

STL Equity Matters

By Erika Whitfield • Dec 02, 2022
Smart Brevity® count: 5.5 mins... 1451 words

Welcome to the 16th 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 the [River City Journalism Fund](#), a non-profit journalism project formerly known as [Before Ferguson Beyond Ferguson](#).

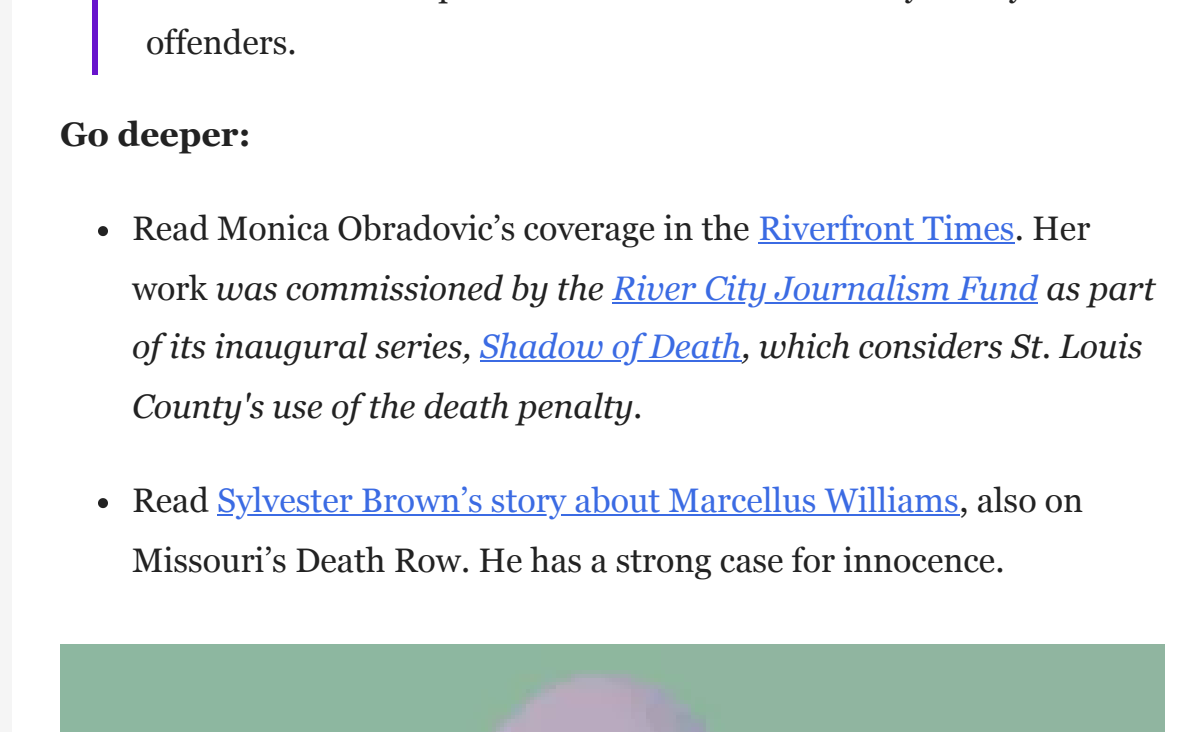
This rebranding and new collaboration brings additional resources and brainpower that will boost reporting on local government, the environment, criminal justice, the arts, the business community and more.



You can learn more by reading this story in the [Gateway Journalism Review](#).

Let's dive in.

1. Kevin Johnson Executed Amid Allegations of Racism



Kevin Johnson

What's new: The state of Missouri administered a lethal injection to Kevin Johnson on the evening of Nov. 29, ending a long battle by attorneys, friends, family and death penalty opponents to save Johnson's life.

