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A Race Massacre Survivor And Her Descendants Take Center Stage

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FEATURED

Tulsa School Board
District 3 Candidates

A Q&A with Kyra Carby and Dorie Simmons, TPS
District 3 candidates.

District 3, A6



FEATURED

Aging Prison Population
Strains Corrections

A demand to “spur the release of elderly and
medically vulnerable prisoners.”

Prison, A10



(L-R) A'marion Penny, 19, and Keyon'Dre Penny, 16, great-grandchildren of Mother Lessie Benningfield Randle, 110, 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre Survivor. The two cousins have received full-tuition university scholarships from the Tulsa Reconciliation Education and Scholarship Program. A'marion, a Central High School graduate, is a Langston University student majoring in both fields of business and science. Keyon'Dre is an Oklahoma State University freshman with a career goal of working at NASA. PHOTO KIMBERLY MARSH, THE OKLAHOMA EAGLE

Scholarship Supports Greenwood Legacy, New
Generations of Tulsa Students

Legacy
Kimberly Marsh
The Oklahoma Eagle

A Race Massacre Survivor And Her Descendants Take Center Stage.
Two great-grandchildren of 110-year-old Mother Lessie Benningfield Randle are committed to continuing their ancestral legacy as the recipients of college scholarships that will prepare them for careers and equip them with the knowledge and skills to preserve their elder’s work to keep the legacy of the Greenwood District alive.

Mother Randle, one of two living survivors of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, joined her family in a news conference on March 29 at the Greenwood Cultural Center. The event was held to honor the achievements of Randle’s descendants and support St. Sen. Regina Goodwin’s bill to strengthen the Tulsa Reconciliation Education and Scholarship Program. The program is a powerful testament to the enduring strength of the Greenwood community, its achievements, and the ongoing journey toward justice and reconciliation. Even as a supercentenarian, Mother Randle shows her endurance and strength. She is present at many public events as the face of the Race Massacre victims, survivors, and their descendants. On this day, Randle, A’marion Penny, 19, and Keyon’Dre

Penny, 16, along with many of the Randle descendants, scholarship committee members, local elected officials and community advocates gathered to support the program. The two cousins have received full-tuition university scholarships from the program. Oklahoma Senate Bill 1054 passed the Senate unanimously and will soon head to the Oklahoma House of Representatives. Goodwin’s proposal builds on the program by prioritizing descendants of the massacre’s survivors, as well as other eligible graduates, to foster educational opportunities as a form of reconciliation. The Oklahoma legislature established the program in 2001, largely through the work and persistent lobbying of St. Rep. Don Ross and the late St. Sen. Maxine Horner. “The emphasis would be placed

Cont. A3, Legacy



Jennettie Marshall, former Tulsa Public Schools Board member, District 3, addressing audience during the Tulsa Reconciliation Education and Scholarship Program awards announcement event, March 29, 2025. PHOTO KIMBERLY MARSH, THE OKLAHOMA EAGLE



(CENTER) **Lessie Benningfield Randle, 110**, 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre Survivor, joined three generations of Randles to celebrate Sen. Regina Goodwin's efforts to strengthen the Tulsa Reconciliation Education and Scholarship Program. PHOTO **KIMBERLY MARSH, THE OKLAHOMA EAGLE**

SB 1054: Builds upon the existing program by prioritizing descendants of the massacre’s survivors

FROM A2
Legacy

on descendants,” Goodwin said. “This is about strengthening the scholarship, lengthening the legacy. The scholarship wants us to preserve our history. It wants us to understand that the race massacre was a horrific event. It was an event that we will never forget, and we continue to honor those that we have with us,” Goodwin added. As she spoke, Mother Randle was at her side.

A'marion, a Central High School graduate and now a Langston University student majoring in both fields of business and science, said he is aligned with the legacy of his family's educational values. He wants to keep the Greenwood legacy alive through asking Black youth to not just follow in his footsteps, but to become even better as a leader.

“Keep God first,” he said. “I want young people to basically do what I’m doing but influence others so everybody can get a piece of the pie.”

