

STL Equity Matters

By Erika Whitfield • Jan 25, 2022

Smart Brevity® count: 5.5 mins...1418 words

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

How it works: We are here to shine a light on how race is lived in our region. We look back, we look ahead, and we are very much in the now.

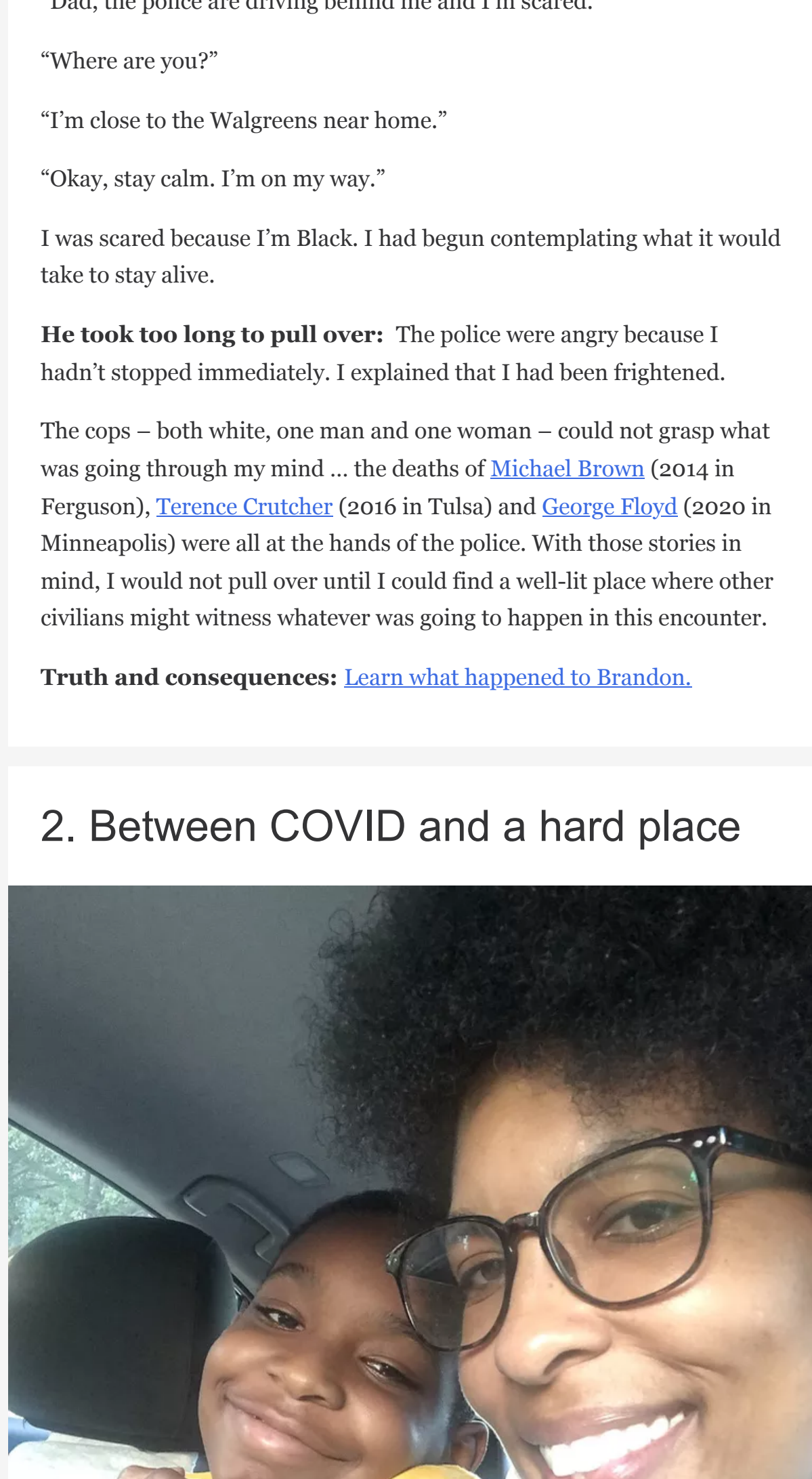
Who is behind this: This newsletter is brought to you by [Before Ferguson Beyond Ferguson](#), a non-profit racial equity storytelling project.