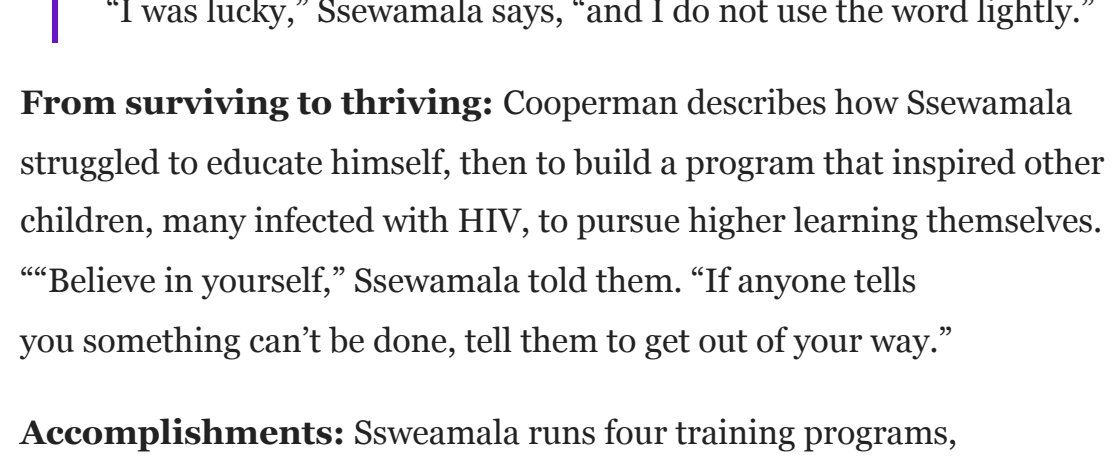
Why it matters: No one disputed that Johnson committed a heinous crime as a teenager in 2005 when he murdered [Kirkwood Police Sergeant William McEntee](#). But Johnson's supporters noted that the death penalty had been applied inequitably in his case because of his race.

Noteworthy: Former St. Louis County prosecutor attended the execution. It was his office that sought the death penalty against Johnson.

It's a rare case of Missouri executing someone for a crime they committed as a teenager. Missouri has executed only one man for a crime he committed as a teen since a landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision in 2012 required states to rethink how they treat youthful offenders.

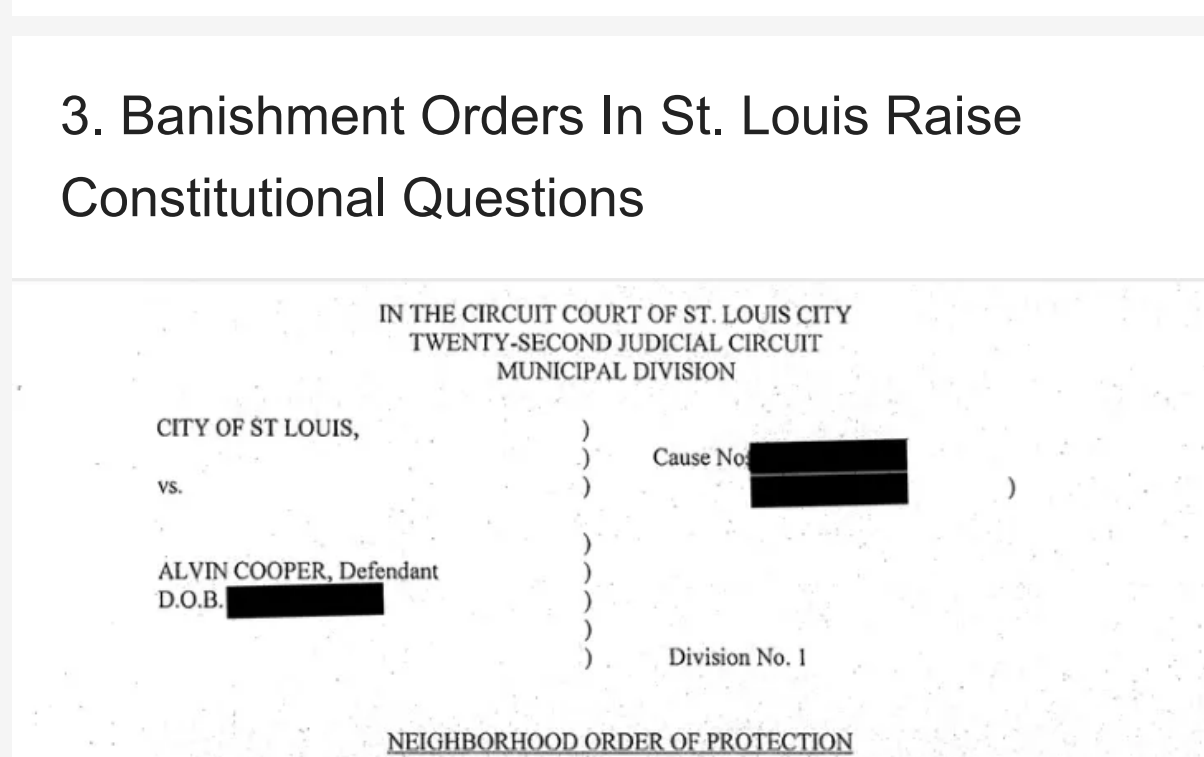
Go deeper:

