

# STL Equity Matters

By Erika Whitfield • Jul 15, 2022  
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**Welcome to the 12th 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:**

- **The End of Isolation Tour**, comes to St. Louis July 27-29 with performances aimed at ending the torture of solitary confinement.
- **Parents, alumni and community leaders** win a five -year battle to remove the name of a Confederate soldier and rename the school for a pioneering Black educator.
- **Forward Through Ferguson** launches #Transforming911, a community accountability and advocacy tool that examines St. Louis' 911 system and calls on the region to reimagine and transform public safety.
- **Sylvester Brown** believes too many Black Americans are disengaged from the Jan. 6 hearings.
- Educator **Erika Whitfield** remembers what happened when she placed a clenched fist over her heart and refused to recite the Pledge of Allegiance.
- **Lea-Rachel Kosnik**, a professor at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, shares Chapter 8 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. Drama Coming to STL Aims To End Solitary Confinement



**What's New:** The End of Isolation Tour presents The BOX, a play written by Sarah Shourd, a survivor of solitary confinement, in collaboration with other survivors.

**Why It Matters:** The BOX is a play about collective resistance and personal transformation inspired by stories collected from incarcerated people. It is currently on a 10-city tour.

“We are more than theater alone,” say the producers. “We are a catalyst for building, strengthening, and knitting together communities across the country on the frontlines of ending torture and isolation.”

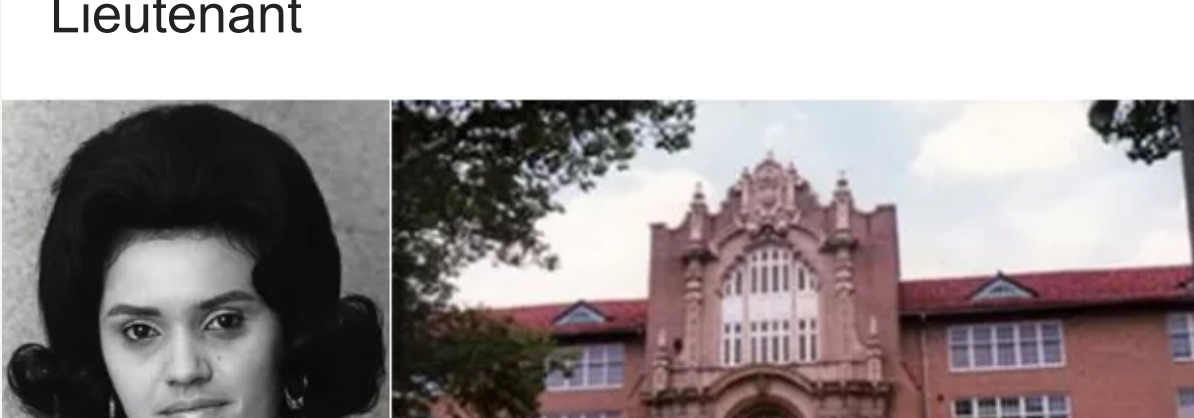
**Host:** The Pulitzer Center, founded by St. Louisan Emily Pulitzer and Jon Sawyer, former St. Louis Post-Dispatch Washington bureau chief.

**Performance Dates:** July 27-29 at the Big Top in Grand Center, doors open 7 p.m. Performance starts at 7:30 and wraps up at 9:30.

[Purchase Tickets](#)

**Go Deeper:** [An interview](#) with playwright/journalist Sarah Shourd, who spent more than a year in solitary confinement in an Iranian prison.

## 2. Transforming 911



Click on the image to learn more about how Forward Through Ferguson is transforming 911.

**What's New:** A study from Forward Through Ferguson calls St. Louis County's 911 system inefficient and fragmented with many callers getting put on hold or never getting through to receive a needed response.

**Why It Matters:** System issues sap money and resources that could be better applied to other public safety matters. Some who are mistrustful of policing are refusing to call 911 at all.