In this edition:

- **Brandon Ford**, a Gen Z person of color, writes about what it's like to get stopped by police in Creve Coeur.
- **Erika Whitfield** reflects on COVID-interruptus as an educator-parent.
- **Laura Horwitz**, co-founder of We Stories, testifies before a Missouri House committee considering measures that take dead aim at diversity in children's literature.
- **Sylvester Brown**, journalist, discusses difficulties covering COVID in marginalized communities.
- Also mentioned in this newsletter: **Kwofe Coleman**, **Orvin Kimbrough**, **Vernon Mitchell**, **Brittany Packnett**, and **Geoff Ward**.
- **BFBF Founders Dick Weiss and Sally Altman** will talk about new initiatives for the racial equity storytelling project with **Paul Wagman**, host of a zoom forum sponsored by Central Reform Congregation. Time: 7:30 p.m., Thursday, January 27. [Sign up here](#) to register and get your ZOOM link.

Let's dive in.

1. Close encounters of the Creve Couer kind



Brandon Ford

Thought bubble: Ever wonder what goes through the mind of a young Black driver who is stopped by police? Brandon Ford takes you there.

On a summer night: When I found a patrol car following me and signaling me to pull over about 10:30 that night, I called my father.

"Dad, the police are driving behind me and I'm scared."

"Where are you?"

"I'm close to the Walgreens near home."

"Okay, stay calm. I'm on my way."

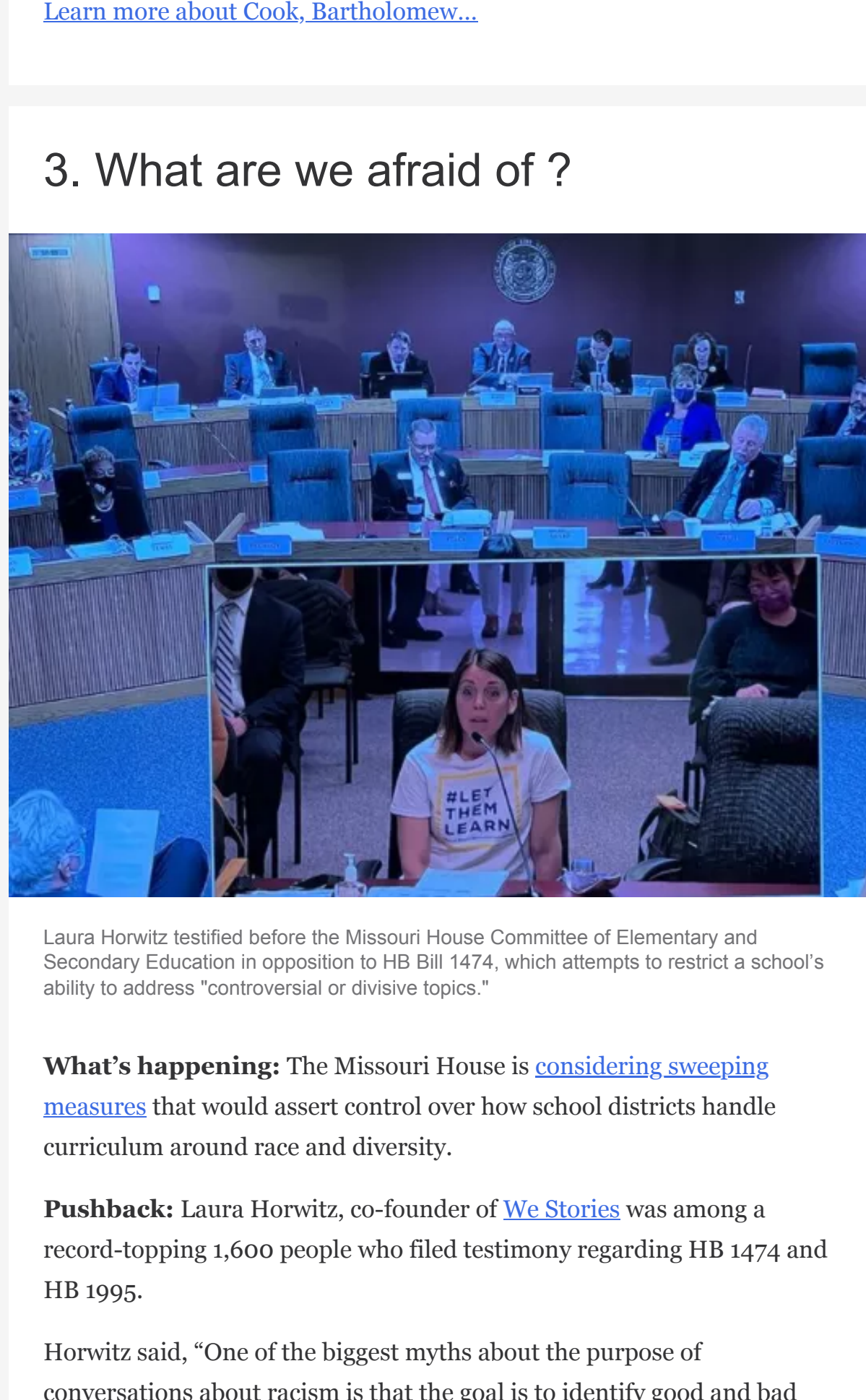
I was scared because I'm Black. I had begun contemplating what it would take to stay alive.