- Read Monica Obradovic's coverage in the [Riverfront Times](#). Her work was commissioned by the [River City Journalism Fund](#) as part of its inaugural series, [Shadow of Death](#), which considers St. Louis County's use of the death penalty.
- Read [Sylvester Brown's story about Marcellus Williams](#), also on Missouri's Death Row. He has a strong case for innocence.



Marcellus Williams (Graphic by Daryn Ray)

2. Changing The Future For 70,000 Children



Washington University professor Fred Ssewamala in a screen capture from a trailer for *Offering Hope*. The documentary from producer Thomas Malkowicz will be offered in full in the February 2023 digital edition of *Washington Magazine*.

What's new: If the news of the day has sent you into a trough of despair, this story from Jeannette Cooperman will lift your spirits. In fact, it will amaze you, given how her story in [Washington Magazine](#) begins...

Eleven-year-old Fred Ssewamala dove under his bed. His mother had died when he was 3, and now soldiers with guns were crashing into his house. They shot his father and his stepmother, then his brother and his pregnant sister. Huddled under the bed with Fred was one of his playmates, a little girl age 8. Once the soldiers had killed everyone they could see, they dropped their automatic rifles to their hips and sprayed bullets everywhere, even under the beds, killing her, too.

"I was lucky," Ssewamala says, "and I do not use the word lightly."

From surviving to thriving: Cooperman describes how Ssewamala struggled to educate himself, then to build a program that inspired other children, many infected with HIV, to pursue higher learning themselves.