**It's Backward and Complicated:**

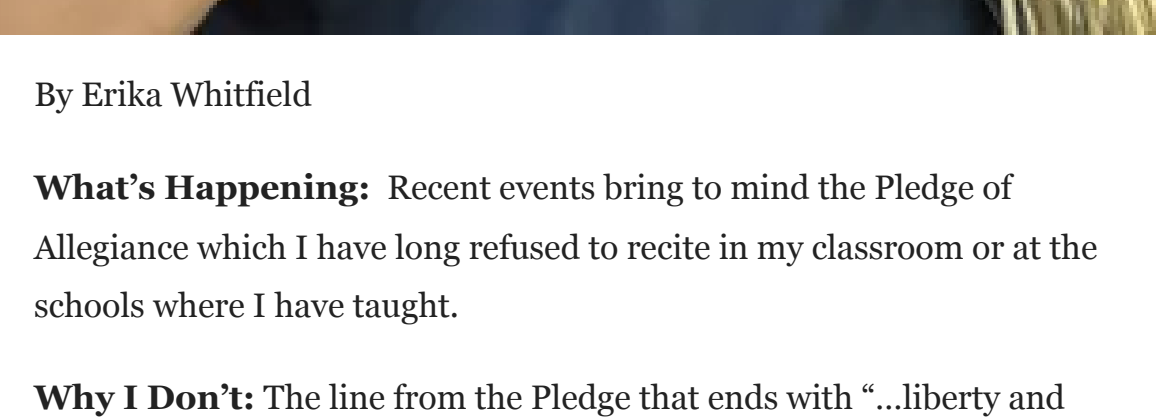
“We're still trying to make a system that was built in a time of landlines work when we're a population of cellphone and wireless users,” Karishma Furtado told St. Louis Public Radio. Furtado is senior director of data and research for Forward Through Ferguson.

**What's Next:** Forward Through Ferguson will continue to work with community partners to gather data concerning how 911 is used and support reform efforts, such as:

- Improving the work environment/reducing stress for call takers
- Diverting behavioral-health related calls to trained crisis professionals
- Creating a non-police first responder alternative in the county

**Go deeper:** [Read/listen](#) to Marissanne Lewis-Thompson's report on the study at St. Louis Public Radio.

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## 3. School Now Honors Legacy of Black Educator Instead Of A Confederate Lieutenant



The former Kennard school will henceforth be known as the Betty Wheeler Classical Junior Academy.

**What's New:** The former Kennard Elementary School, named after a Confederate lieutenant, has now been renamed the Betty Wheeler Classical Junior Academy. Wheeler, an African-American who died in 2011 was the [the founding principal of Metro High School](#), the top-rated public high school in the state.

**The Renaming Took Seven Years:** Parents and alumni wanted to change the school's name “to better reflect their pride in being part of the diverse and inclusive school that exists today,” according to a press release. As a first step the district removed Kennard's name, then began a process to find a new name.

**A Bit of Irony:** Education writer Blythe Bernhard notes in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch that Betty Wheeler Classical Junior Academy is one of only two majority-white schools in the district.

Overall, SLPS is about 80% Black and 12% white. At Wheeler, 30% of students are Black and 60% are white. In the last dozen years, the school's demographics flipped after court-mandated desegregation rules expired that reserved at least 55% of magnet school spots for Black students, Bernhard writes.

**Can More Be Done?** Parents and civic leaders might want to take a look at another St. Louis Public School — Bryan Hill in the city's College Hill neighborhood. It is named for John Gano Bryan, an educator and physician of great repute. But he was also [a slaveholder and ardently pro-slavery](#) (The [school's website](#) doesn't mention that.)