He took too long to pull over: The police were angry because I hadn't stopped immediately. I explained that I had been frightened.

The cops — both white, one man and one woman — could not grasp what was going through my mind ... the deaths of [Michael Brown](#) (2014 in Ferguson), [Terence Crutcher](#) (2016 in Tulsa) and [George Floyd](#) (2020 in Minneapolis) were all at the hands of the police. With those stories in mind, I would not pull over until I could find a well-lit place where other civilians might witness whatever was going to happen in this encounter.

Truth and consequences: [Learn what happened to Brandon.](#)

2. Between COVID and a hard place



Erika Whitfield and her son, Jordan.

What's happening: Classes resumed early this month across the region — but only kinda sorta. With Omicron raging, some schools went virtual, others reimposed mask requirements. Confusion reigned.

Caught in the middle: Teachers, especially those who are also parents. Like me.

Day 1: As we head out the door to our morning commute, my son, Jordan, complains that he doesn't feel well. His stomach hurts. Jordan is not the kind of kid who doesn't want to go to school.

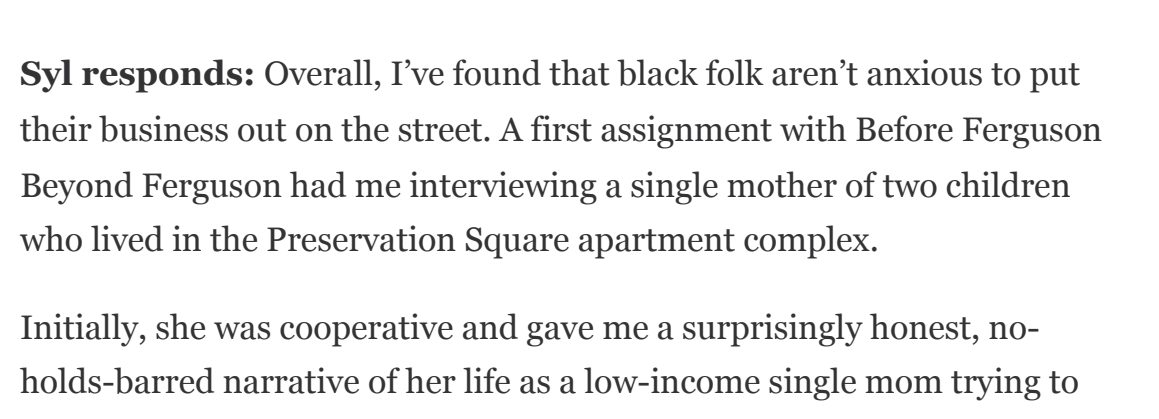
What on earth should I do? Tons of my colleagues are out sick due to COVID. It's the first thing in the morning on the first day back from holiday break.

Are stomach aches a symptom of COVID?

There are no easy decisions here.

[Learn what Erika decided](#) and how she has navigated through the first month of school.