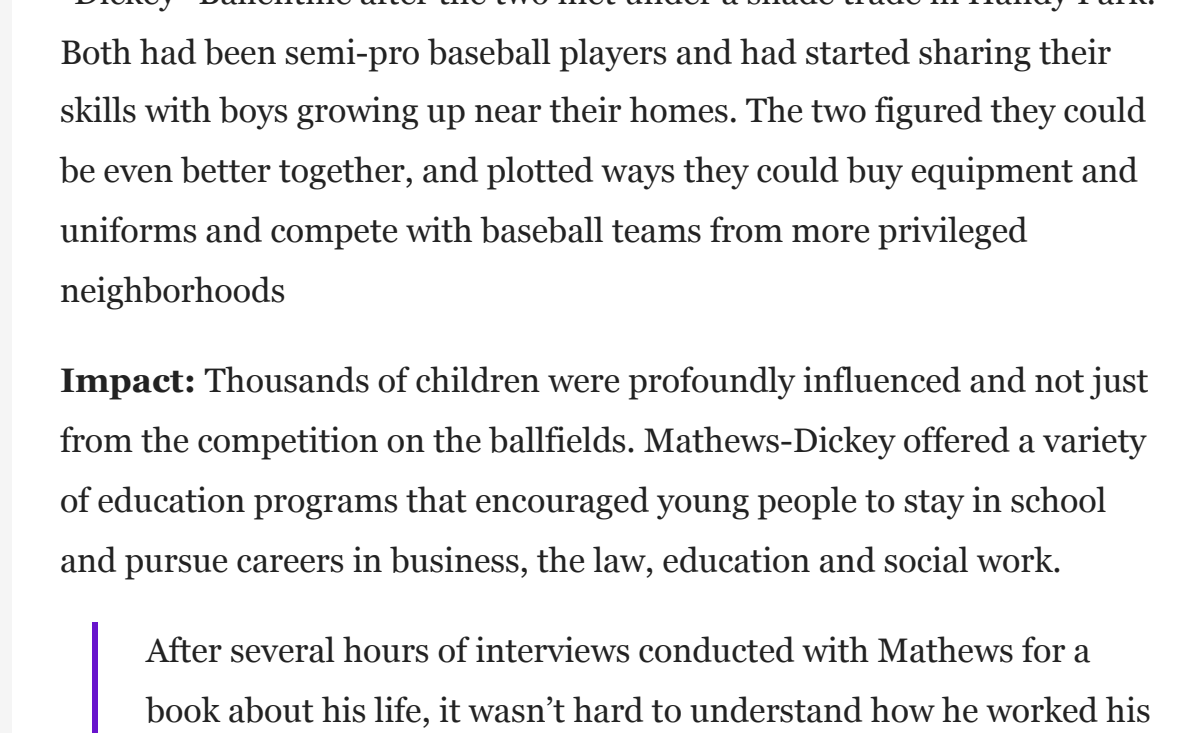
"Believe in yourself," Ssewamala told them. "If anyone tells you something can't be done, tell them to get out of your way."

Accomplishments: Ssewamala runs four training programs, supporting master's, doctoral and postdoctoral students as they learn to research HIV, mental functioning and global health. "This," Ssewamala says, "is the generation that is going to change the country."

Go Deeper:

- [Watch the trailer](#). It's two minutes.
- [Read the story](#).

3. Banishment Orders In St. Louis Raise Constitutional Questions



The agreement Alvin Cooper signed meant that he could be arrested if he entered a 1.2-square-mile part of St. Louis. However, that area is home to many of the organizations that provide shelter, meals and care to the city's homeless.

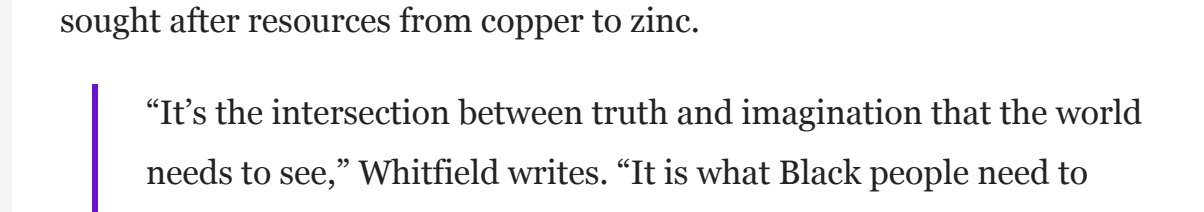
What's new: Pro Publica's Jeremy Kohler discovers a policing tool aimed at banishing homeless people from larges swaths of St. Louis. Aimed at protecting everyday residents and tourists, these orders of protection can also prevent homeless people from accessing services.

Why it matters: "Other American cities order people to stay away from specific individuals or places, and some have set up defined areas that are off-limits to people convicted of drug or prostitution charges," Kohler writes. "But few have taken the practice to St. Louis' extreme, particularly as a response to petty incidents."

