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SCHOOL COUNSELORS

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By AZIAH SID, WORD IN BLACK  
POLICING BLACK BODIES

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# A Conversation With TRACI MANUEL

Oklahoma  
**Teacher Of The Year**

GARY LEE  
TRACI MANUEL

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listening,  
asking what's  
important and  
offering the  
right solutions.

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TRACI MANUEL, Tulsa Teacher of the Year (2022), Oklahoma Teacher of the Year (2023- 24). PHOTO COREY YOUNG

IN RECOGNITION OF HER EXEMPLARY ROLE  
LEADING HER CLASSROOMS AND EDUCATING STUDENTS  
*Manuel was named Tulsa Teacher of the  
Year in 2022 and Oklahoma Teacher of  
the Year for the 2023- 24 school year.*

TRACI MANUEL from A1

**TULSA PUBLIC SCHOOLS** is undergoing a period of regrouping. Administrators at TPS are looking for ways to raise the test scores of students, lift the classroom experience and address other challenges. It is an apt moment for the community of educators, parents, students, and concerned citizens in the North Tulsa community to turn to its most tried and true resource: teachers.

There is no more thoughtful voice in the dialogue than Booker T. Washington English Teacher Traci Manuel. In recognition of her exemplary role leading her classrooms and educating students, Manuel was named Tulsa Teacher of the Year in 2022 and Oklahoma Teacher of the Year for the 2023- 24 school year. Manuel, a native Oklahoman, attended Tulsa public schools and is a 2000 graduate of Booker T. Washington High School. She joined TPS as a substitute teacher in 2005 and has taught at Carver Middle School and for the past two years has been on the faculty at Booker T. As Teacher of the Year, Manuel is traveling the state, promoting the causes of teachers and students. The Oklahoma Eagle engaged her for a wide-ranging interview. Our topics varied from Manuel’s challenges during her student days to her thoughts on how Oklahoma can better address the achievement gap between different sets of students. Manuel’s responses below were edited for clarity and conciseness.

**“Listen, young lady, you’re going to make it and we’re going to get you through this. You’re going to re-strategize. You need to come up with a plan of action.”**

EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT,  
Booker T. Washington  
High School, Tulsa, OK

**OKLAHOMA EAGLE:** What was your toughest moment as a Tulsa Public School student?

**MANUEL:** I had my challenges in school. I was working hard in some areas, struggling academically. When I had my senior meeting with my counselor at Booker T., she started shaking her head telling me “Traci, you don’t really have any good options.” I took that personally. When I left her office, there was an African American secretary at the time who overheard the conversation and saw my devastation. She said, “listen, young lady, you’re going to make it and we’re going to get you through this. You’re going to re-strategize. You need to come up with a plan of action. I ended up going to Philander Smith College and graduate school at the University of Michigan.

**OKLAHOMA EAGLE:** How did your path lead you back to Tulsa and to teaching?

**MANUEL:** In graduate school I worked with a gifted educator named Deborah Harman. Her big focus was on closing the achievement gap among students. Working with her, I was able to train superintendents, principals, teachers, on how to decrease the achievement gaps and become experts on cultural competency. I connected that work back to my hometown of Tulsa. I learned that in Tulsa the achievement gap was widening among students. My heart sank.

TRACI MANUEL *cont.* A5



# Rentiesville: An Historic Oklahoma All-Black Town

By LARRY O'DELL , THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF OKLAHOMA HISTORY AND CULTURE



Rentiesville, founded in 1903 and developed on twenty acres owned by William Rentie and twenty acres owned by Phoebe McIntosh, is located in McIntosh County five miles north of Checotah. The community is one of more than fifty All-Black towns in Oklahoma and one of thirteen still existing. Rev. N. A. Robinson, I. J. Foster, W. D. Robinson, and Rentie organized the townsite company with Robinson serving as president. J. J. Hudson opened the first mercantile business and became the first postmaster when the post office opened on May 11, 1904. B. C. Franklin followed Hudson as postmaster. By this time, as a flag stop

on the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railway, the town had five businesses along Main Street, and eighty-one children were enrolled in the school. In 1905 the community elected F. P. Brinson as the first mayor, and Robinson succeeded Brinson in 1909. William Rentie, the town's only lawman, arrested Garfield Walker for drunkenness and disorderly conduct in 1908. Walker later shot and killed Rentie for revenge, taking away not only the marshal but also a principal founder and namesake. The town recovered and prospered for a time, boasting a lumber store, cotton gin, and many thriving businesses. The Great Depression and lure of opportunities

in urban centers caused an exodus of citizens from Rentiesville. By the late 1930s the population dwindled to 154, and the 1990 census reported 66 residents. A population boom occurred, with 102 residents by 2000 and 128 by 2010. The site of the Civil War Battle of Honey Springs is only a half-mile east of town. A noted attraction is the Down Home Blues Club of nationally famed Blues artist D. C. Minner. Every Labor Day weekend Minner hosts the Dusk 'til Dawn Blues Festival in the town. Rentiesville is also the birthplace of Dr. John Hope Franklin, dean of African American historians and author of the award-winning book From Slavery to Freedom.

THE OKLAHOMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY is an agency of the government of Oklahoma dedicated to promotion and preservation of Oklahoma's history and its people by collecting, interpreting, and disseminating knowledge and artifacts of Oklahoma.

JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN'S OLD HOME in Rentiesville (21446.TO.M184.51.1.9, Larry O'Dell Collection, OHS).

## Featured Last Week



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TRACI MANUEL, Tulsa Teacher of the Year (2022), Oklahoma Teacher of the Year (2023- 24). PHOTO FACEBOOK

TRACI MANUEL from A3

I asked my husband if there was any way we could go back home and help some of those young kids. I wasn’t really wanting to do education. My goal was to open a performing arts center that helped kids with their talents. Back in Tulsa, I connected with Millard House (II), who was then principal at KIPP school, and he gave me the opportunity to work there. He said, “You go back into the classroom and stay there.” I responded, “Am I really ready for this?” I guess I was.

**OKLAHOMA EAGLE:** What satisfies you most as a teacher?

**MANUEL:** I have worked with a lot of students who were three and four, even more grade levels behind. I became very close with their families. I realized that this was my calling. This is where I needed to be - being able to see a lot of those students become successful finding their voices and overcoming their obstacles.

**OKLAHOMA EAGLE:** Do you have a role model or mentor as a teacher?

**MANUEL:** I’m inspired by Marva Collins, who was an innovator, an entrepreneur, and educator. She used to say, “we can reach children because they have so much potential. It’s up for us as teachers to tap into that and make it a reality for them.” So that’s me.

**OKLAHOMA EAGLE:** What more can be done to close the achievement gap?

**MANUEL:** The achievement gap is still growing in Tulsa. I - and many others - are working on it. Some people think that to close it you just jump into the curriculum and go forward. Well, there’s a lot more to it. ... (In) our Black and brown communities, parents understood that they needed to provide more resources for their kids than what the public school system was able to offer. But we’ve always been at a disadvantage sometimes where we can’t afford those tools. So how are we as public educators dealing with that? We are using the tools that we have and having the conversations we need to have. At Booker T., for instance, the counselors might notice that students are not passing in reading, or their English classes. They try to approach the students and say, “Hey, can we have lunch and learn together?” Is TPS going about it the right way? I think so. In terms of (future) steps, they need to use experts in the classroom, and also turn to some of the retired educators. In my journey as Teacher of the Year, I will be looking to help the state and to encourage certain districts to pursue getting experts in the classrooms and using everyday people in the classroom. Tulsa public schools are working to achieve that achievement gap. Are we there yet? Absolutely not. Can we

do better? Yes,

**OKLAHOMA EAGLE:** How does developing cultural competency among teachers fit in?

**MANUEL:** For teachers to have cultural competency is crucial to helping close the achievement gap. We have to make sure our staff are trained and bring it back into the schools. But when we talk about activism, not every educator, either classroom teacher or administrator felt comfortable with those kinds of conversations. That’s where cultural competency comes in. I’ve realized that traditional educators look at the content, but don’t realize that not all content resonates

with all our students. So, we have to ask, when they read something, how comfortable are they? Are the tests they take reflective of (the) students’ knowledge or students’ resources that they’ve been exposed to? Cultural competency calls for us to dig into that - to deal with the academic issues that students are facing. Because if students pick up a novel, or they are digging into their history, and they never see themselves, how vested are they going to be in their K through 12 (th grade) experiences? The communication styles of different teachers also matter. Let’s say a teacher decides to tell a student in a minority environment, would you like to open the text and let’s explore Booker T. or Mark Twain or

whatever we’re looking at? And the student goes, “No, I really am not going to do that. I don’t want to do it.” And another teacher comes along who may relate to that student culturally and has a communication style of being direct and says, “Students open the text. Let’s dig in.” And the students do it. My approach as a teacher at Central High School was very different from my approach at Booker T. Washington. The way that I communicate as a teacher, the way that I relate, (and) the way that I interact with the students will vary according to the different demographics. But I think I got the same outcomes. So, you must be culturally competent about the students that you are addressing, especially when you are in lower performing environments, but also higher performing environments. I think you can’t not deal with cultural competency if you’re going to address the deficiencies that we have in public education.