An Oklahoma State University freshman with a career goal of working at NASA, Keyon'Dre said he spread information about the massacre and survivor legacy while at Rogers High School. He continues to generate more awareness.

“I’m just gonna uphold our name as much as I can, and I’m gonna give a lot of money with my profession,” he said, referring to his plans to share the wealth from his successes in a mechanical engineering career.

“I started teaching Keyon'Dre how to read at the age of six months,” said his mother LaDonna Penny, Randle's granddaughter. “He read his first book at 18 months. He was promoted from the second grade to fourth grade. He took his first college course at the age of nine. I pushed him... and it was a struggle, but he is getting the talent that he was given out there.”

Goodwin asked participants to let families know Tulsa School District students may apply now for the Tulsa Reconciliation Education and Scholarship Program at OKcollegestart.org under the Scholarships section.

The scholarship is funded by a trust that was established in 2001 with an appropriation of \$1.5 million. The interest has funded

“
I started teaching Keyon'Dre how to read at the age of six months
He read his first book at 18 months.

LaDonna Penny, mother of Keyon'Dre Penny

scholarships to 184 students over the past 24 years. SB Bill 1054 would increase the taxable family income cap to \$125,000 from the current \$70,000, reflecting inflation, providing opportunities to more students. The scholarship can be used at any college, university or Career Tech in Oklahoma.

Moreover, the measure would also extend eligibility to qualified students from other states who are direct lineal descendants of those living in the Greenwood area of Tulsa between April 30, 1921, and June 1, 1921. The bill would remove the income cap entirely for applicants who are direct lineal descendants of individuals who lived in Tulsa's Greenwood District during the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre.

Goodwin presented a similar measure twice while serving in the House of Representatives. Her previous effort, House Bill 4154, passed in the House but ultimately died in the Senate. The new measure was passed unanimously by

the Oklahoma Senate. It now goes to a vote of the House. If successful, it would then be sent to Gov. Kevin Stitt's desk for signature.

House Representatives Michelle McCane, Dist. 72, and Ron Stewart, Dist. 73, spoke at the news conference in favor of the bill. They pledged their support on the House side. Goodwin also thanked St. Rep. Jason Lowe, the House principal author of SB 1054.

“We think we are well represented here,” Goodwin said. “What we want to do is make sure that trust is healthy, and we want to make sure that the earnings from that trust continue to fund this scholarship long after we're all gone. We can't stay here forever, but we want it for the generations to come (so) that they will be able to benefit from the scholarship,” she added.