Impact: A man was arrested for trespassing while gathering on a city sidewalk with friends across the street from a downtown homeless shelter. He agreed to stay out of downtown but was subsequently arrested for a violation and served three months in jail, [a case highlighted](#) by columnist Tony Messenger in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

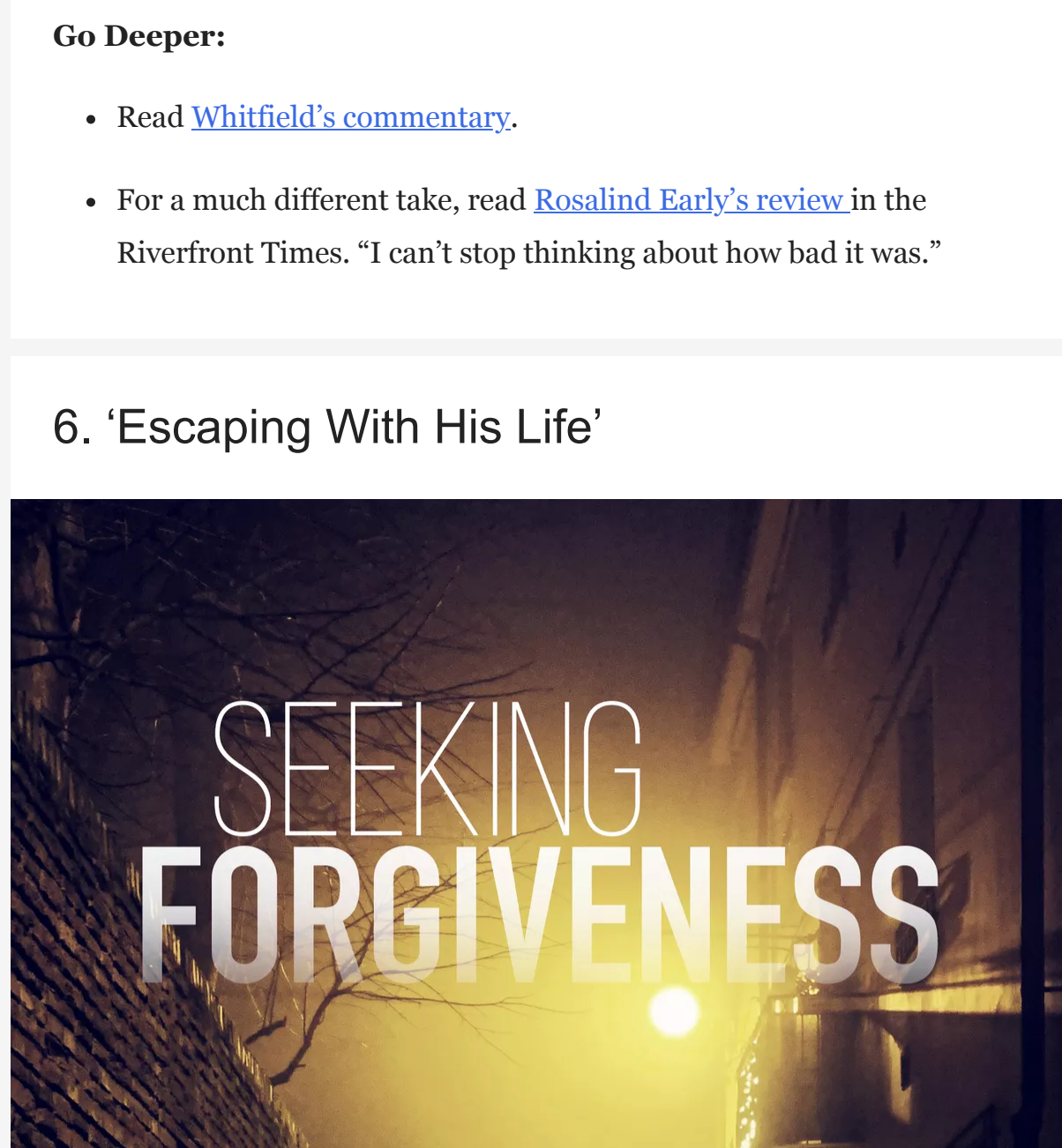
Go deeper: Read Kohler's report at [Pro Publica](#).