**OKLAHOMA EAGLE:** Are there some learning issues that linger from the Pandemic?

**MANUEL:** Artificial intelligence – and how it is used among students – remains a big issue. As an English teacher, I could see that some of my students’ writings were not matching their conversations. When I asked some students to discuss topics, I saw that it didn’t match (the) papers they had done. I started thinking that plagiarism was an issue. And accountability was another one. Many students weren’t mastering skills. They were just churning out homework. We’re still dealing with that.

Another thing is that a lot of my Black and brown students are still a year or so behind their white counterparts. When we look at their writings, again, their critical thinking, their dedication and willingness to work through tough text, things of that nature, they may not have that same stamina to do some of those fields. They’re definitely still affected by this.

**OKLAHOMA EAGLE:** You have a special needs child. Is TPS responding well to his learning needs?

**MANUEL:** My son is 12, a fifth grader at Sequoia Elementary School. That’s one of our Title 1 schools. It has a high concentration of Hispanic students with a low number of white and African American community. My son had an interesting story. He is a special needs student. We knew we had to take very serious precautions to try not to fall behind during the COVID-19 period. And so, my aunt, an experienced educator for well over 40 years, worked with him one on one. He was also part of an academic disadvantage program. And we had some other people within our village – including my mother - who helped build his skills. So that’s how we are making sure he gets the best possible education. I know many kids did not have the advantages or resources he has.

TRACI MANUEL cont. A6





PHOTO PROVIDED

# “We Must Take A Second Look At How Well Kids Are Doing”

TRACI MANUEL *from A5*

**OKLAHOMA EAGLE:** How can parents best be engaged with the learning experience?

**MANUEL:** We need to give parents roles, responsibilities, and resources to help their children. I believe that they are very receptive to that. Obviously, .... magnet schools like Booker T. Washington, they don't necessarily need that, because they still believe a lot of those parents that the parent is the first teacher that their child will interact with. And so, they show that in their involvement through the foundation, and they're evolving through PTSA, and sports, and through other programs that their kids are in that they aren't there. But many of our schools don't have those resources. And so, I think if we began to in our community platforms, our churches, our organizations, our sports, because that's where a lot of Black and brown students reside, we must begin to let parents know, we don't just need to see you on the court. But we need to see you in the classroom and make those parents feel comfortable and (give) them the tools that they need to help their children be successful.

**OKLAHOMA EAGLE:** How can the school system help kids who have fallen way behind in their grade level?

**MANUEL:** It's accurate on some levels that some of our kids are third and fourth grade levels. But it depends on the angle that you're looking from. Many of my Anglo-Saxon kids, when it comes to English content, or the foundational skills -- writing and reading, they have those. But my Black and brown kids, they have skill sets to engage in discussion (are) rich, and the ability to dig into text and connect it to real world applications. The tests do not show that we are performing strongly in those ways. The tests focus only on their written skills that matter. In my field as an educator, I know it's not just my written expression that matters. It's my oral expression as well. It's with that perspective that we must take a second look at how well kids are doing. One example is a kid named Michael. He

“How do I push past these things, to make sure that these students and I have a respectful way of standing and that we’re grasping the things that they need?”

**Traci Manuel**  
Tulsa Teacher of the Year (2022),  
Oklahoma Teacher of the Year  
(2023- 24)

was one of those kids who was very far behind in his skill sets. I remember Michael saying, “I can’t do it. And I don’t want to do it.” I responded, “Michael, you know what, I’m just going to call your mom. He said, “but do you even know my mom?” I slowly said, “Yeah, we’ve went to school together.” I knew we had not, but I used that as an approach to see how far I could get. To this day, Michael and I call ourselves family. He has grown by leaps and bounds and skill sets. He’s been able to make it and become successful. And there have been other such moments when I think through the stories of students and see their eye-opening moments. I see when they realize that I really care, I believe in them, I’m going to push them hard. Having those encounters with students really helped me know that this is what I’m supposed to be doing.

**OKLAHOMA EAGLE:** What has been hardest for you as a classroom teacher?

**MANUEL:** I had a rough road trying to figure out how do I find my voice. How do I continue knowing I’m in an environment where it’s not really inviting for me even as an adult? How do I push past these things, to make sure that these students and I have a respectful way of standing and that we’re grasping the things that they need? I still feel like I’m learning. I still have those moments when I ask myself “Do I belong?” But I think that I have gained the confidence to say it doesn’t matter if I belong, I am going to insert my voice and I am going to be respectful with that and respectful to you and we are going to journey alone together because that’s what we do with our magnet programs. So yeah, there have been points where I’ve been challenged and want to give up like other teachers, but again, through my village that I’ve always known, I can always go back to those retired educators and say, “Hey, what did you do when you had this? How did you handle this? How did you handle things when you and an administrator differed on ideas? How did you push through it? That’s how I’ve been able to really keep going.

**OKLAHOMA EAGLE:** I know there is a shortage of schoolteachers in Tulsa and elsewhere in Oklahoma. What can we do to retain good teachers?

**MANUEL:** I want to add my voice to the fight to keep teachers in Oklahoma. I know there are challenges in that fight -- such as whether our pay rate may or may not increase. I want to make sure that there is the opportunity for systemic growth for teachers. Right now, on the table is whether or not to pay teachers by performance-based pay. At one time, teachers whose students had high test scores were being paid an extra stipend. But I look at teachers who are making growth changes, who may be in those low-performing schools with those students who are three- and four-grade levels behind. Those teachers who are in tough environments may even be working harder than teachers who are in environments where their kids are showing growth. So, when we look at performance-based pay, I think we really need to merge that with systemic growth. As long as teachers are showing growth, then we should be paying them for those efforts. That approach will make a better environment for our teachers, our students, our family and our standard state of Oklahoma for public good.

**OKLAHOMA EAGLE:** You started a support group for girls and young women. What was the objective and how well did it work?

**MANUEL:** I sponsored a group called Women of Power for years. This group dealt with the community, dealt with confidence, dealt with culture, career and college preparation for students. It was a leadership class. I keep in contact with those students. They learned to work through tough times and develop skills. Some other students that I didn’t have in that program haven’t fared as well.

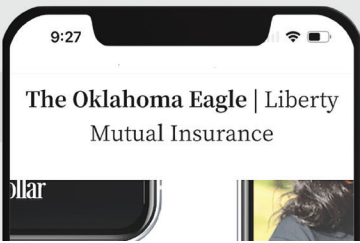
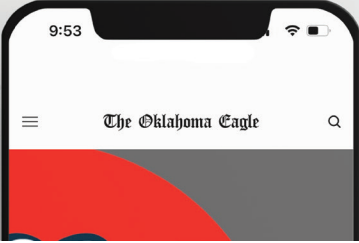
**OKLAHOMA EAGLE:** What inspires you?

**MANUEL:** My faith, my family, my village, keep me going. I love to see a challenge. There’s not one challenge that I can’t say that I have not overcome. It may have taken me a while, but I’ve overcome it. Sometimes I feel like I’m in new territory with new tech challenges and so on. I need to stay engaged to help the next generation to overcome that.

The Oklahoma Eagle

## Our Mission

To amplify our core value of equity, through journalism and editorial” is the cornerstone of our continued success.







STATE REP. ERIC ROBERTS, R-Oklahoma City, asks State Election Board Secretary Paul Ziriaux a question during an interim study on ranked choice voting held Sept. 12, 2023 at the Oklahoma State Capitol. PHOTO KEATON ROSS/OKLAHOMA WATCH

# “I’ll Be Honest, I’m Confused By Ranked-Choice Voting.”

RANKED-CHOICE VOTING *from AI*

From Alaska to New York City, ranked-choice voting has gained traction in a handful of states and dozens of municipalities.

A coalition of voter advocacy groups and some elected officials, including Rep. Mickey Dollens, D-Oklahoma City, and Stillwater mayor, Will Joyce, say the preference-based voting system helps reduce negative campaigning and gives a greater voice to third-party and independent voters. But several Republican lawmakers, concerned about a potential switchover being costly and confusing to voters, remain skeptical.

Five Republican-led states have banned municipalities from using ranked-choice voting in their elections since 2022. Last month the American Legislative Exchange Council, a Virginia-based conservative nonprofit whose members draft and share model legislation, finalized a model proposal to ban ranked-choice voting at the state and municipal levels.

The ranked-choice voting issue isn’t entirely partisan. The Washington, D.C. Democratic Party filed a lawsuit in early August seeking to block a ranked-choice voting ballot measure, arguing the system could disenfranchise low-income and minority voters. Several Democratic officials in Nevada, including the state’s U.S. Senate delegation and leaders of the House and Senate, oppose an upcoming ballot initiative for similar reasons.

Members of the House Elections and Ethics Committee weighed potential policies governing ranked-choice voting, including a municipal-level ban, during an interim study at the state Capitol on Tuesday morning. Interim studies don’t generate official reports or recommendations but are often used to guide future legislation.

Here’s a look at what could be in store in the upcoming legislative session:

## How Ranked-choice Voting Works

Instead of selecting a single candidate per race, voters in jurisdictions with ranked-choice voting rank candidates by preference from first to last.

If a single candidate doesn’t win a majority of first-place votes when ballots are first counted, the candidate with the least amount of first-place votes is eliminated and second-place votes from those ballots are distributed to remaining candidates. This process continues until there’s a majority winner.

That process eliminates the need for a runoff election, which Oklahoma uses in primary contests in which a single candidate doesn’t get a majority of votes. That could save the state millions in the coming decades and offset the potential cost of implementing ranked-choice voting, said Cindy Alexander, a volunteer with Rank the Vote Oklahoma.

