

STL Equity Matters

By Erika Whitfield • May 31, 2022

Smart Brevity® count: 4 mins... 1050 words

Welcome to the tenth edition of our newsletter: STL Equity Matters

How it works: We shine a light on how race is lived in our region.

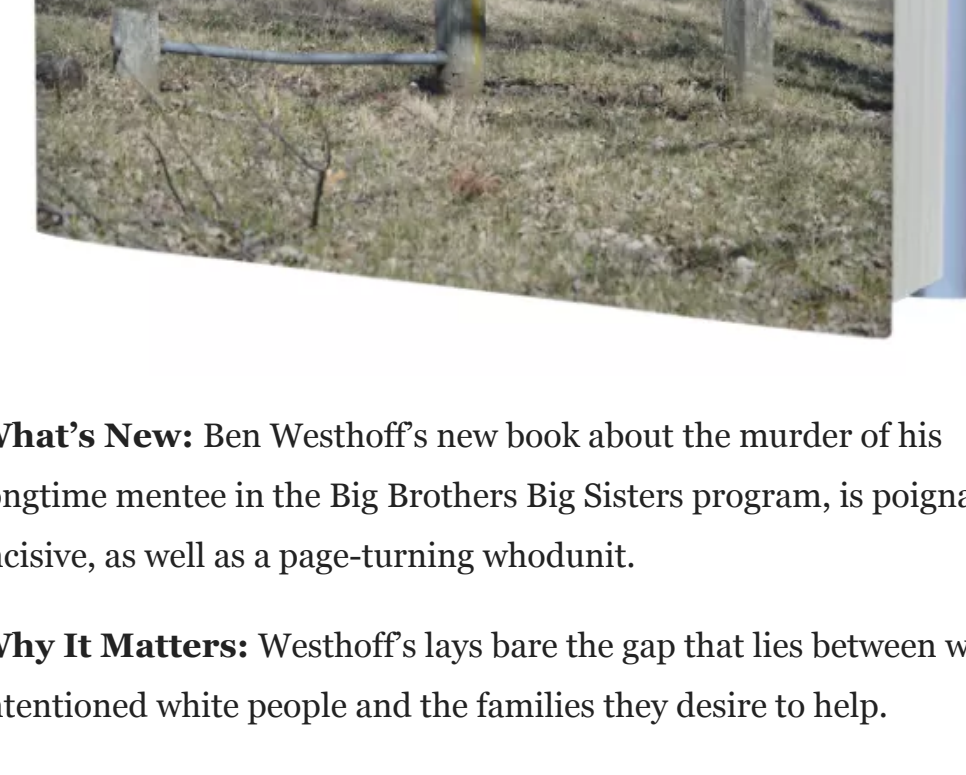
Who is behind this: This newsletter is brought to you by [Before Ferguson Beyond Ferguson](#), a non-profit racial equity storytelling project.

In this edition:

- **Ben Westhoff's** brilliant new book lays bare the gap between well-intentioned white people and disadvantaged families they seek to help.
- Journalist **Cara Anthony** says “East St. Louis is often mislabeled as ‘hard and tough’ but she has found “a tenderness in the city that most people don’t see.”
- **Sylvester Brown** writes about the promise and pitfalls when non-profits work in marginalized communities.
- **Erika Whitfield** remembers the curmudgeonly English teacher who helped turn her into an English teacher.
- **Lea-Rachel Kosnik**, a professor at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, shares Chapter 4 about the challenges a white mother faces in adopting a Black child in a novel we are serializing at Before Ferguson Beyond Ferguson.

Let's dive in.

1. ‘Little Brother’ Shatters Myths



What's New: Ben Westhoff's new book about the murder of his longtime mentee in the Big Brothers Big Sisters program, is poignant and incisive, as well as a page-turning whodunit.

Why It Matters: Westhoff's lays bare the gap that lies between well-intentioned white people and the families they desire to help.