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4. St. Louis Loses A Humanitarian



Martin Luther Mathews (Photo by Wiley Price)

What's new: Martin Luther Mathews, co-founder of the Mathews-Dickey Boys' & Girls' Club and a drum major for racial harmony in St. Louis for more than 60 years, died Nov. 7 in hospice care at Evelyn's House in Creve Coeur, Mo.

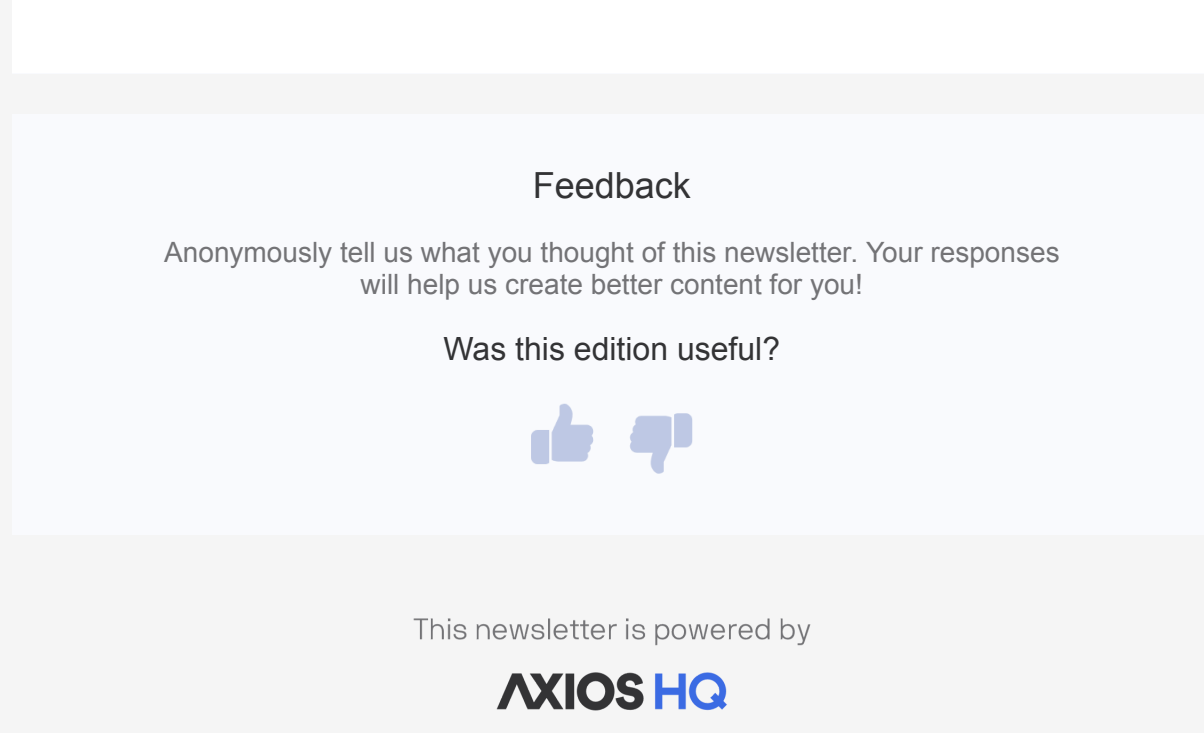
His legacy: Mathews started the club in 1960 with Hubert Habib "Dickey" Ballentine after the two met under a shade trade in Handy Park. Both had been semi-pro baseball players and had started sharing their skills with boys growing up near their homes. The two figured they could be even better together, and plotted ways they could buy equipment and uniforms and compete with baseball teams from more privileged neighborhoods

Impact: Thousands of children were profoundly influenced and not just from the competition on the ballfields. Mathews-Dickey offered a variety of education programs that encouraged young people to stay in school and pursue careers in business, the law, education and social work.