“It’s safe to assume that a runoff election



PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

will cost a million dollars,” Alexander said in an interview before the study. “And the cost is more than just the money. Some people find it inconvenient to go vote ten weeks after they just did so, they may have to make arrangements to get time off work. And sometimes the interest just wanes in those 10 weeks.”

In a presentation to lawmakers, Alexander said ranked-choice voting more accurately reflects the will of the people because a candidate with majority support always wins. She cited the 2002 gubernatorial race, in which former Democratic Gov. Brady Henry narrowly defeated Republican Steve Largent with just 43.6% of the overall vote, as an election in which Republicans could have benefited from ranked-choice voting.

The system also tends to reward elected officials who are solutions-oriented and open to compromise, Alexander said. Three Alaska political scientists penned an article in May outlining positive changes in the state’s legislature after a voter-approved initiative implementing ranked-choice voting took effect last year, including an expedited state budget agreement.

“Candidates will be hoping to be the second choice of a voter if they can’t be the first,” Alexander said. “They don’t want to offend a voter who is a big supporter of another candidate.”

## State Elections Chief, Alaska Senator Urge Caution

Four of the five speakers at the study were critical of ranked-choice voting, raising concerns that it’s overly complex or mostly supported by left-leaning organizations.

State Election Board Secretary Paul Ziriaux said the state’s voting machines aren’t capable of reading ranked-choice ballots and would need to be replaced if the voting system is adopted. He said it would probably take at least a year to send requests for proposals and purchase capable machines, likely at a cost exceeding \$10 million.

Additional money would be needed to educate voters and election officials of the changes. When Alaska voters approved a ballot initiative implementing ranked-choice voting, the state Legislature appropriated \$1.6 million to launch an education campaign.

“I’ll be honest, I’m confused by ranked-choice voting,” Ziriaux told lawmakers. “As you can imagine, if I’m confused, how does the general public respond to it? I would not want to be the one to have to go out and explain it to voters.”

Asked whether the state would be capable of tallying ballots and reporting results on election night under a ranked-choice voting system, Ziriaux said probably not.

“That would be my concern,” Ziriaux said. “For me personally, one of the things that really helps give voters confidence in elections here in Oklahoma is you may have to stay up until 11 or 12, but in general you know when you go to bed who won the election.”

Mike Shower, a Republican state senator from Alaska, said a growing percentage of ballots have been disqualified since ranked-choice voting was implemented, particularly among low-income and minority residents. In Alaska’s August 2022 special election, ballots from several rural precincts went partially uncounted because of a mailing delay, but the state’s election director said a full tallying would not have changed the final results.

Shower, a self-described conservative who focuses on election policy, added that he believes ranked-choice voting is a ploy to shift Republican-leaning states further to the middle. Scott Walter, president of the right-leaning Capital Research Center, told lawmakers earlier in the study that left-leaning nonprofits are leading the effort to persuade municipalities and states to adopt ranked-choice voting.

“I would implore you to look at ways to prevent this system from coming into Oklahoma while you have the opportunity to do so,” Shower said.

Alexander, the ranked-choice voting advocate, said concerns about the complexity of the system are overblown, citing exit polls from Alaska and growing adoption of the system in university and business settings. About four in five Alaskans who participated in a Patinkin Research Strategies survey described casting a ranked choice ballot in the November 2022 midterms as simple. Nine percent of respondents said the system was very difficult.

Alexander said voter advocacy groups could consider a veto referendum if the Legislature passes restrictions on ranked-choice voting. Organizers would need to collect at least 57,664 signatures over 90 days to reach the ballot.

“That is definitely the playbook that’s circulating,” Alexander said regarding statewide bans of ranked-choice voting. “I would be very concerned that Oklahoma would lose the opportunity to allow better elections and allow the majority of voters to choose who is elected.”

Correction: A previous version of this story referenced Alaska ballots that were rejected in June 2022. This was a statewide mail-in election, not a ranked choice election. A definition of the American Legislative Exchange Council has also been updated for clarity.

KEATON ROSS covers democracy and criminal justice for Oklahoma Watch. Contact him at (405) 831-9753 or [Kross@Oklahomawatch.org](mailto:Kross@Oklahomawatch.org). Follow him on Twitter at @KeatonRoss.



IN THE SUMMER OF 2022

# New laws suppressed telehealth abortion care, medication abortions and shuttered remaining clinics almost overnight



MAGON HOFFMAN'S life was in danger and her unborn daughter wouldn't survive. She had to drive 600 miles for an abortion. Hoffman and her husband, Lane, are seen holding an ultrasound image. PHOTO WHITNEY BRYEN/OKLAHOMA WATCH

## ABORTION from A1

When she awoke on the couch in the early morning hours of Nov. 21, Magon Hoffman's pajama pants were soaked in blood. What began as light bleeding the night before had turned severe. Hoffman assumed she was miscarrying.

But an ultrasound revealed it was Hoffman's life that was in danger.

At 14 weeks, the fetus seemed healthy, but Hoffman, 31, had one of the largest blood clots her doctor had ever seen and was at risk of going into shock or organ failure if it continued to grow.

Hoffman's doctor restricted her physical activity to little more than a temperate walk. She was unable to work, care for her toddler or decorate her Christmas tree. All Hoffman could do was wait and hope the clot resolved itself. Doctors performed weekly ultrasounds to ensure the fetus remained safe.

On Dec. 28, Hoffman went in for her 20-week check up and an anatomy scan, an ultrasound that provides a detailed view of a fetus' bones, heart, brain, face and other features. And it's the first chance to detect heart conditions, spinal defects, poor organ development and other abnormalities.

Hoffman's scan revealed that her unborn daughter was missing a skull and most of her brain. There was zero chance, not even a 0.1% possibility, that the baby would survive, Hoffman remembers her doctor saying. Her daughter would die almost immediately after birth.

Hoffman could attempt to carry the fetus to term risking gestational diabetes, high blood pressure and bleeding. Assuming no other complications arose, Hoffman would spend the next four months in bed or with highly restricted movement, attempt a life-threatening delivery and watch her daughter die. Or, she could terminate the pregnancy, reducing the risks to her own life and spare her unborn daughter pain.

"Carrying her to term sounded like the most torturous thing I could do to myself, my husband and our unborn child," Hoffman said. "I knew immediately that the right decision for myself and my family was to terminate."

## Hated and Alone

Hoffman's decision was sure and swift. But, months earlier, Oklahoma lawmakers took that choice away from Oklahomans like Hoffman when they passed confusing abortion restrictions that

# IN 2021, OKLAHOMA PHYSICIANS PERFORMED ABOUT 3,600 ABORTIONS

STATE HEALTH  
DEPARTMENT REPORT



PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

led doctors to refuse the procedure as a precaution.

In June, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the constitutional right to an abortion allowing Oklahoma to implement some of the nation's most restrictive laws.

An Oklahoma law written in 1910 was reinstated making performing an abortion a felony except to save the life of the mother. Another state law allowed people to sue abortion providers or others who aided and abetted an abortion. Coupled with legislation that preceded the Supreme Court ruling, five overlapping laws created an unclear picture of abortion access in Oklahoma.

Hoffman's doctor told her she could not get the procedure in Oklahoma even though her life was in jeopardy and the fetus had no chance of survival. Hoffman was prepared to leave the state for the procedure she needed and sought guidance from her doctor on how to find the safest option, what to ask potential providers and what to tell them about her condition. After a week of desperate messages to the nursing staff she had come to trust, a nurse finally called her back and explained that they had spent the week trying to decipher the law and what they could legally say to Hoffman. The nurse offered to provide a list of clinics in neighboring states, which Hoffman had already found online.

"I didn't become a nurse to have conversations like this," the nurse told Hoffman. "I became a nurse to help people and I'm so sorry I couldn't."

Hoffman's options dwindled the longer she waited. And, now, she was on her own to find the care she needed.

"It seems a little silly now, and I was dealing with pregnancy hormones and all that, but I truly thought everyone in Oklahoma hated me," Hoffman said. "I

thought everyone was going to think I was a murderer, even the doctors and nurses, because the way politicians talk about abortion is so hateful, like we're only using it as birth control."

## The Chilling Effect

Access to abortions was limited in Oklahoma before the Supreme Court's ruling. There were fewer clinics than in other states and more requirements for physicians and pregnant patients that delayed or hindered care.

In 2021, Oklahoma physicians performed about 3,600 abortions, according to a State Health Department report. Most occurred before the eighth week of pregnancy, the report shows. The majority of patients had never had an abortion before and were treated with medication rather than surgery.

Asked why they were receiving an abortion, 394 patients said health complications to the fetus and 324 said their own life was at risk, according to the report. And 59 reported the procedure was necessary to prevent death.

In the summer of 2022, new laws suppressed telehealth abortion care, medication abortions and shuttered remaining clinics almost overnight, said Janet Levit, a University of Tulsa law professor and Center for Reproductive Rights board member. Fewer than 900 residents received abortions in Oklahoma last year, according to the 2022 health department report. None occurred after May.

Vague and conflicting language in the laws heightened confusion and fear. Doctors and nurses worried about lawsuits, losing their medical license or incarceration if they acted too soon, leaving pregnant patients without care.