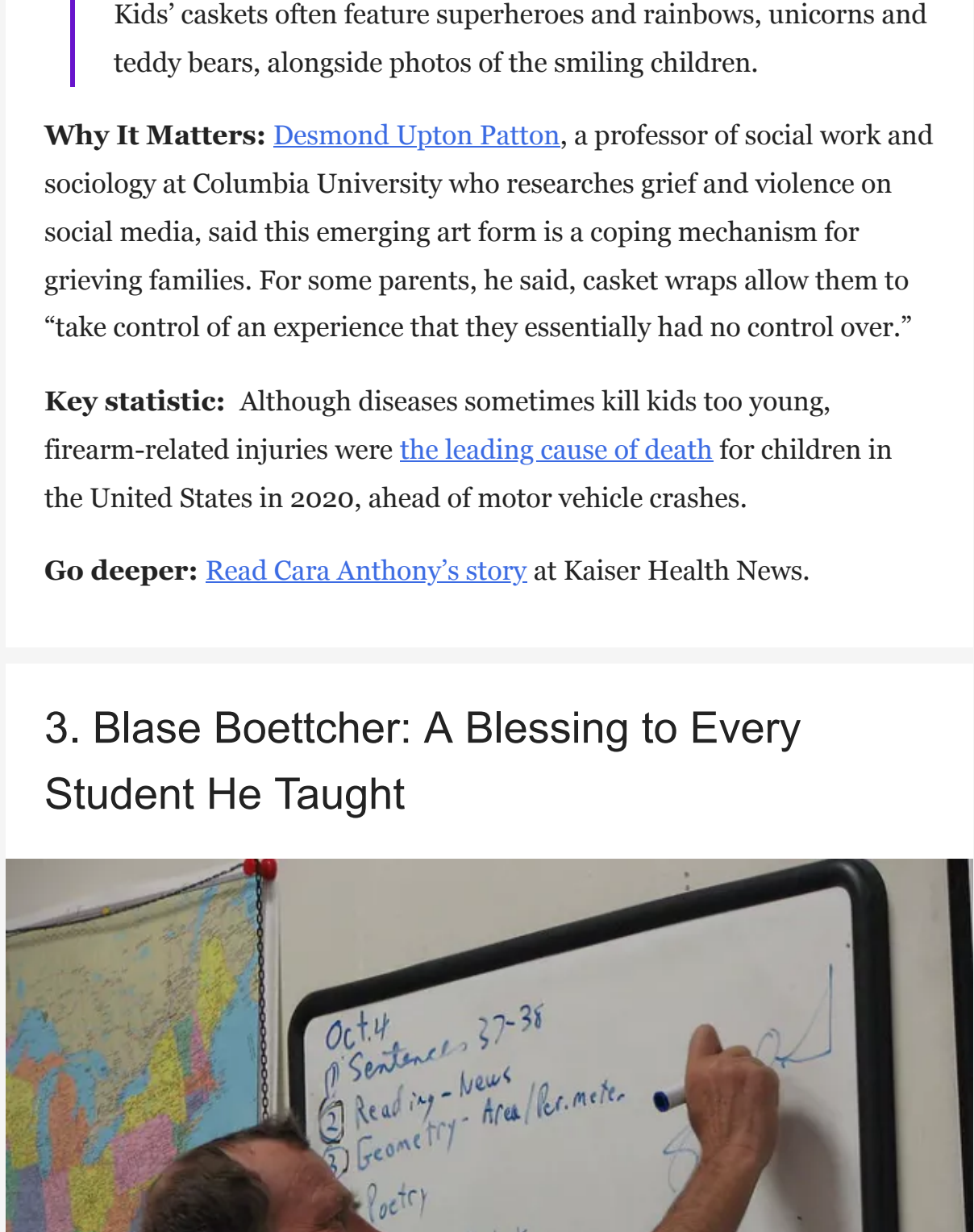
No Sugarcoating: Westhoff adored his Little Brother, Jorell Cleveland, but came to learn after his death that in his teenage years Jorell had been dealing drugs, purchasing weapons and threatening violence.

Learning the truth about Jorell and the man who killed him required Westhoff to uncover a heartbreaking cycle of poverty, poor education, drug trafficking, and violence. *Little Brother* brilliantly combines a deeply personal history with a true-crime narrative that exposes the realities of life in communities like Ferguson all around the country.

— From the dust jacket

Go Deeper: [Read an excerpt](#) at the Riverfront Times.

