measure had sailed through the Senate with unanimous approval and, at least in the mind of Phillip Thompson, who came up with the idea of the bill, was a no-brainer, low-lift way for the state to recognize the wrongs of the past.

“I thought it had a chance because it's a very innocuous bill,” Thompson told me. “We weren't asking for reparations, nothing like that; we just wanted a real apology.”

An apology would be the very least the state could do, considering Virginia institutions' horrible history of using Black people, living and dead, as guinea pigs.

Thompson said he got the idea for the resolution after reading a [Politico article](#) in late 2022 that explained how Black laborer Bruce Tucker's body was violated in the name of a medical miracle after his accidental death in 1968.

A day after he died from a fatal fall, and without his family's knowledge or consent, Tucker's “heart was sewn into the chest of a white business executive” at the [Medical College of Virginia](#), the forebear of what is now Virginia Commonwealth University's School of Medicine, according to Politico's report. “It was one of the first heart transplants in the country, and it gave the med school the status it had sought at the forefront of transplant science.”

Tucker's sad fate also underscored Richmond's record of body snatching, the practice of stealing the bodies of deceased Black people for doctors-in-training to practice dissection. “Resurrectionists” were known to lurk in Black cemeteries in Richmond, seeking to abscond with the remains of the newly dead, according to the [documentary](#) “Until the Well Runs Dry: Medicine and the Exploitation of Black Bodies,” directed by [Dr. Shawn Utsey](#), former chair of VCU's African American Studies Department.

Thompson asked one of his representatives, Sen. Jennifer Boysko, D-Fairfax, to sponsor the bill and advocate for its passage. In her presentation to the House Rules subcommittee last week, Boysko said the healing of old wounds can't precede acknowledgment that the wounds were inflicted in the first place.

"I think it's important that we address problems so we can move forward collaboratively," Boysko told me in a phone interview after her bill was dashed. "We know there are Black people who live in Virginia and around the country who are suspicious of health care because of what has happened in the past. Our bill would have at least admitted that and given people a small peace of mind."

Thompson agreed, citing some Black Americans' distrust of the medical community stemming from its past unethical actions that had a deleterious impact on African American health, such as the 40-year-long [Tuskegee Experiment](#). In that case, the government withheld syphilis treatment from hundreds of Black men to study the disease without telling them and then continued to let the disease ravage the men's bodies, even after penicillin became widely available for treatment.

The Tuskegee Experiment and many other instances of medical mistreatment is "why we had difficulty with the COVID vaccines in the African American community," Thompson said. "Many of us still don't trust the system, and when you look at history, that distrust is justified."

In learning all of this, the question that persists for me is simply, why? What possible reason did Republican lawmakers have to dismiss SJ 274? Kilgore didn't return my emails or calls seeking an answer, so I have to rely on the sorely lacking response to the legislation by Gilbert, given during the [subcommittee meeting](#) on Feb. 17.

"I feel like there are thousands upon thousands of equally painful and hurtful and regrettable stories that could be told about how we treated one another, how Black Americans were treated for a very long time in this country. And I just worry that there's no end to these resolutions, and maybe that's the intent, I don't know," Gilbert said. "But certainly if it helps for me to acknowledge that fact – that there are these many, many hurtful, painful memories and events and actions that hurt so many people – you know, I'm doing that publicly right now. But I just don't know in the way of legislation

how we contribute to that healing by acknowledging one or two a year at a time. That's my main concern.”



📷 House Speaker Todd Gilbert explains why he voted to lay SJ 274 on the table, a measure which would have formally acknowledged and apologized for the medical misuse of Black bodies in Virginia. (Image courtesy the Virginia House of Delegates committee livestream)

Let me paraphrase how this message comes across to me, as a Black Virginian interested in righting the wrongs of the past: “There are way too many instances of Black people’s human and civil rights being trampled in the dirt for us to acknowledge them all, so we won’t even try.”

What a cowardly, callous stance to take – and during Black History Month, no less. And while the governor’s administration continues to [threaten the teaching of African American history](#) in our schools, and as [health disparities](#) persist among Black Virginians. As my late grandmother would say, it is a sin and a shame.