"Because the exceptions were so unclearly drafted, hospitals were in a fair amount of paralysis in

the face of a lot of life-threatening conditions to women," said Levit.

Rep. Jim Olsen, R-Roland, who introduced a bill that made performing an abortion a criminal offense except in a medical emergency, said broad language was intended to give doctors the discretion to act as long as they gave equal weight to the life of the mother and the unborn baby. Gov. Kevin Stitt signed the bill into law in 2022.

Jaci Statton was about to pass out from blood loss and pain in March when emergency room staff told her to wait in the parking lot of Oklahoma Children's Hospital until she was actively crashing in front of them or on the verge of a heart attack, according to a federal complaint filed Sept. 12.

Sutton's complaint alleges that the hospital violated federal rules when it failed to provide stabilizing care. Sutton seeks an investigation by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services into her care, which could result in changes to hospital policy and procedure, or fines, and set a precedent for statewide pregnancy care.

The complaint follows Oklahoma Supreme Court rulings this year striking down two laws and affirming a woman's right to terminate a pregnancy to preserve her life. The decisions broadened exemptions to state abortion bans giving some autonomy back to doctors and patients. But it's unclear how much and whether the changes will affect results for patients like Statton or Hoffman.

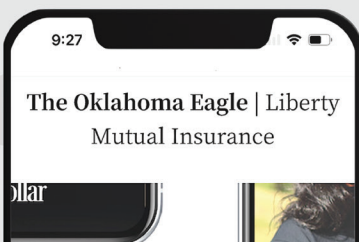
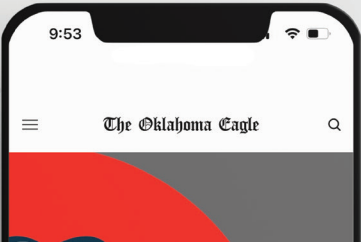
Olsen said he plans to reintroduce in 2024 the stricken bills that made performing an abortion a criminal and civil offense changing the exemption from medical emergency to preserving the life of the mother. Olsen said he did not consult physicians about the first bills nor upcoming legislation.

ABORTION cont. A9

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Olsen said he also is considering proposing a state question that would allow voters to decide whether personhood begins at conception.

“It’s not only the life of the mother in question,” Olsen said. “That absolutely matters, but it’s also about the life of the baby and we have to have a solution that includes both the life of the woman and the life of the baby.”

Dr. Dana Stone, a private practice obstetrician and gynecologist who has treated pregnant Oklahomans for nearly 30 years, said fear continues to stifle physicians despite the recent rulings. It’s going to require time and more clarity to undo the damage previous language caused in medical settings, she said.

Nothing will change without guidance from hospital attorneys and the state attorney general, Gentner Drummond, she said. Drummond’s spokesman said guidance is underway but did not know when it would be released.

“The power of these laws is their chilling effect,” Levit said. “They’re drafted broadly and relatively untested, and I’m guessing that fuzziness is by strategic design, which means it’s going to take some brave attorneys and doctors to test those changes.”

In the meantime, Oklahoma is forcing women to travel out of state for care, contributing to higher rates of pregnancy-related death and complications. According to a March of Dimes’ report, the farther a woman travels for maternity care, the higher her risk of complications that can lead to severe medical conditions or death of the mother and fetus.

Hoffman traveled nearly 600 miles from Oklahoma City to Albuquerque’s University Of New Mexico Health Sciences Center.

### ‘Oklahoma Really Kicked Me When I Was Down’

Abortion is banned in Missouri. And laws in Arkansas and Texas are similar to Oklahoma’s.

Hoffman was 21 weeks pregnant when she called providers in Kansas. They were booked for at least two weeks and Kansas does not allow abortions after 22 weeks so Hoffman turned to New Mexico.

Clinics warned that protestors had become more aggressive since the overturning of Roe v. Wade and Hoffman would have to be transferred to a hospital if the clot ruptured during her procedure or if surgery was the better option. Finding a hospital that



A CELEBRATION outside the Supreme Court, Friday, June 24, 2022, in Washington. The Supreme Court has ended constitutional protections for abortion that had been in place nearly 50 years — a decision by its conservative majority to overturn the court’s landmark abortion cases. PHOTO AP PHOTO/STEVE HELBER

ABORTION from A8

LIKE THOSE WHO DIED IN  
POTTAWATOMIE COUNTY, PEOPLE  
OFTEN ARRIVE IN JAILS WITH  
UNTREATED PHYSICAL AND MENTAL  
HEALTH CONDITIONS WORSENERD  
BY INCARCERATION, ACCORDING  
TO A 2019 REPORT FROM THE  
PRISON POLICY INITIATIVE, A  
NONPROFIT THAT STUDIES MASS  
INCARCERATION.

offered abortions added time and stress to Hoffman’s search.

The university hospital wouldn’t schedule Hoffman without reviewing her medical records. Hoffman’s Oklahoma doctor was prohibited from consulting with New Mexico physicians. He couldn’t call or send medical records, staff told her. So, Hoffman explained what she could to the New Mexico team and then collected her medical records, ultrasound images, and notes from her long-time Oklahoma doctor and sent them to someone she had never met in New Mexico.

On Jan. 11, two weeks after the ultrasound that revealed her unborn child’s fate, Hoffman’s abortion was complete. That afternoon, Hoffman grieved the loss of her daughter from the passenger seat of their Ford Escape while her husband drove eight hours home.

“I felt so judged and so alone,” Hoffman said. “This was one of the hardest moments of my life and Oklahoma really kicked me when I was down.”

Olsen said it sounded like Hoffman’s doctor could have made the case to perform an abortion under the medical emergency or to preserve her life. But, he said, it’s complicated.

“The doctor’s judgment of non-viable was likely correct, but sometimes you hear that physicians give a horrible report and then it turns out expectedly better, so there’s always that risk,” Olsen said. “The doctor needs to do all he can to preserve the life of both of them.”

Hoffman lost her job and spent nearly \$6,000 on the procedure, hotel stay and other travel expenses that, she said, could have been avoided had physicians been allowed to care for her at home.

“What happened to my daughter was a tragedy,” Hoffman said. “But what happened to me was the fault of the state of Oklahoma.”

WHITNEY BRYEN is an investigative reporter at Oklahoma Watch covering vulnerable populations. Her recent investigations focus on mental health and substance abuse, criminal justice, domestic violence and nursing homes. Contact her at (405) 201-6057 or wbryen@oklahomawatch.org. Follow her on Twitter @SoonerReporter.

# “We’re not buying services from the Chinese government.”

- PAULA SHANNON, DEPUTY SUPERINTENDENT, TULSA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

RYAN WALTERS from A1

One day after a former Tulsa Public Schools employee was charged with conspiracy to commit wire fraud, Oklahoma State Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters testified in front of a committee in Congress and alleged that TPS has a connection to the Chinese Communist Party, something the district has denied.

On Monday, former Tulsa Public Schools chief talent and equity officer Devin Fletcher was charged in U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Oklahoma with conspiracy to commit wire fraud depriving TPS of \$603,992. Today, Walters told members of Congress there should be federal laws prohibiting school districts from taking money from “hostile foreign governments” and from entering into “data sharing agreements with hostile foreign governments.”

Walters has used both instances — Fletcher’s alleged embezzlement and TPS’ connection to the Chinese government — as reason to threaten a takeover of Oklahoma’s largest brick-and-mortar school district.

“Through a series of CCP-affiliated nonprofits, that school district maintains an active connection with the CCP through a program called the Confucius Classrooms, even after the federal government crackdown on similar programs in 2020,” Walters told members of the U.S. House Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education. “The role that the CCP plays in some of our K-12 schools is an issue that goes far beyond the realm of education and has national security implications. Through programs such as Confucius Classrooms, we are allowing a hostile, foreign, anti-democratic government a foothold into our schools.”

None of Oklahoma’s congressional delegation sits on the subcommittee or its larger Committee on Education and the Workforce.

Walters found a welcome audience in the subcommittee’s Republican majority, members of which asked Walters and others testifying questions regarding the scope of China’s influence in American education and how to stop it over the hearing’s nearly two-hour duration.

“Over 500 K-12 schools across the United States have allowed the CCP to establish itself in their halls under the guise of Confucius Classrooms, but when you pull back the curtain on these cultural exchange centers,

you find a CCP-backed agenda that undermines the principals upon which our education system is built,” said Subcommittee Chairman Aaron Bean (R-FL4) in his opening statement. “The risks posed by the proliferation of communist Confucius Classrooms is threefold: threatening America’s national, geopolitical and academic interests.”

### ‘This is an issue of national security’

In his remarks, Walters said the federal government should ban districts from taking money from “hostile foreign governments.” Additionally, Walters also asked for a law prohibiting schools “from entering into data-sharing agreements with hostile foreign governments.”

As Walters asked for the legislation, some committee members seemed unsure about the role of the federal government in policing local school districts. Rep. Burgess Owens (R-UT4) asked Walters to expand on his request “without violating the principles of federalism.”

“First of all, this is an issue of national security,” Walters answered. “When you look at the indoctrination going on in our classrooms from several different perspectives, this is one of the most heinous. Frankly, when you look at this, this is a failure of Nancy Pelosi’s leadership when this was brought to her attention. The Biden administration — this failure to secure our schools and education system is traitorous.”

Tuesday’s hearing was not the first time Congress has attempted to address the influence of China in school districts.