Now A Word From Our Sponsor



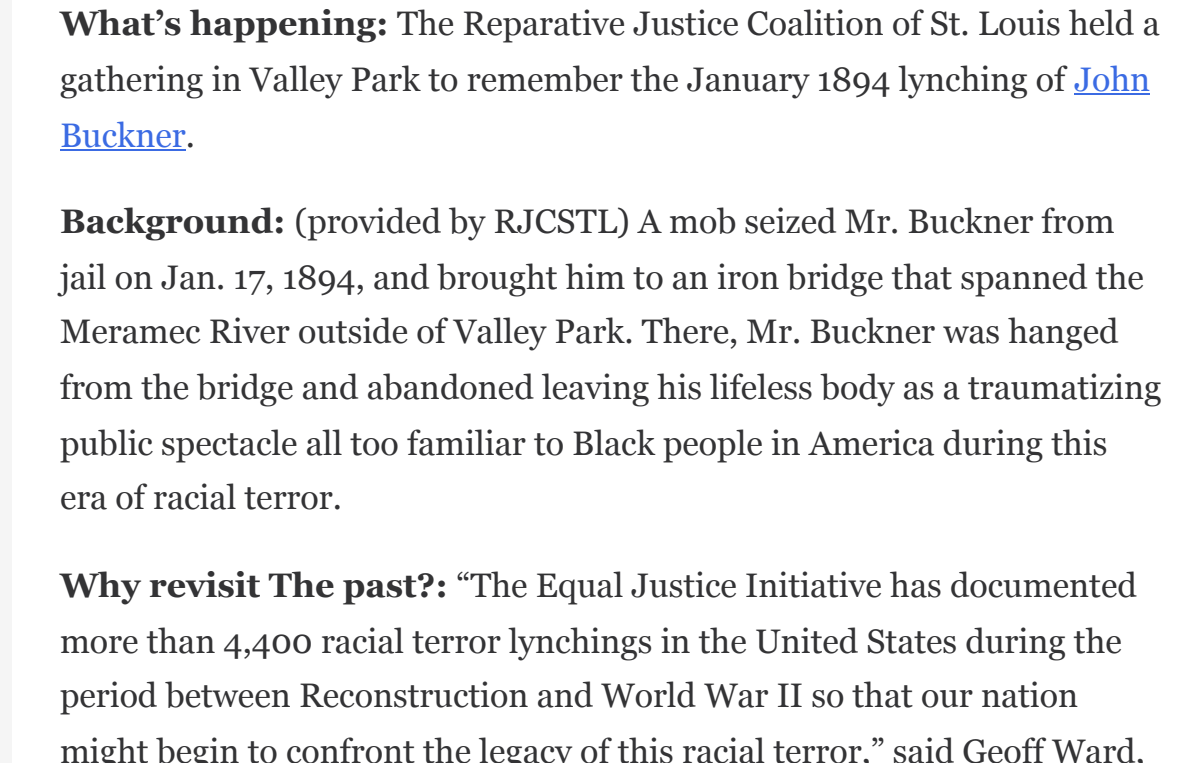
The bottom line: We are the leading local, personal injury attorneys

Who we are: Cook, Bartholomew, Shevlin, Cook & Jones, LLP in Belleville, Illinois, brings together the diverse experience of some of the most highly recognized plaintiffs' attorneys in the area.

- We work collaboratively to deliver optimal counsel and resolution for our clients. Members of our firm are AV-rated and have been selected for inclusion in the Super Lawyers list.
- We are licensed to practice law in both Illinois and Missouri, and are prepared to handle the most complex injury claims throughout the region.
- We are active in charitable giving and participate widely in the local community. That's why we are a sponsor for STL Equity Matters.

[Learn more about Cook, Bartholomew...](#)

3. What are we afraid of ?



Laura Horwitz testified before the Missouri Committee of Elementary and Secondary Education in opposition to HB Bill 1474, which attempts to restrict a school's ability to address "controversial or divisive topics."

What's happening: The Missouri House is [considering sweeping measures](#) that would assert control over how school districts handle curriculum around race and diversity.

Pushback: Laura Horwitz, co-founder of [We Stories](#) was among a record-topping 1,600 people who filed testimony regarding HB 1474 and HB 1995.

Horwitz said, "One of the biggest myths about the purpose of conversations about racism is that the goal is to identify good and bad white people, to assign blame and guilt, or to absolve oneself of those feelings by reading all the right books and saying all the right things. Nothing could be further from the truth of my experience."