Bruce Tucker’s body parts were stolen, and one of the state’s current leading medical schools pioneered its practice on the literal strength of his heart. To acknowledge and apologize for this horror is the very least this legislature could have, and should have, done. Thompson and Boysko plan to bring the measure before the legislature again next year; let’s hope more sensitive and sensible legislators will then advance what is long overdue.



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Studies, class-action suit link hair relaxers to cancer; Black women in Virginia are at risk

After two studies show a link between hair relaxers and uterine cancer, beauty brands owe it to their customers – especially disproportionately impacted Black women – to come clean about the risks

| SAMANTHA WILLIS

NOVEMBER 20, 2023 12:02 AM



📷 Hair relaxers, such as the one shown here, have been linked to an increased rate of uterine cancer in Black women who use them, according to studies from the National Institutes of Health and Boston University. (Samantha Willis/ The Virginia Mercury)

When I saw [reports](#) about a National Institutes of Health [study](#) that found women who used chemical hair straighteners known as relaxers were more than twice as likely to develop uterine cancer than those who didn't, a sulfur-scented flashback zapped me back to my first experience getting my hair relaxed.

I was 10 or 11, and my mama was preparing me and my little sister for Easter church service the next day. She had laid out our frilly white dresses with ankle socks to match and black patent leather Mary Janes; all that was left to do on that Saturday evening was our hair, so Mom pulled out a box of children's no-lye relaxer and transformed into a kitchen table chemist.

She mixed a small bottle of activator liquid into a jar of relaxer base, and the goopy, pale pink mixture smelled like rotten eggs or something you might clean your bathroom with. That worried me a little, but not enough to dissuade me from the relaxer process that promised to turn my naturally kinky African American hair into silky smooth strands that could be bedecked with barrettes, like the little girl's on the box. There wasn't anything on the packaging that said the relaxer was unsafe either, unless you got it in your eyes.

So I squeezed my eyes shut while Mom applied a thin layer of petroleum jelly around my hairline, "so it won't burn your skin," she said. She carefully plastered the relaxer onto my hair with the same skillful motions she used to ice cakes, and when I told her it was starting to tingle, she said that meant the treatment was working.

As time passed, the tingling turned to itching and then to burning. It felt like a hot curling iron was pressed directly against my crown, sending waves of intense heat all over my head and making my still-closed eyes water. But finally I could bend over the bathroom sink for Mom to rinse the relaxer from my strands, which, I saw when I finally opened my eyes, now hung limp instead of clumping in their usual tight coils – a look that my elders sometimes called "nappy." Mom then styled my hair to resemble the relaxer box girl's straight strands, and I was so happy.

Mom applied her own relaxer that night too, after mine and my sister's. We didn't know then what we do now: Relaxers are a byproduct of discrimination Afro-haired people have faced for centuries in America, stemming from a beauty standard that has

avored Eurocentric features like straight hair, slim noses, thin lips and fair skin. Relaxers have long been a way many Black women have conformed to this standard, which has often been necessary to advance in their careers and to also be seen by the larger white society as “presentable,” “neat” and “stylish.”

The message that such standards broadcast – that natural, kinky-curly Black hair is not presentable, neat or stylish – has only recently been challenged in our society, evidenced by passage of legislation like the so-called “Crown Act,” which in 2020 updated Virginia’s human rights anti-discrimination law to include “traits historically associated with race, including hair texture, hair type, and protective hairstyles such as braids, locks, and twists.”

Codifying the acceptance of Black hair in public accommodations and employment is excellent progress, but it may have come too late for many Black women.

NIH isn’t alone in discovering a connection between relaxers and cancer. Last month, Boston University released a new study that reported “long-term use of chemical hair relaxers by postmenopausal Black women was associated with increased risk of uterine cancer.” This study followed 45,000 women for 22 years, noting their hair relaxer use and cancer rates. The disparities it found between Black women and other women are alarming.

“We did our best to adjust for possible other explanations for why the women got cancer in our statistical analysis,” said Boston University Associate Professor of Medicine Kimberly Bertrand, an epidemiologist and one of the study’s authors. “We tried to account for other risk factors of uterine cancer that we’re aware of, like obesity or reproductive issues, and ruled those out.

“You can’t prove causality with this type of study design but you can prove correlation,” she continued. “There’s strong biological plausibility that some of the chemicals included in these products do have effects on the hormone system, and could plausibly be associated with cancers.”