In 2019, the Senate released a 96-page report from the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations within the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs detailing the influence of Confucius Institutes and Classrooms in the U.S.

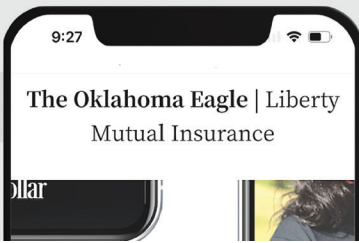
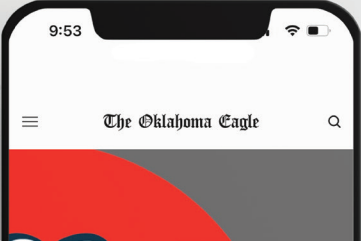
Such organizations provide professional development and assistance for schools and universities that provide Chinese-language classes for students. While the organizations are affiliated with the Chinese government, scrutiny from Congress over the years has led them to reorganize and distance themselves from being a direct arm of the government, although they are still funded primarily by China.

RYAN WALTERS cont. A10

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RYAN WALTERS *from A9*

While Walters has repeatedly said Tulsa Public Schools is taking money from China, reporting from Lenzy Krehbiel-Burton of the Tulsa World indicates TPS contracted with a nonprofit based in Texas to allow its Chinese language teacher to use the nonprofit’s professional development resources provided by Confucius Classrooms.

Walters attempted to use the connection to justify his criticism of TPS as the State Board of Education considered the district’s accreditation status last month. While he declined to discuss the matter in the meeting where members voted on TPS’ accreditation, he posted a video filmed from his car and addressed attendees of a Moms for Liberty meeting about it.

In those remarks, Walters said TPS is taking money from China, but a district official told the Tulsa World the district is not taking money but, instead, is paying its own money for professional development and other resources.

“Those resources and the teacher’s salary are paid for by the district,” said Paula Shannon, deputy superintendent of TPS, who told the Tulsa World that about 30 Booker T. Washington students took Chinese as an elective in the 2022-2023 school year. “We’re not buying services from the Chinese government.”

**‘A good step toward righting the ship’**

Another issue discussed regularly by Walters involves the alleged mishandling of finances within TPS, which is currently being audited by the state. Walters has repeatedly emphasized the need for TPS to improve internal financial controls owing to Fletcher’s alleged embezzlement, although Walters and TPS officials disagree on the exact amount that was mishandled.

To that end, Walters on Tuesday seemed to celebrate charges being filed against former TPS senior administrator Devin Fletcher, who is accused of conspiracy to commit wire fraud regarding a scheme wherein federal prosecutors allege that Fletcher fraudulently obtained more than \$600,000.

“This is a good step toward righting the ship at Tulsa Public Schools,” Walters said in a statement Tuesday. “TPS must ensure there are internal financial controls in place to prevent this abuse of the public trust.”

A statement emailed anonymously from a TPS “news” account said the district has been working to improve its financial controls as a result of the incident.

“Our commitment to the students, families, and community we serve remains unwavering,” the statement said. “While this incident is deeply troubling, it does not define the hardworking and dedicated educators, staff, and administrators who make up our school district. District leadership continues to cooperate with law enforcement and the state auditor’s office to ensure that justice is served. In addition, district teams began the work of strengthening internal financial controls over a year ago and continue to build upon those improvements to safeguard our district’s finances.”

In the information filing (embedded below) that outlines the criminal charge against Fletcher, U.S. Attorney Clinton Johnson and Assistant U.S. Attorney David Whipple said Fletcher used his position to fake invoices and other documents that caused the loss of hundreds of thousands of dollars for the district. The attorneys said Fletcher received help from an unnamed “Conspirator A.”

Meanwhile, State Auditor and Inspector Cindy Byrd is still performing an investigative audit into the district’s finances.

Gov. Kevin Stitt requested the audit in July 2022 after TPS learned of “contract irregularities” and self-reported them to the Tulsa County District Attorney’s Office. Fletcher resigned around the same time.

(Update: This article was updated at 6:51 p.m. to correct the spelling of a Tulsa World reporter’s name.)

**WHITNEY BRYEN** has is an investigative reporter at Oklahoma Watch covering vulnerable populations. Her recent investigations focus on mental health and substance abuse, criminal justice, domestic violence and nursing homes. Contact her at (405) 201-6057 or wbryen@oklahomawatch.org. Follow her on Twitter @SoonerReporter.

**POLICE VIDEO SHOWS KELLIE WRIGHT’S** first moments in the Pottawatomie County jail. Wright died less than 24 hours after this image was recorded at a nearby hospital with unexplained bruises and broken bones. PHOTO **POLICE VIDEO**

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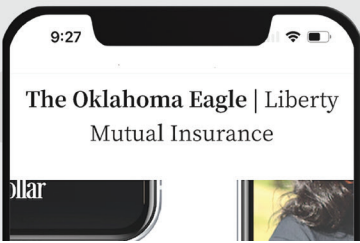
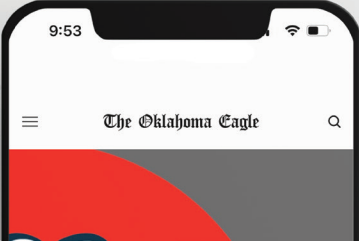
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# Simmons was released from prison in July, his conviction vacated

MAN FREED from AI

**OKLAHOMA CITY (AP)** — An Oklahoma prosecutor says she will not seek to retry a convicted killer who spent nearly 50 years in prison before he was freed earlier this year by a judge who ordered a new trial.

Oklahoma County District Attorney Vicki Behenna said in a statement Monday that there is no longer physical evidence in the case against 70-year-old Glynn Ray Simmons.

“When considering whether to pursue the case against Simmons again, the district attorney determined the state will not be able to meet its burden at trial and prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Simmons was responsible for (Carolyn Sue) Rogers’ murder,” according to the statement.

Behenna’s office also said detectives who investigated the 1974 murder of Rogers and the surviving victims are either deceased or unavailable.

Simmons was convicted of killing Rogers during a liquor store robbery in the Oklahoma City suburb of Edmond. He has repeatedly said he wasn’t in Oklahoma but rather in his home state of Louisiana at the time of the robbery.

Simmons was released from prison in July after a district court judge vacated his conviction and sentence and ordered a new trial, saying prosecutors had failed to turn over evidence in the case, including a police report that showed an eyewitness might have identified other suspects in the case.

Simmons and co-defendant Don Roberts were both convicted of the murder and initially sentenced to death. Their sentences were reduced to life in prison in 1977 after U.S. Supreme Court rulings related to capital punishment. Roberts was released on parole in 2008.

“The state will not be able to meet its burden at trial and prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Simmons was responsible for (Carolyn Sue) Rogers’ murder,”

VICKI BEHENNA  
Oklahoma County  
District Attorney



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1559 E Reading St. Tulsa OK  
(918) 584-3206

Minister RJ Smith

Sunday school - 9:30am  
Sunday Worship - 10:45am  
Monday Worship - 6:00pm  
Wednesday Bible Study - 5:00pm

## CAPERNAUM MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH

1962 N. Sheridan Rd.  
(918) 834-4747

Pastor Ruthie I. Howard

Sunday School  
10:00 a.m.  
Morning Worship  
11:00 a.m.

Bible Study & Prayer Wednesday 7:00 p.m.  
For Transportation (918) 402-6027

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Worship 11 a.m.

Bible Study  
Wednesday  
7 p.m.



Rev. Emanuel L. Collier, Sr.  
Pastor

## Gethsemane Baptist Church

727 East 56th St. North  
(918) 425-6613

Dr. W. T. Lauderdale

Sunday School  
9:00 a.m.

Church Services  
11:00 a.m.

## Zoe' Life Church of Tulsa

Rudisill Regional Library  
1520 N Hartford Ave.  
Tulsa OK 74106  
(918) 409-4899

Pastor Richard and Cher Lyons

Sunday Worship: 1pm  
Wed- Healing School: 6:30p - 8p

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## SOLID ROCK 7th DAY BAPTIST CHURCH

123 E. 59th St. North  
Ph: (918) 425-2077

Pastor Rick Bruner

Sabbath School (Saturday)  
9:30-10:45 a.m.  
Praise & Worship 11:00 a.m.  
Choir Rehearsal  
Wednesday 6:00 p.m.

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## Northside Christ Gospel Church

3101 N. M.L King Jr. Blvd.  
Tulsa OK  
(918) 625-2374

Sunday School - 10 am

Sunday Morning  
Worship - 10:45

Sunday Evening Prayer - 7 pm  
Sunday Worship - 7:30 pm  
Wednesday Prayer - 7:30 pm  
Wednesday worship - 8pm

Rev. John W. Anderson

## VERNON AME CHURCH

307-311 N. Greenwood Ave.

P: 918-587-1428  
F: 918-587-0642

vernonamechurch@sbcglobal.net

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8:30 am

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10:00 am

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Sunday Morning Worship  
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2247 N. Peoria  
Tulsa, Okla. 74106  
(918) 425-1071

Warren Blakney, Minister

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Sunday Morning Worship.....10:00 a.m.  
Sunday Evening Worship.....6:00 p.m.

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Rev. Robert Givens

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Morning Worship 11:00 a.m.