After several hours of interviews conducted with Mathews for a book about his life, it wasn't hard to understand how he worked his magic. He never started a conversation with what he wanted from you or what you should or could do. He was interested in *you*. How were you doing? What were your hopes and dreams? How could he help you get to where you wanted to go? This worked with both the kids and captains of industry. — Richard Weiss

Learn More about Mr. Mathews: Read Richard Weiss' remembrance in the [Riverfront Times](#).

5. Afro-futurism Is The Future



Wakanda Forever publicity photo.

What's new: The long-awaited *Black Panther* sequel debuted to mixed reviews, but our editor and commentator Erika Whitfield says the film is an important reminder why representation is vital to Black people of all ages.

Why it matters: In a world where Africa is often misidentified as a country and portrayed as primitive and underdeveloped, Wakanda reminds us that Africa is indeed a continent and the epicenter of the most sought after resources from copper to zinc.

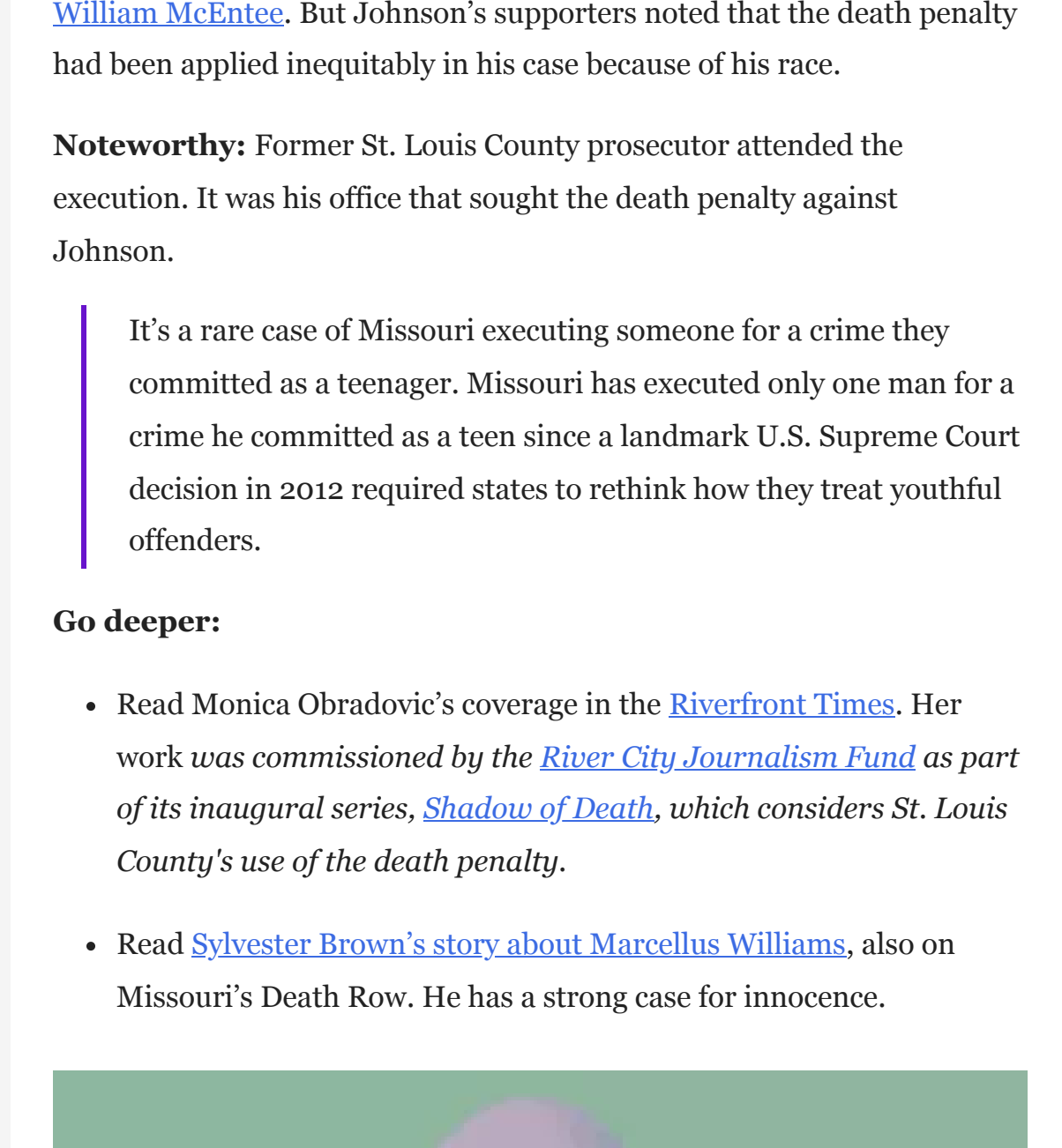
"It's the intersection between truth and imagination that the world needs to see," Whitfield writes. "It is what Black people need to experience on a regular basis. Here is an African nation with the greatest resource in the entire world, vibranium, colonizers attempting to steal it, women warriors charged with protecting it. Not to mention the powerful women characters, two with ingenious science acumen and a regal African queen. Honestly, it doesn't sound so far-fetched.