Like many cosmetic and beauty products, hair relaxers are loosely regulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. That lack of close oversight potentially puts people who use them at risk, said Lee Floyd, a Richmond-based attorney who has been appointed to the plaintiffs’ steering committee of a massive class-action lawsuit against several global beauty brands that produce and market hair relaxers. The case now includes over 8,200 women who have used

relaxers and developed cancer, including “hundreds” from Virginia, Floyd said.

“These are products that are sold to women of color, not just in the U.S., but internationally. They are also marketed to children. In many instances, these products are marketed as created from ‘natural’ substances, like olive oil or Moroccan oil,” she said. “What we’re now learning is that these hair relaxer products contain dangerous carcinogenic substances, which, again, women and children are applying to their hair without any warning of the carcinogens. It’s heartbreaking.”

The lawsuits seek to not only compensate victims for the harm they may have suffered due to the relaxers but also force beauty brands to disclose on packaging and marketing materials that the products contain dangerous substances that could cause cancer. Had those types of warnings been included on relaxer boxes from the start, many women – including my mama, my sister and me – wouldn’t have used them.

Master stylists and sisters Aleta Smith and Areta Johnson might have thought twice about applying the treatments to their customers’ hair too.

“I’ve done countless relaxers,” said Smith, who has served mostly Black women over her 40 years as a stylist in Hanover County. She hasn’t had any clients who developed uterine cancer, she said, and is curious whether the box relaxers at the center of the lawsuit contain different chemicals than the professional-grade, pre-mixed relaxers

she and her sister use.



The back-to-natural hair movement sweeping the nation in recent years has decreased the number of relaxers Smith applies now, but she said that “back in the day, almost all of my customers were getting relaxers, and they have to be touched up every six weeks. Some of them wanted it sooner than six weeks but I wouldn’t give it to them.”

After retiring from Twin Images, the salon she shared with Smith, Johnson is now a cosmetology instructor at Rowanty Technical Center, teaching hair care and stylist skills to students from Dinwiddie, Prince George and Sussex County Public Schools and preparing them to take the state cosmetology licensing exam. Johnson also said she’s not aware of any relaxer clients developing uterine cancer, but she stopped relaxing her own hair about 10 years ago.

“I was a cancer survivor, and my hair texture had started changing,” she said. “And I realized I could get the same look without a relaxer and my hair would be healthier and not prone to thinning.”

If she was still behind the stylist’s chair, Johnson said she would advise clients to “really think carefully about getting a relaxer now. How you wear your hair is a personal choice, but with these studies coming out, I would be leery of hair relaxers.”

It’s been over 10 years since I last used creamy crack, as relaxers are colloquially called in Black culture. My decision to stop was less about the health risks – which I didn’t know existed – and more about empowering myself as an African American woman to proudly wear my hair in its natural texture, Eurocentric beauty standards be damned, because Black is beautiful.

While I know many women who now reject the sociocultural programming of their mothers’ and grandmothers’ generations that made relaxers a requirement for the well-coiffed, I know others who still relax their hair. That is their choice and right. But everyone should also have the right to be fully informed about the cancer risks relaxers probably pose so that they can make the choice that best suits them, their hair and their personal definition of beauty, safely.



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Hanover school board referendum is an opportunity to see democracy in action

In deciding whether Hanover's embattled school board should remain appointed or elected, Hanover citizens get a long-overdue invitation for their input

| SAMANTHA WILLIS

OCTOBER 23, 2023 12:02 AM



 In Ashland, a sign urges Hanover citizens to vote yes to making Hanover's school board an elected body. Hanover is one of a handful of Virginia localities whose school boards are appointed by local governments rather than elected by voters. (Samantha Willis/The Virginia Mercury)

In November, Hanover County voters will answer a question that sounds simple but could be the precursor of a historic shift in the way the county oversees the education of its 17,000 public school students: “Shall the method of selecting the school board be changed from appointment by the governing body to direct election by the voters?”

Preceding this referendum is a chorus of voices – from parents, educators, students and community members – calling for significant change in how members are added to the school board. What began years ago as low-toned complaints about the board’s lack of transparency and accountability to residents are now a cacophony of legitimate concerns that cannot be easily quieted. As a graduate of Hanover schools, I say emphatically: Bring the noise.