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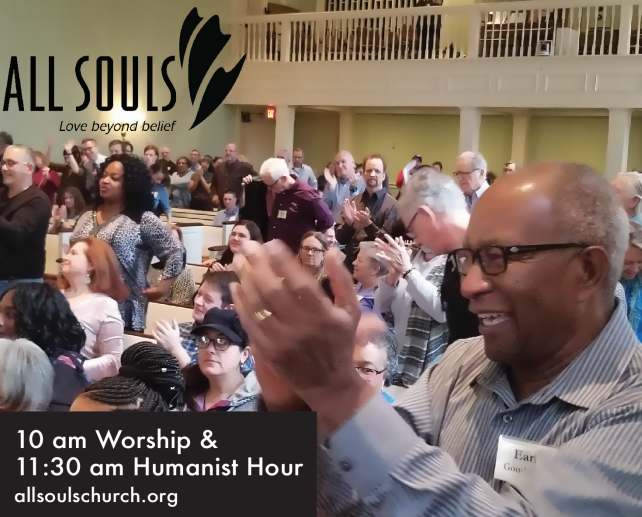
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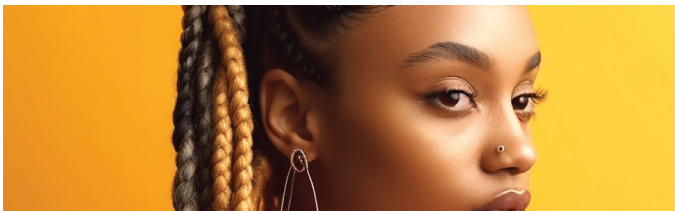


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**BLACK CHILDREN AT RISK**  
Despite the CROWN Act, educators are still punishing Black children for wearing braids, locs, and other natural hairstyles.” **A15**



*It’s going in  
with an open  
mind and  
practicing  
from a space  
of cultural  
humility.*



**STUDENTS** in deeper learning environments are excited about coming to school and engaged in the subjects they are learning. PHOTO **ALLISON SHELLEY/THE VERBATIM AGENCY FOR EDUIMAGES**

By **AZIAH SIID**, WORD IN BLACK

Although the national average ratio of school counselors to students is currently 408:1, it’s still far above the recommended ratio, and Black students are feeling the effects.

Every day across the United States, students look forward to seeing one particular person when they walk into school. It’s not a classmate or a teacher. It’s their school counselor — the one person they feel truly hears, protects, and values them during the time they spend on campus.

But when that counselor has potentially hundreds of students assigned to them, it’s tough to really check in with each and every student about their individual emotional well-being and mental health.

With the challenge of post-pandemic learning loss, along with the mental health crisis among Black youth, students, families, mental health staff like counselors, school psychologists, and nurses need all the help they can get.

That’s why, in July, at the American School Counselors Association annual conference, both the progress made in decreasing the ratio, as well as the work that still needs to be done, were on the agenda. As was the fact that schools attended primarily by white students show the most improvement.

**Fewer Students Per Counselor**

Using data from the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics, researchers found that, for the 2021-22 school year, the average counselor-to-student ratio was 408 students for every counselor, the lowest since ASCA

began tracking ratios in 1986. During the 2020-21 school year, the ratio was 415:1.

Even with the decrease, the ratio is still way too high. The ASCA recommends 250 students to one counselor.

Georgia Congresswoman Lucy McBath spoke on this at the ASCA conference, saying school counselors need tools that allow them to “continue to invest in our students’ psychological welfare, which really helps to support the entire family academically.”

**Race Impacts the Ratio**

The analysis found only 14% of districts met the recommended ratio of students to school counselors. Districts that were at least 75% white were more likely to meet the recommended ratio.

As shown in studies like Education Trust’s analysis of higher-need districts compared to lowest-need districts, we see discrepancies in funding to the schools and students who need support the most.

Celeste Malone, the immediate past president of the National Association of School Psychologists and associate professor of school psychology at Howard University, said she chose to be at the historically Black university because it was important to both build the diversity of school-based mental health providers and have them focus on culturally responsive practices that directly tie into students lived experiences.

“We know there’s a lack of school-based mental health

providers in general,” Malone tells Word In Black.” But, acutely, there’s a lack of school-based mental health providers of color, and so we are very much mixed-matched with the school-age population that we serve.”

Malone says that although there is a shortage of the very much-needed school psychologists, those who are in place working with this specific population have a duty to approach the job in a wholesome manner.

“It’s going in with an open mind and practicing from a space of cultural humility,” Malone says. “We recognize the limits of our own knowledge. We acknowledge that students, families, those who we serve are the experts on their own experience, and we should be trying to learn from them.”

The full reality of some low-income and minority students, like living in a food desert or attending a school without air conditioning, has to be taken into consideration during a time when youths are facing a mental health crisis.

“Students can’t learn if they are not fully present in the classroom,” Malone says, because things like depression, anxiety, and food insecurities are distractions.

“We need to focus on building those relationships, making sure students feel safe and supported because it frees their minds not to have to worry about some of those things.”

**Creating Solutions Despite Recruitment Hardships**

While recruitment and retention numbers are low among school-based mental health providers, Malone says there are other ways to address the disproportionate ratio besides hiring more psychologists.

“That’s an ongoing challenge. Demand for our services is increasing where our supply hasn’t grown to meet that demand,” Malone says. “ Everything was exacerbated with COVID, then ongoing school violence and other traumas our students are experiencing.”

One solution is for current school counselors and psychologists to provide teachers with additional tools and resources to assist kids in ways they can. Giving them the information they need gives mental health providers more time “for the more acute and severe cases where we do need to provide that individual counseling or provide assessment services.” Malone says.

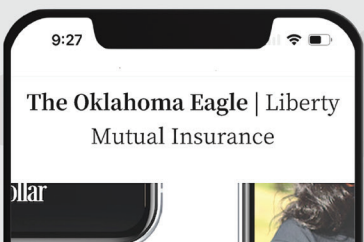
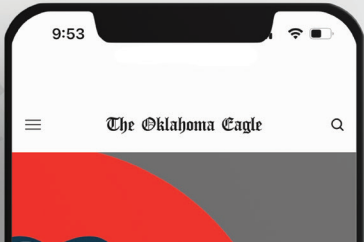
“Specific to school psychology, we think about indirect service delivery and how we consult with teachers,” Malone says. “If we’re able to work with teachers, provide them with classroom management strategies, as well as other techniques to help them recognize students’ emotions, validate those emotions, and provide those basic supports... that mitigates a lot of challenges.”

“As we build teacher capacity, that’s 30-plus students we serve indirectly, and that frees us for the more acute and severe cases where we do need to provide that individual counseling or provide assessment services.”

And it’s important to make sure students are aware of healthy practices.

“Another idea is around building student capacity and thinking about mental health lessons, psycho-educational lessons, about mental health, and teaching them coping skills so that they’re also able to support each other,” Malone says.

**AZIAH SIID** is the education reporter for Word In Black. She graduated from Morgan State University with a B.S in multimedia journalism. Aziah is a journalist with a background in K-12 teaching, aiding young individuals with disabilities, and involvement in the betterment of underserved schools around New York City.





# Despite the CROWN Act, Educators are still punishing Black children

By AZIAH SIID, WORD IN BLACK  
POLICING BLACK BODIES from AI

**WHEN** the Create a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair — or C.R.O.W.N Act as most people know it — was first passed in California in 2019, it signaled to the nation that discriminating against Black students or employees with natural hairstyles like afros, braids, bantu knots, locs, and twists would no longer be legal in the world’s fourth-largest economy.

The legislation, which has since spread to a total of 24 states, means it’s against the law to force Black people to alter what grows out of our heads to be seen as smart or professional at work.

And natural kinks, coils, and curls can no longer violate school dress codes either.

But how many school districts are actually following the CROWN Act? Apparently not Barbers Hill High School in the Houston suburb of Mount Belvieu, Texas.

Within the same week of the Lone Star State adopting the C.R.O.W.N Act, 17-year-old Barbers Hill student Darryl George was suspended because school officials said his locs violated the school dress code. The teen has been suspended since Aug. 31, and the family’s attorney said if the district said if he doesn’t cut his hair by next week, he’ll have to attend an alternative school.

The school said the length of his hair is the problem. The Barbers Hill Independent School District dress code prohibits male students from having hair longer than the eyebrows, ear lobes, or top of a T-shirt collar. In addition, the hair of all students must be clean, well-groomed, geometrical, and not an unnatural color or variation.

“What they’re really saying is you’ll never be able to wear [this style],” state Rep. Ron Reynolds (D) told the Washington Post. It’s hard to say you can wear locs but you want them to be very short. That’s not really how it works,” he said.

According to Darryl’s mother, Dareesha George, her son’s hair is typically tied up and twisted into intricate styles that don’t showcase any length.

“My son is well-groomed, and his hair is not distracting from anyone’s education,” Darresha George told the Associated Press. “This has everything to do with the administration being prejudiced toward Black culture.

Candice Matthews, a Texas-based civil rights activist with the New Black Panther Nation, told the Washington Post that what’s happening to Daryl George is “personal because it’s your heritage, it’s your culture.”

As Matthews, who is helping the teens’ family, pointed out, “This is from our ancestors. How dare [they] try to rip that from us.”

“You don’t see us trying to control White people’s hair,” she said. “So why are [they] trying to control ours?”