2. Tender Is The City



Cemetery workers lower Calyia Stringer's casket into the ground after the 3-year-old was killed by a stray bullet last year. Her casket featured a custom wrap designed by a local funeral home and Damian Ferek's company, CasketWraps. (Photo by Cara Anthony)

What's New: The art of wrapping a casket in imagery is increasing in popularity, writes Cara Anthony, the St. Louis correspondent for Kaiser Health News. Across the country, casket wrap companies are creating custom designs for grieving parents who have lost their children to trauma.

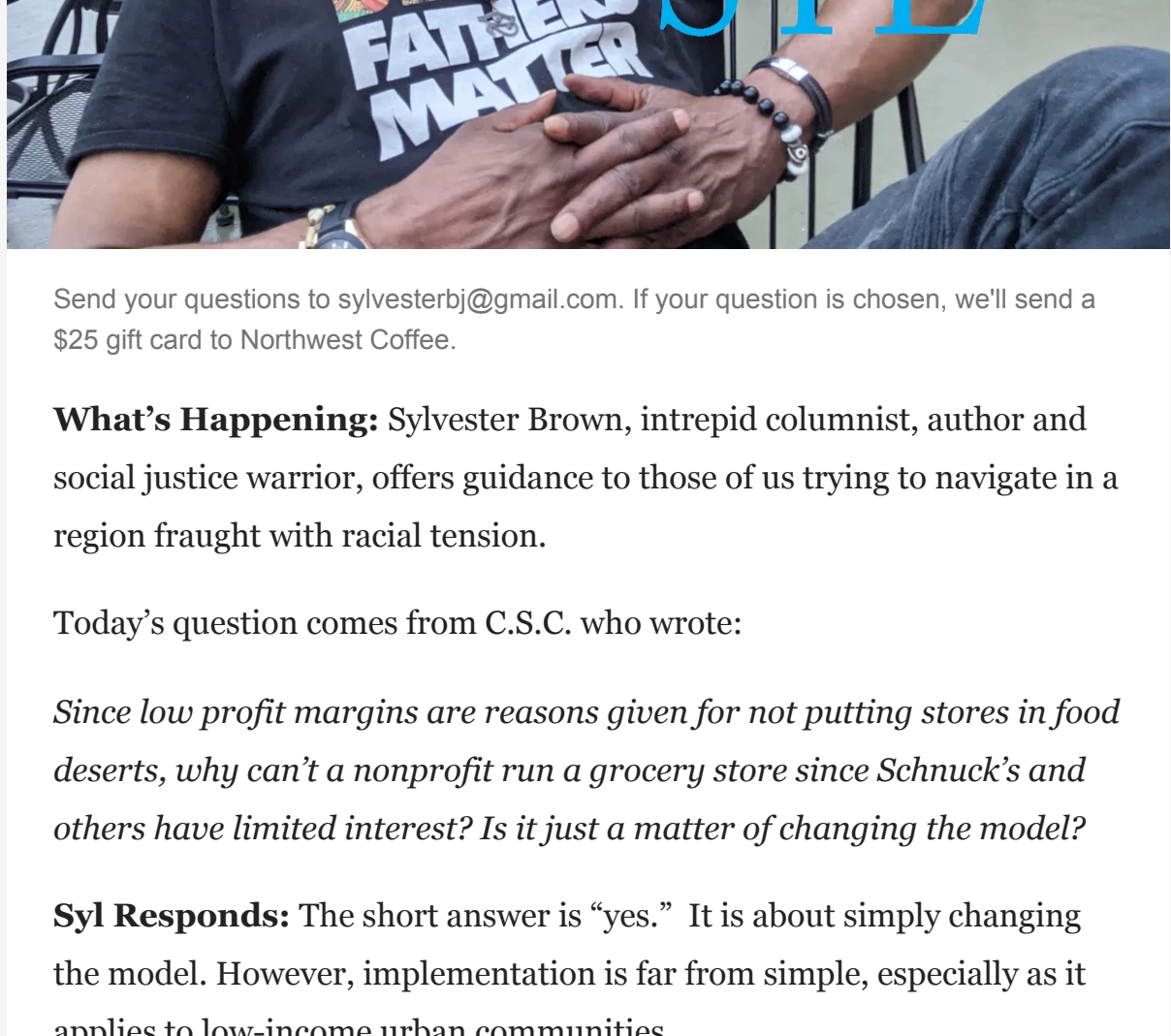
Kids' caskets often feature superheroes and rainbows, unicorns and teddy bears, alongside photos of the smiling children.