Meaningful to educators: Whitfield is teaching the first section of *Black Science Fiction* at Clayton High School, a senior elective.

Go Deeper:

- Read [Whitfield's commentary](#).
- For a much different take, read [Rosalind Early's review](#) in the Riverfront Times. "I can't stop thinking about how bad it was."

6. 'Escaping With His Life'



What's New: Lea-Rachel Kosnik shares Chapter 25 in a semi-autobiographical novel we are serializing. The story is about white parents who have adopted a Black child.

In Chapter 25: Rachel is trying to learn what happened when her African-American son Miles and his friend Desmond were arrested at a house party. Sarah, a white student who had been friendly with Miles, has claimed she was raped in a bedroom at the home. But as Sarah relates to Rachel on a phone call, the circumstances were far different than what the police assumed.

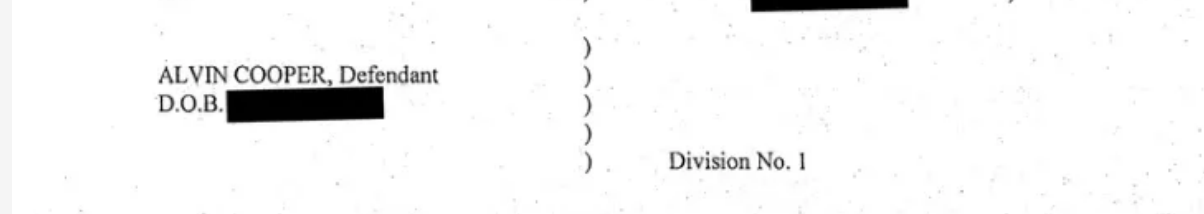
"Ignoring pleas from Sarah and everyone else in the room, adrenaline racing, music playing, smoke swirling, voices loud, confusion louder, the police had drawn their guns. They had pointed them at the kids.

"I knew I should be grateful that Miles had escaped with his life."

Go Deeper: [Find all 25 chapters here](#). Note: Each chapter takes less than five minutes to read. You can download and print the chapters as a PDF.

Even Better: [Buy the book](#).

- Join Lea at her book launch** and signing at 2 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 4, at 7915 Davis Drive, Clayton, Mo.
- Listen to Lea's interview** with KMOX Radio's [Debbie Monterrey](#), who is also an adoptive mother of a Black son.
- Read A Review:** [In the St. Louis Post-Dispatch](#), Dale Singer praises *Seeking Forgiveness* "for the power of its message."



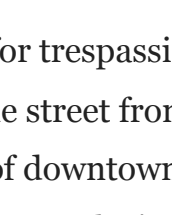
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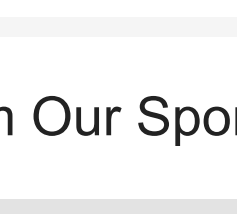
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