Hanover County is one of just 12 localities statewide where [school board members are appointed](#) by a local governing body instead of elected by citizens. Before 1992, all school boards in the state were appointed, according to Gina Patterson, executive director of the Virginia School Boards Association, which serves 131 school boards across the state.

“We were the last state that allowed elected school boards in the country,” Patterson told me by phone. “The beauty of Virginia is that we allow both elected and appointed school boards; we allow whatever is the best fit for the community.”

In Hanover’s case, there has been continued consternation about what the best fit for the community really is, centering on whether the appointed school board is truly representative of Hanover students, what they need academically and what they and their parents want from their educational experience.

Even a cursory glance at the school board’s actions over the past few years lends legitimacy to students’ and parents’ concerns that the majority-white, majority-male school board – appointed by the all-white, majority-male Hanover County Board of Supervisors – doesn’t reflect or respect beliefs, lifestyles or teachings outside a conservative, white worldview.



Hanover swiftly rushed to the defense of guns; not so quickly for residents shaken by a racist rally

More than 100 localities across the commonwealth have passed symbolic “sanctuary city” amendments, measures that have no legislative teeth, but reiterate citizens’ rights to own and bear guns. Stafford County is among the latest local governments in Virginia to adopt the stance, bracing for gun control laws promised by the incoming Democrat-controlled state legislature. On ... [Continue reading](#)

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There was the school names controversy, wherein the school board refused to change the names of Hanover schools bearing Confederate veterans’ monikers. The board staunchly refused to remove the racist school names for years, despite protests from hundreds of citizens who rightly viewed them as hurtful reminders of the Civil War and the white men who fought in it for the right to continue owning Black people as property.

After the issue first surfaced for a vote in 2018, the Board of Supervisors booted off Marla Coleman, who was one of just two school board members to vote to change the names. (The other member, Ola J. Hawkins, was a Black woman; removing her would have been too obviously racist, they probably concluded.) Coleman has since [publicly shed light](#) on what she calls the “political” appointment process, which until now has been shrouded in secrecy by the Board of Supervisors.

Amanda Kronenberg, a parent of a 9-year-old Hanover Public Schools student and a 15-year-old who attends Maggie Walker Governor's School, said she first learned Hanover had an appointed school board at the time of the name change controversy.

"I started to look into who was on the school board, what they do, who is my rep, and how they voted on this issue," she said. "The person who was my rep at the time voted against changing the names; I was pro-changing the names. I didn't like that they didn't support the students that way, so I wondered when they were up for election and 'never' was the answer."

After years of negative press about the school names, the board finally, if reluctantly, [voted to change the names](#) in 2020. By then, they'd lost the trust of many members of Hanover's Black community and their allies, and that well-earned distrust persists today.

In 2021, the school board flagrantly rejected standards mandated by the state Board of Education to protect transgender and nonbinary students, leading to student protests and a [lawsuit](#) levied by five trans students and their families. The school board then hired notorious conservative Christian advocacy group Alliance Defending Freedom to craft its own [policy](#) for trans children, which requires these students to submit written requests to use bathrooms that match their gender identity and gives the school board the sole authority to accept or reject the requests. Kronenberg was also troubled by this kerfuffle, saying it "signaled that the school board or system didn't care about trans students, which appalled me."

The board's policy also suggests the requests include students' personal information, including disciplinary and criminal records, and a doctor's or therapist's note "verifying that the student has been diagnosed with gender dysphoria and/or that the student consistently and authentically expresses a binary gender identity." This needlessly burdensome process seems unfair and discriminatory toward students whose gender identity should have no bearing on the quality of education they get in Hanover and whether they can just use the bathroom where they feel most comfortable.

Last year, the school board's [self-directed equity audit](#) revealed that "Black students in Hanover schools are overrepresented in school discipline and underrepresented in advanced courses, such as AP

and IB programs, in the county for the second straight year,” according to [WRIC](#).

Despite that, a member of the school system’s Community Equity Advisory Board, formed partly in response to the racial equity concerns that bubbled up during the school names controversy, said there had been “no movement” from the school board on the advisory group’s top recommendations – that the school system submit to a third-party equity audit and that it hire a director of equity and inclusion initiatives – for at least three or four years. All of this sent the message that the school board doesn’t take its commitment to equity seriously.