## A Pattern of Hair Discrimination

Attacks on Black hairstyles are nothing new in the nation’s schools — and in the past decade, many of the controversies have garnered national attention.

Who can forget how in 2018 in New Jersey, Buena Regional High

Create a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair (C.R.O.W.N) Act, first passed in California in 2019, it signaled to the nation that discriminating against Black students or employees with natural hairstyles like afros, braids, bantu knots, locs, and twists would no longer be legal.

School wrestler Andrew Johnson was forced to cut his locs or forfeit a match? A white referee told the Black high school wrestler to either cut his dreadlocks or forfeit the match. The viral video of the young athlete cutting his locs piece by piece on the sideline sent ripples through social media, particularly in the Black community.

The incident prompted the referee’s suspension and sparked the passage of the state’s C.R.O.W.N Act in 2019.

But Black girls are also targets of hair discrimination. The 2021 Dove CROWN Research Study for Girls found that 45% of Black school girls ages 5 to 18 have experienced hair bias and discrimination. And 86%

of Black teens who experienced hair discrimination said it had happened by age 12.

For example, in 2013, 7-year-old Tiana Parker was sent home from her school in Ohio after being told that her locs weren’t “presentable.” In 2017, two teen girls in Massachusetts were targeted for having extensions in their braids and were banned from school activities and their prom. 2018, two girls were sent home from their Catholic school in Louisiana for their hair violating the dress code — extensions in braids also weren’t allowed. The parents sued, and a judge blocked the school’s policy.

## Discretionary Violations Result in Suspensions

As Howard Henderson and Jennifer Wyatt Bourgeois wrote for Brookings in 2021, “Black students are three to six times more likely to be suspended or expelled from school, and today, there remains a regressive movement that continues to criminalize natural Black hairstyles under the auspices of ‘preparing them for the real world.’”

They found that “Black students are more likely to be suspended for discretionary reasons such as dress code or long hair violations, neither of which have been found to be predictive of student misconduct.”

They also recommended that “we recommend that all school personnel who have the power to enforce the dress code participate in validated cultural sensitivity training.

Barbers Hill previously clashed with another Black male student over the dress code. Officials told a student he had to cut his dreadlocks to return to school or participate in graduation in 2020, which garnered national attention.

Meanwhile, Greg Poole, who has been the Barbers ISD district superintendent since 2006, said the school’s policy is indeed legal and is a form of teaching students to conform as a sacrifice that benefits everyone.

“When you are asked to conform ... and give up something for the betterment of the whole, there is a psychological benefit,” Poole said. “We need more teaching (of) sacrifice.”

**AZIAH SIID** is the education reporter for Word In Black. She graduated from Morgan State University with a B.S in multimedia journalism. Aziah is a journalist with a background in K-12 teaching, aiding young individuals with disabilities, and involvement in the betterment of underserved schools around New York City.

PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES





# Celebrity Attractions *is bringing Disney's* **ALADDIN** *to Tulsa*

By KIMBERLY MARSH

CELEBRITY  
ATTRactions IS  
BRINGING DISNEY'S  
"ALADDIN" TO TULSA,  
SEPT. 26 - OCT.  
1, AT THE TULSA  
PERFORMING ARTS  
CENTER, 110 E. 2ND ST.  
THE PLAY IS CELEBRITY  
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OPENING SHOW FOR  
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ORGANIZATION IS  
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ANNIVERSARY WITH  
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are available.



DISNEY THEATRICAL PRODUCTIONS, under the direction  
of Thomas Schumacher presents Aladdin, the North American  
tour, music by Alan Menken, lyrics by Howard Ashman and Tim  
Rice, book and additional lyrics by Chad Beguelin, directed and  
choreographed by Casey Nicholaw.

The central character of "Aladdin" is the Genie, who historically has appeared in animation with blue skin, and is a culturally problematic figure. This 2023 Disney production features a new twist with Black actor Marcus M. Martin playing the lead. Martin was wrapping up another tour and moving to the next location when The Oklahoma Eagle was able to interview him and ask a few questions. The questions ranged from his thoughts about the role, to his experiences and advice for aspiring Black musical and theater actors. An Akron, Ohio native, Martin is on his first national tour debut. He got his start in musicals with the Regional Theatre: "Little Shop of Horrors" (Audrey II), "The Wiz" (The Lion), "Carousel" (Enoch Snow), "The Music Man" (Marcellus Washburn), and "A Christmas Carol" (Ghost of Christmas Present). He is a 2020 graduate of the Baldwin Wallace Music Theatre program.

Question and answer with Marcus M. Martin, who plays Genie in Disney's "Aladdin" Broadway Musical show, appearing in Tulsa, Sept. 26 - Oct.1.

**THE OKLAHOMA EAGLE:** How did you get involved in musical theatre? Where are your roots and what was your ultimate path to performance, and then to Disney? Was singing/acting something you always knew you wanted to do? Did you have family influences?

**MARTIN:** I'm an only child, so my parents were always encouraging me to pursue extra-curricular activities that would help me develop relationships with other kids. I was awful at every sport I tried. But I've always been an energetic kid that loved entertaining people through song and one-man skits. My mom recommended that I switch it up and try theater camp instead. The rest is history. I watched the original Broadway cast of "Aladdin" perform "Friend Like Me" on the Tony Awards as a teenager and knew I could play this role. I just needed to put in the work to make it happen.

**THE OKLAHOMA EAGLE:** Genie is such an iconic Disney character. How did you go about making the role your own? What did you want to bring to the character?

**MARTIN:** I'm very fortunate that our team really trusted me enough to allow me to add my own personal flavor to this role. I'm not arrogant enough to think I could ever recreate the magic that has been made by the Genies that have come before me, so I just made it my Genie; lots of pop culture references, some church culture references, and a whole lot of joy! I really wanted my genie to be layered. You see the glitz and glamour (and) all of the jokes. But that's surface level. The fun part as an actor is adding the nuance, the vulnerability, the real emotion. I wanted audiences to see a humanized genie.

**THE OKLAHOMA EAGLE:** What do you do to prepare and how much time does it take to get into costume/makeup/character?

**MARTIN:** I just stretch, get my voice warmed up, and check in with my cast! I'm a pretty happy guy so getting into the mood to play the genie isn't too hard. It takes our makeup supervisor about 10 minutes to get my Genie face on.

**THE OKLAHOMA EAGLE:** How does it feel to be portraying this magical character on stage?

**MARTIN:** It's truly an honor! This role means so much to so many people around the world. The fact that I'm the one who gets to make people relive their childhood is something I'll never take lightly!

**THE OKLAHOMA EAGLE:** As a Black actor, how does it feel to be playing a character that has traditionally been depicted in a more caricatured, problematic way? How do you think this production handles the character?

**MARTIN:** I love that our show doesn't shy away from the problematicness (Yes, I know that's a made-up word. Just rock with it) of a character like the genie. It really deals with the history of what a "genie" includes, and challenges Aladdin to change that.

**THE OKLAHOMA EAGLE:** What do you see happening on the musical circuits with diversity? Do you see more roles and more respect for Black performers than in the past? What does the future hold in your opinion?

**MARTIN:** We have a LOOONG way to go. But we've also come a LOOONG way from where we were! I think the next step is continuing to fight for true equity and inclusion. Not just diversity! That is where the change is going to happen and is currently happening. I'm seeing more Black casting directors, agents, producers, stage managers. The revolution is happening.

**THE OKLAHOMA EAGLE:** The story of Aladdin deals with themes of identity, wishing to be someone else, finding yourself, etc. What themes in the story resonate with you as an actor?

**MARTIN:** Who you are is enough and the gifts that God has given you are enough. Period.

**THE OKLAHOMA EAGLE:** How much fun is it to perform the big energetic musical numbers like "Friend Like Me"?

MARTIN: It's a 12-minute roller coaster ride, Zumba class, karaoke night all in one!

**THE OKLAHOMA EAGLE:** What are some of the challenges you face in a role like this with so much singing, dancing, and costume/makeup work? How do you keep your energy up?

**MARTIN:** Eight shows a week is no joke! In order to build my stamina, I sang "Friend Like Me" while running on the treadmill every day for months before we started rehearsal! A proper warm up is important, getting 8-10 hours of sleep is a requirement, drinking water and electrolytes is a requirement. Pacing yourself is so important.

**THE OKLAHOMA EAGLE:** For young aspiring (specifically) Black actors/performers, what advice would you give about pursuing musical theater and iconic roles like this?

**MARTIN:** 1. Study the craft. Read every play you can, watch every play you can, ask questions of actors, watch your favorite actors' interviews. 2. Be willing to sacrifice! Greatness comes at a cost! If you want to achieve greatness, being disciplined is so important. And to be disciplined you're going to have to sacrifice! Going to the party, hanging out with that friend group, staying up late. Be willing to sacrifice all of that to make your dreams come true.

**THE OKLAHOMA EAGLE:** What's next for you?

MARTIN: I'm getting married three months after my time on tour is up! I'm excited to build a life with my forever person! Love you, Lydia!

"Aladdin," the hit musical based on the Academy Award-winning animated film, opened on Broadway at the New Amsterdam Theatre to critical acclaim on March 20, 2014, and quickly established itself as one of the biggest new blockbusters in recent years. Having played over 3,000 performances, the New York production is among the top 20 longest runs in Broadway history.