What does happen?: "What I see in this bill (HB 1474) is that fear writ large," Horwitz said, "that white parents and their children might encounter ideas that challenge them and... then what? What would happen? What are we so afraid of?"

The bottom line: "There are far too few stories shared about what comes after fear, what comes after discomfort, and how positive conversations about race can be for white folks, how whole having a more developed understanding of racism can make us, how humanizing being in real community across racial lines can be."

Go deeper:

- [Read the transcript of Horwitz's testimony.](#) (500 words, reading time 2 minutes.)
- [Wentzville School District bans](#) Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*.

4. Ask Syl: The COVID coverage conundrum



Send your questions

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.

Question: *"How has COVID affected journalism as a Black man in an already disadvantaged arena? Has it been easier to get the scoop or harder? Has it made journalists more inclined to follow pure truth stories even harder?"*

Syl responds: Overall, I've found that black folk aren't anxious to put their business out on the street. A first assignment with Before Ferguson Beyond Ferguson had me interviewing a single mother of two children who lived in the Preservation Square apartment complex.

Initially, she was cooperative and gave me a surprisingly honest, no-holds-barred narrative of her life as a low-income single mom trying to deal with COVID. But then she ghosted me, not returning my calls for follow-up questions. I figured she had second thoughts about providing her blunt commentary.

On the other hand: Once I get some people talking, I've found that I can make them comfortable enough to share some great and oftentimes personal information with me. I think it's a matter of building trust, which humbles me and makes me appreciate my role as a down-to-earth Black writer.

Deciphering the gray areas: I do my best to present the truth about the pandemic and dispel all the rumors and social media misinformation. But I've come to understand that the mistrust sown by the medical system is a real thing that needs to be addressed if we are to survive this epidemic and get a handle on health disparities in poor neighborhoods.

Go deeper: [Syl's thoughts](#) on how journalists can navigate in underserved neighbors.

5. Remembrance of a lynching

Illustration of the scene of the lynching the morning after (Source: *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, Jan. 18, 1894, p. 12).

What's happening: The Reporative Justice Coalition of St. Louis held a gathering in Valley Park to remember the January 1894 lynching of [John Buckner](#).

Background: (provided by RJCSTL) A mob seized Mr. Buckner from jail on Jan. 17, 1894, and brought him to an iron bridge that spanned the Meramec River outside of Valley Park. There, Mr. Buckner was hanged from the bridge and abandoned leaving his lifeless body as a traumatizing public spectacle all too familiar to Black people in America during this era of racial terror.

Why revisit The past?: "The Equal Justice Initiative has documented more than 4,400 racial terror lynchings in the United States during the period between Reconstruction and World War II so that our nation might begin to confront the legacy of this racial terror," said Geoff Ward, an RJCSTL organizer who spoke at the remembrance in Buder Park. "These legacies are evident in our schools, in neighborhood violence, in health disparities, and many other contexts, but perhaps most pronounced in our criminal justice system today."

Action: Participants collected soil from the site of the lynching and placed it in jars provided by the Equal Justice Initiative. These jars will be displayed in various memorial exhibits: in [EJI's Legacy Museum in Montgomery](#), Alabama, at the [Griot Museum](#) here in St. Louis, and in the Missouri Community Remembrance Project Exhibit at the [Black Archives of Mid-America in Kansas City](#).

Go deeper: [More about the Reporative Justice Coalition's work in St. Louis.](#)

Margaret Holly

What we're reading & watching

Banker **Orvin Kimbrough** sees networking as key to diversity. David Nicklaus in the [St. Louis Post-Dispatch](#)

St. Louis activist **Brittany Packnett** featured (along with Anita Hill) in PBS's [Finding Your Roots](#).

New CEO **Kwofe Coleman** says The Muny should reflect all of St. Louis. Jeremy D. Goodwin at [St. Louis Public Radio](#).

Vernon Mitchell, the city's new chief equity officer to focus on data. Dana Rieck in the [St. Louis American](#)

Contributors to this newsletter. [Brandon Ford](#) (top left), [Erika Whitfield](#), and [Sylvester Brown](#). Click on a name to get a bio.

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