**Go deeper:** Read Bernhard's [report](#) in the Post-Dispatch.

## 4. My Heart, My Country, My Students



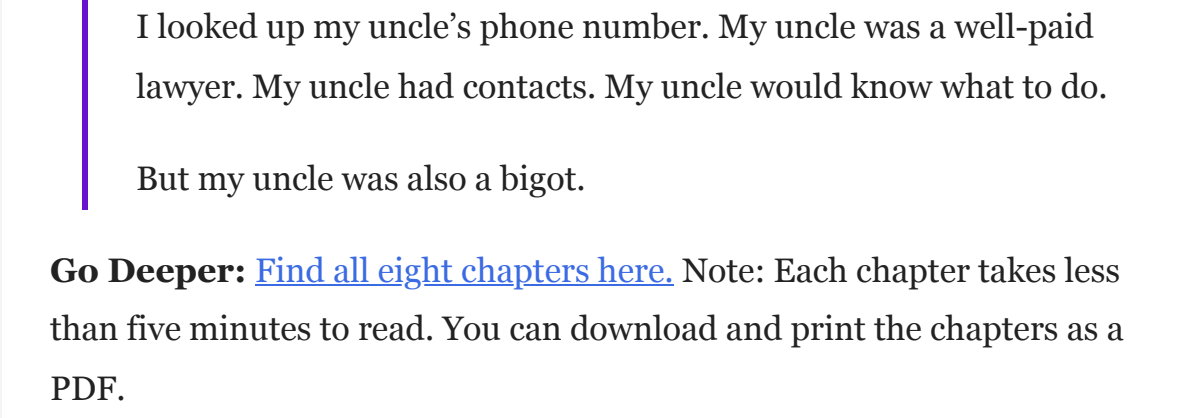
By Erika Whitfield

**What's Happening:** Recent events bring to mind the Pledge of Allegiance which I have long refused to recite in my classroom or at the schools where I have taught.

**Why I Don't:** The line from the Pledge that ends with “...liberty and justice for all” should be amended with the words unless you're Black, Latino, poor, LGBTQIA+, or a woman with a uterus. When the Pledge is recited I put my fist over my heart and remain mum.

**It Hasn't Gone Unnoticed:** At Christ Light of the Nations school where I once worked, my homeroom students wanted to know why I refused to say the Pledge. I told them and [here was their reaction](#) (along with that of a parent, my principal and a fellow teacher) ...

## 5. Ask Syl: Blacks Ignore Jan. 6 Hearings At Their Peril



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. Send your questions to Sylvester to [sylvesterbj@gmail.com](#) and we promise a thoughtful response that will be shared with the community. If your question is selected, we'll send you a \$25 gift card to Northwest Coffee.

Today's question comes from K.W. who wrote:

*“Do you think African Americans are paying enough attention or are as engaged with the Jan. 6 hearings as they should be?”*

**Syl Responds:** I've been consumed with the hearings and all the details they have exposed to date. But to be honest, KW, I'm not feeling like my peeps are as engaged as I am.

The Black folk who I casually chat with at bars, restaurants and other places have me concerned.

Mostly, I get the “if they were Black” responses — as in “if Obama did what Trump did, he'd be in jail,” or “if Black protestors did what the white rioters did there'd be dead Black bodies all over the Capitol grounds.”

**These Sentiments Are True:** But they lack the necessary level of introspection on the danger Black people and voters of color face in future elections. The 2021 insurrection may be only the start of actions that threaten voters of color.

**Why It Matters:** Trump and his allies created a multi-layered plot to disenfranchise millions of voters. In nine of the nation's most competitive states -- Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin -- the number of Black Americans eligible to vote was at a record high of 30 million. Now they are at work on more methods to disenfranchise voters in future elections.

**Go Deeper:** [Read Syl's response in full.](#)

## 6. ‘My Uncle Was A Bigot’



LEA RACHEL

**What's new:** Lea-Rachel Kosnik shares Chapter 8 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 been arrested. Late at night, Rachel drives down to the police lockup in the hope of bringing him home.

**In Chapter 8:**

I needed to act. We didn't need a father, husband, or brother, but a lawyer. A well-paid lawyer that would wipe the smirk off those police officers' faces behind the front desk...

I looked up my uncle's phone number. My uncle was a well-paid lawyer. My uncle had contacts. My uncle would know what to do.

But my uncle was also a bigot.

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

## Read Our Annual Report



Greetings to all of you who have been following and supporting our racial equity non-profit storytelling project Before Ferguson Beyond Ferguson. Here is our annual report documenting our work for 2021 and goals for 2022.

Click on the image to read the report.

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