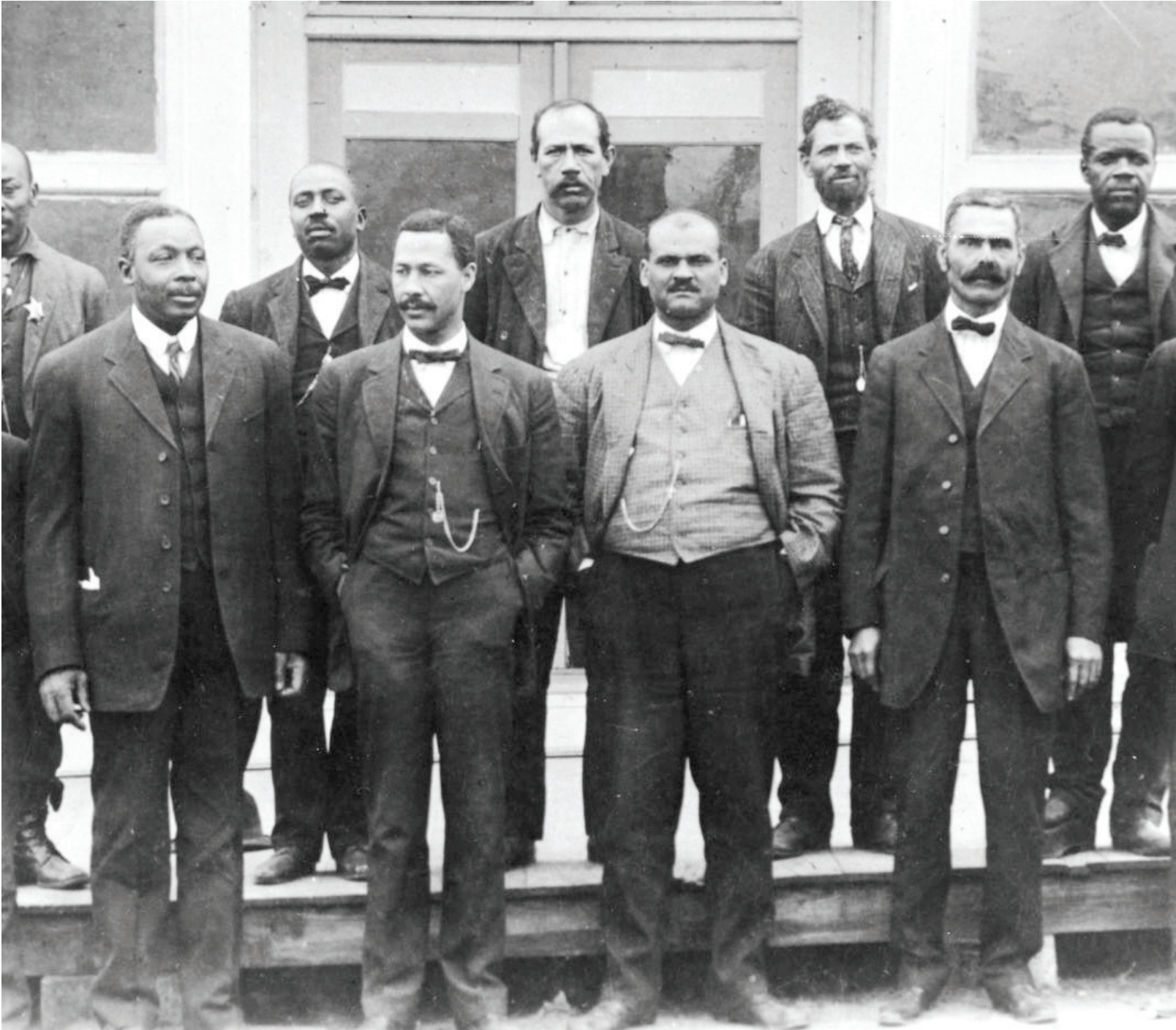
Kimberly Marsh, who reported and wrote this story, is a senior contributor to The Oklahoma Eagle. She has devoted a big part of her career to chronicling the policies of Tulsa's city leaders.



(L-R) **A'marion Penny, 19**, and **Keyon'Dre Penny, 16**, great-grandchildren of Mother Lessie Benningfield Randle (center), 110, 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre Survivor. The two cousins have received full-tuition university scholarships from the Tulsa Reconciliation Education and Scholarship Program. A'marion, a Central High School graduate, is a Langston University student majoring in both fields of business and science. Keyon'Dre is an Oklahoma State University freshman with a career goal of working at NASA. PHOTO **KIMBERLY MARSH, THE OKLAHOMA EAGLE**

Boley: An Historic Oklahoma All-Black Town

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



Located halfway between Paden and Castle in Okfuskee County, Boley is the largest and most well known of the more than fifty All-Black towns of Oklahoma and one of only thirteen still existing. The town, established on land allotted to Creek freedman James Barnett’s daughter Abigail, was named after J. B. Boley, a railroad official of the Fort Smith and Western Railway. Founded in 1903 and incorporated in 1905, Boley and the African Americans living in the area prospered for many years. The Boley Progress, a weekly newspaper, began in 1905. The paper and various advertising campaigns circulated through the South and lured many former slaves to the new town. At 1907 statehood Boley sheltered 824 individuals.