Hailed by "The New York Times" as "fabulous and extravagant," the Broadway production has broken 16 New Amsterdam Theatre house records and spawned nine additional productions on four continents. Worldwide it has welcomed more than 16 million people and can be seen currently on Broadway and on tour across North America, as well as in Japan and Spain, with a United Kingdom tour opening shortly.





LEFT **REV. SKIP ELLER**, author, vicar at St. Aidan's Episcopal Church, and Jean Pasley, one of the founding members of the church.

RIGHT **MEMBERS** of St. Aidan's Episcopal Church commemorate the 50th anniversary of the church. **PHOTOS COURTESY OF JANEL PASLEY, THE ASTUTE CREATIVE**



# St. Aidan's Celebrates 50th Anniversary, Hosts Tulsa Symphony Concert Series

By DR. JERRY GOODWIN

*St. Aidan's Episcopal Church recognized its 50th anniversary on Aug. 26-27. The church is the result of two congregations coming together in 1973.*

One of the original churches was St. Thomas, which was established five years after the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. It served a predominantly Black community, described as “African American, predominantly white-collar and academic congregation,” in its church home at the corner of North Peoria Avenue and Virgin Street, according to a documented history of the church. The other church was St. Mark's, established in 1952, that included a membership primarily of “Caucasian, blue-collar Episcopalians in the area.” It was located near 36th Street North and North Cincinnati Avenue (currently Martin Luther King Blvd.). Both churches were in north Tulsa, and the churches were “representative of Tulsa's racial segregation and the artificial mode of living in the first sixty years of the twentieth century, enforced by the Jim Crow laws of Tulsa, and all the South.”

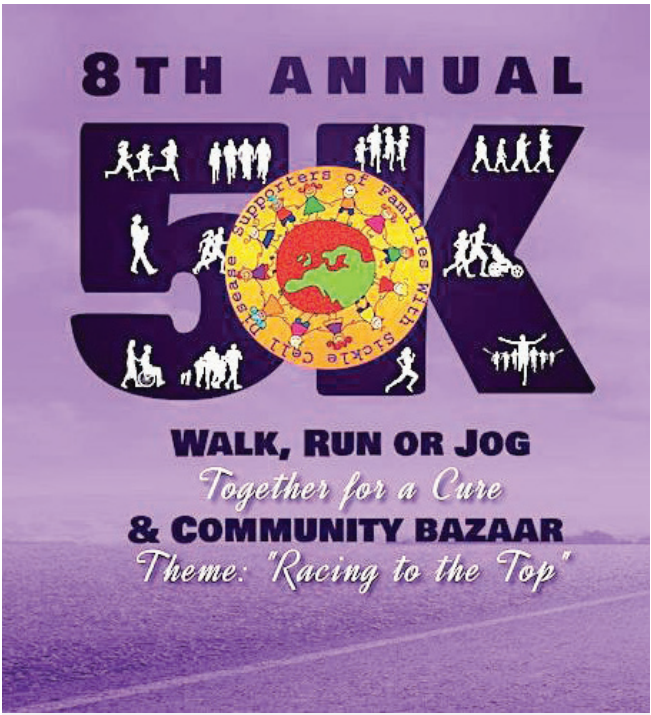
As the nation continued to wrestle with segregation and racial oppression in the 1960s and 1970s, the leadership at the state diocese recommended that the churches merge to continue serving the community. Bishop Chilton Powell made the suggestion because the two local churches were facing “dwindling membership and finances.” The decision was made to locate the newly formed church at St. Mark's because it was a larger church and had sufficient parking among other reasons.

In the recorded history of St. Aidan's, the mission of the church “faithfully seeks to be a diverse Christian community centering its life on the worship of God, love for all people, and outreach to the community.”

I would like to see the church to be “more of a community space for north Tulsa. We are there to service the community around us,” said Rev. Skip Eller, vicar of St. Aidan's.

In this anniversary year, the church will begin a concert series with the Tulsa Symphony on Sept. 30 at 2 p.m. The series is open to the public with future dates to be announced soon. The program is sponsored by Flint Family Concert Series. For a free ticket, you can reserve it at <https://www.tulsasymphony.org/flint/>

The church is located at 4045 Martin Luther King Blvd. Services are 10 a.m. for Sunday School and 11 a.m. for worship and fellowship. For more information, call (918) 425-7882.



## Supporters of Families with Sickle Cell Disease Hosts Eighth Annual Run And Health Bazaar In OKC

By DR. JERRY GOODWIN

*‘Supporters’ sponsored its eighth annual Sickle Cell 5K Walk, Run, or Jog for a Cure and a health bazaar. The events was held at the State Capitol, 2300 N. Lincoln Blvd., in Oklahoma City on Sept. 30 starting at 9 a.m. Registration for all ages will begin at 7 a.m., and participants can register at [www.scok5k.com](http://www.scok5k.com).*

“We are excited to continue the organization of the annual Sickle Cell 5K Walk, Run, or Job for a Cure to unite our community in the fight against this relentless condition,” said Velvet Brown Watts, executive director of Supporters of Families with Sickle Cell Disease Inc. “Our goal is not only to raise awareness but also to raise funds that will make a meaningful impact in the lives of individuals and families affected by sickle cell disease.”

The health expo featured resources, vendors, and other supporters for the organization. Additionally, entertainment and other activities was available for those in attendance.

Supporters of Families with Sickle Cell Disease's mission is to increase self-efficacy, improve the overall quality of life for patients living with sickle cell and thalassemia, children, adults, and their families within the State of Oklahoma through systemic changes in patient care, disability policies, education, family support, economic self-sufficiency, awareness, and advocacy.

For sponsorship opportunities or for more information, contact Jeremiah Watts, community development director, at [jeremiahwatts@att.net](mailto:jeremiahwatts@att.net) or (918) 619-6174. The organization's website is [www.sicklecelloklahoma.org](http://www.sicklecelloklahoma.org).

# Sickle Cell Disease

## Bristow's Lincoln School Celebrates 24th Reunion

By DR. JERRY GOODWIN

The health expo featured resources, vendors, and other supporters for the organization. Additionally, entertainment and other activities was available for those in attendance.

Supporters of Families with Sickle Cell Disease's mission is to increase self-efficacy, improve the overall quality of life for patients living with sickle cell and thalassemia, children, adults,

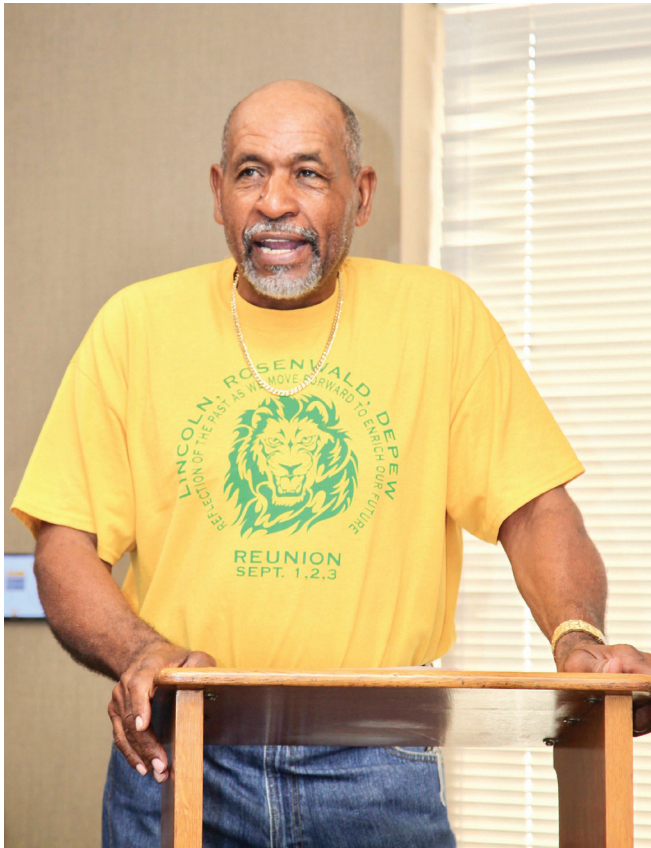
The Lincoln Alumni Association held its 24th reunion in Bristow, Okla., Sept. 1-3. Over the four-day celebration, the attendees received presentations from current school district officials, educators, and local historians. The events were held at the Bristow Community Center.

Lincoln was built prior to integration. It closed in 1959. The grade school through high school was constructed by the Bristow Board of Education with additional support from the Rosenwald Fund (Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation). After the school closed, many students then transferred to Bristow High School.

The alumni association awards scholarships to descendants of Lincoln and Depew high schools. Scholarship funds were raised during the reunion. The alumni offer five \$1,000 scholarships per year.

Additional schools included with the alumni association are Deep Fork, Depew, Harlinsville, Morning Star, Newby, Rosenwald, Sunny Slope, and Sunset. A historical marker was erected at the Bixby Community Center to recognize the approximately 15 schools built by the Rosenwald Fund.

For more information, you can contact the Lincoln Alumni Association or President Ted Alexander at P. O. Box 125, Bristow, OK 74010 or [caaj05@gmail.com](mailto:caaj05@gmail.com).



**TED ALEXANDER** is president of the Lincoln Alumni Association. **PHOTO COURTESY OF EXCELL LA FAYETTE JR.**





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The Oklahoma Eagle

### Our Mission

To amplify our core value of equity, through journalism and editorial" is the cornerstone of our continued success.