Why It Matters: [Desmond Upton Patton](#), a professor of social work and sociology at Columbia University who researches grief and violence on social media, said this emerging art form is a coping mechanism for grieving families. For some parents, he said, casket wraps allow them to “take control of an experience that they essentially had no control over.”

Key statistic: Although diseases sometimes kill kids too young, firearm-related injuries were [the leading cause of death](#) for children in the United States in 2020, ahead of motor vehicle crashes.

Go deeper: [Read Cara Anthony's story](#) at Kaiser Health News.

3. Blase Boettcher: A Blessing to Every Student He Taught



Blase Boettcher (Photo by Brian Marston)

By Erika Whitfield

Countless St. Louisans considered themselves lucky to have had Blase Boettcher as their English teacher even if he did sometimes rip their papers to shreds, throw their book bags out a window and call them dinkleberries. And I was one of them.

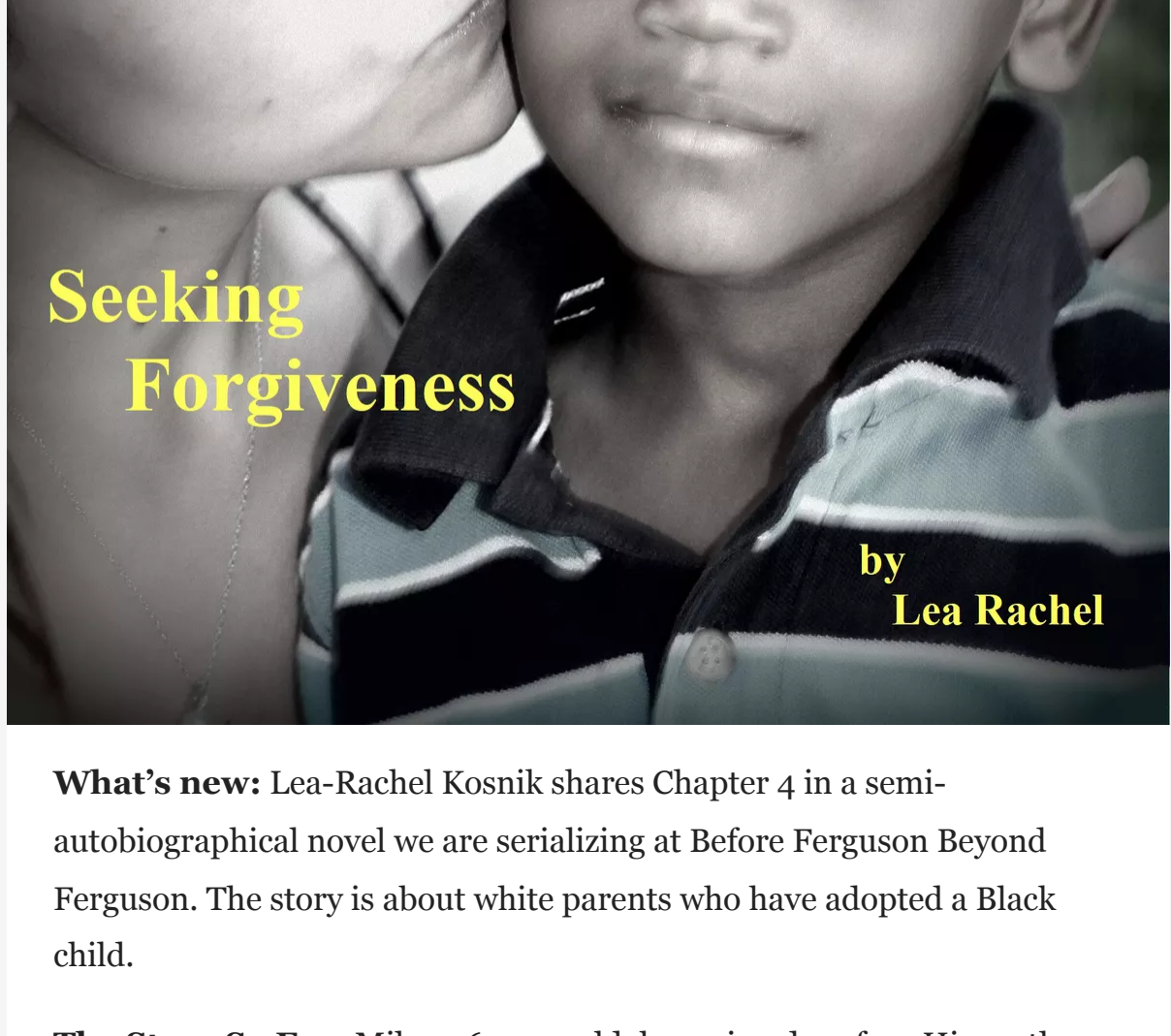
Mr. Boettcher died May 18 and afterward many of his former students posted social media tributes and then turned out for his celebration of life May, 24. Not only a teacher, Mr. Boettcher was a Boy Scout troop leader and a track coach.