Finally, this year, the board has ruffled feathers by jumping on the book banning bandwagon. This June, it created and voted in a policy that outlines how public requests for books to be banned from school libraries will be processed and then [banned 19 books](#), including “The Bluest Eye” by Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Toni Morrison.

School districts struggle to implement new laws on sexually explicit books



RICHMOND, Va. — Although a new Virginia law requires schools to inform parents when sexually explicit materials are used in the classroom, some districts are using that law as the basis to go further and remove certain books from schools altogether. Book ban requests across the state often have

cited the Virginia law, which was signed last year by Republican Gov. Glenn Youngkin. ... Continue reading

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I first read that book as a Hanover County high school student, devouring sentences between classes; it solidified my lifelong love of literature and gave me an example of fiction writing on a genius

scale authored by a Black woman whom I adored and emulated as a budding creative writer. Sadly, other young Black aspiring writers in Hanover schools won't get the same mind-opening opportunity – an essential point of public education – that I did.

Throughout these firestorms, the common denominator is Hanover's School Board, whose hardline stances against progressive actions to make the school system more welcoming, equitable and inclusive of all students clashes with large swaths of the constituents it serves.

To me, appointed school boards like Hanover's hearken back to the Jim Crow era, when all-white appointed school boards had sole authority over education in their localities, often to the detriment of Black students.

A classic example of this dynamic was found in Prince Edward County, where in 1951, students of the county's only high school for Black students, Robert Russa Moton High, and the NAACP sued the school board for refusing to equally fund Moton or give it basic resources for student success – like books in good condition or classrooms where students would be warm and dry. A Black teenager, Barbara Johns, [led a protest of 450 students](#) before the lawsuit; it set the stage for the landmark case that would end school segregation, *Brown v. Board of Education*.

This model of appointed school board leadership belongs in the history books, not in Virginia's modern school systems. But in Hanover, the growing number of folks who didn't agree with the school board's many missteps has had no recourse.

Until now.

Beginning last year, a nonpartisan, citizen-led group, [Hanover Citizens for an Elected School Board](#), collected more than 10,000 signatures in support of placing the question of whether the county's school board should be appointed or elected on the November ballot. In July, their work earned the court-ordered [right to a referendum](#).

The group makes some very sane points. They highlight the fact that while school boards in Virginia have no taxation authority, they do determine how federal, state and local funds, some of which come from taxpayers, should be spent. Even if Hanover residents don't have a child in school or any connection to the school board,

their taxes still fund it. Should taxpayers continue to have no say in the school board's decisions?

A counter-effort to keep the school board appointed has geared up, fueled by a \$15,000 contribution from the [Hanover County Republican Committee](#). They're fighting under the banner of voting no to "political school boards."

But Hanover's school board has *always* been political, by virtue of its members' appointment by the Board of Supervisors, whose politics could be seen as clear as day even by Stevie Wonder.



This is Hanover (but it doesn't have to be)

Hanover County is my home. At least seven generations of my family were born and raised here; freedmen founded our community's church 151 years ago. I was horrified and disgusted to witness the tail end of a small Ku Klux Klan gathering 10 minutes from my house on Saturday. Horrified and disgusted, but not surprised. ... Continue reading



Virginia Mercury

Another anti-elected school board group, Together Hanover, shared this [frankly frightening presentation](#) in an April Board of Supervisors meeting. If you don't care to watch the full sermon, they allege that those seeking an elected school board have an "unstated goal through teaching CRT to create a race war and gender war" and are vying "to not only keep parents out of the classroom but to keep parents from knowing what's going on in the classroom in the first place." The rhetoric is closely aligned with Gov. Glenn Youngkin's dubious "[Parents Matter](#)" movement, which stokes unfounded fears

about Virginia schoolchildren being force-fed critical race theory and equity education.

If parents matter so much, why shouldn't they have a say in deciding who will represent them and their children on the school board?

On Election Day in Hanover, there will be much to lose but also much to gain. Whether the referendum on electing the school board passes or fails, the fact that it's on the ballot means Hanover citizens finally have a vote in the county school system's progression or regression – and a chance to participate in the democratic processes that uphold this nation.



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