Mr. Boettcher was the teacher who helped me get back on track after a harrowing experience when my mother, younger brother and I were robbed at gunpoint in front of our house. He encouraged me to write for the high school newspaper and building on that I earned a bachelor's degree in mass communication in journalism. Now I am a teacher at Clayton High School.

Mr. Boettcher was a cranky, coffee drinking curmudgeon and a blessing to every student he taught.

Go Deeper: [More from Erika about Mr. Boettcher.](#)

4. Ask Syl: Would a Non-Profit Grocery Make \$ & Sense?



Send your questions to sylvesterbj@gmail.com. If your question is chosen, we'll send a \$25 gift card to Northwest Coffee.

What's Happening: Sylvester Brown, intrepid columnist, author and social justice warrior, offers guidance to those of us trying to navigate in a region fraught with racial tension.

Today's question comes from C.S.C. who wrote:

Since low profit margins are reasons given for not putting stores in food deserts, why can't a nonprofit run a grocery store since Schnuck's and others have limited interest? Is it just a matter of changing the model?

Syl Responds: The short answer is “yes.” It is about simply changing the model. However, implementation is far from simple, especially as it applies to low-income urban communities.

A network of well-funded, heavily resourced nonprofits is key in rebuilding and maintaining thriving disenfranchised communities. The challenges, however, are embedded in the words, “well-funded” and “heavily resourced.”

I operated a food-based non-profit for several years — [The Sweet Potato Project](#) — but it went belly-up because I lacked the knowledge and resources to make it grow.

What It Takes: Much work must be done to prepare future non-profiters in poor neighborhoods to succeed. They must:

- Learn the process of leveraging government and philanthropic resources.
- Understand how at least some non-profits have succeeded in instituting great change in marginalized communities.
- Learn the power of uniting around a collective mission.

Role Model: The vision of Maxine Clark, founder of Build-A-Bear Workshop is a big step in the right direction. Her new project, [Delmar DivINe](#), serves as a workshop of sorts for non-profits, providing office space where they can collaborate with other organizations in a startup environment.

It's a great idea that could lead to a bevy of nonprofits, like the grocery store you mention, C.S.C.

Go Deeper: [Syl elaborates on his Sweet Potato experience.](#)

5. When Your Adopted Child Is Chatty and Black

What's new: Lea-Rachel Kosnik shares Chapter 4 in a semi-autobiographical novel we are serializing at Before Ferguson Beyond Ferguson. The story is about white parents who have adopted a Black child.

The Story So Far: Miles, 16 years old, has missed curfew. His mother, Rachel, figures he'll be home soon, but it turns out he has been arrested..

In Chapter 4: Rachel remembers Miles as an extroverted toddler.

Miles and I went to the corner Starbucks most Saturday mornings and spent a good hour there lounging in the oversized chairs, drinking coffee and orange juice and stuffing ourselves with muffins and croissants. If I got up to get a napkin or straw Miles would turn to whoever was closest and, whether they were alone or with a companion, ask them a question. “Do you drink coffee?” was his favorite, because it generally drew a laugh, but he'd also ask strangers if they were a mommy or a daddy, or if they drove a car. Not everyone responded to him kindly.

Go Deeper: [Find all four chapters here.](#) Note: Each chapter takes less than five minutes to read. You can download and print the chapters as a PDF.

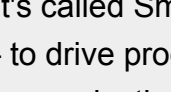
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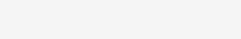
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