By 1911 Boley boasted more than four thousand citizens and many businesses, including two banks and three cotton gins. Booker T. Washington, founder of the National Negro Business League and the Tuskegee Institute, in Alabama, visited the town in 1905 and proclaimed it “the most enterprising and in many ways the most interesting of the Negro towns in the United States.” The town supported two colleges: Creek-Seminole College and Methodist Episcopal College. Boley also had its own electrical generating plant, water system, and ice plant. The Masonic Grand Lodge completed a majestic Masonic Temple around 1912. At the time, it was said to be the tallest building between Okmulgee and Oklahoma City.

Like many rural towns, Boley suffered through hard times in the 1920s and 1930s, its population dropping to 1,154 in 1920 and 874 in 1930. By World War II the population stood at 942, and it declined to 573 in 1960 and to 423 in 1980. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, with a population of 1,126, the town was experiencing economic rejuvenation. The number of residents was 1,184 in 2010. Boley still hosts the nation’s oldest African American community-based rodeo every Memorial Day weekend. The downtown business district is listed in the National Register of Historic Places (NR 75001568) and has been designated a National Historic Landmark by the National Park Service. In April 2020 the census counted 1,087 residents.

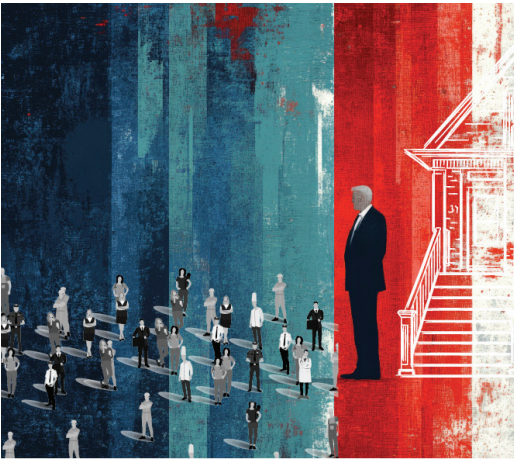
The Oklahoma Historical Society is an agency of the government of Oklahoma dedicated to promotion and preservation of Oklahoma’s history and its people by collecting, interpreting, and disseminating knowledge and artifacts of Oklahoma.

Boley Town Council (3377.D.2, Oklahoma Historical Society Photograph Collection, OHS).

Featured Last Week



Envision Comanche Park, the Anchor of the Phoenix District, Is Catalyst for Residential, Commercial Growth



Tulsa Housing Authority Board Faces Potential Federal Rental Assistance Shortfall



918: A Conversation with Tracie Chandler

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Kyra Carby and Dorie Simmons, Tulsa Public School board District 3 candidates. PHOTO PROVIDED

Tulsa School Board District 3 Candidates

District 3
Kimberly Marsh
The Oklahoma Eagle

Kyra Carby and Dorie Simmons, Tulsa Public School board candidates vying for a seat to represent North Tulsa’s District 3, have rounded off their stances on issues for the general election set for April 1. Their platforms reflect agreement on several fronts, but differ vastly in their approach to the role. Both candidates care deeply about student outcomes and teacher retention. Carby is willing to challenge systems head-on. Simmons is focused on preserving harmony and ensuring consensus-driven change.

During a Tulsa Classroom Teachers Association candidate forum on Feb. 4 at McLain High School, a District 3 grandparent wanted to ask questions of the candidates. She was told the forum was for moderator questions only. The Oklahoma Eagle followed up with the resident, Joyce Smith Williams, to ask what questions she had for the two candidates as they head into the general election. Williams is African American and a fervent advocate for Black Tulsa. This analysis reflects candidate statements made during the February forum and in response to more recent written questions. The story on the forum can be found in the Feb. 28 issue of The Oklahoma Eagle.

The candidates

Carby, 39, is a former TPS educator and currently a genealogy grant

“
The primary role of a board member is the fiduciary responsibility of how the district spends resources, voting on budgets, voting on policies, supporting the district, but also...asking questions about things that come up for board approval.

Kyra Carby, candidate, Tulsa Public Schools Board, District 3.

coordinator with the City of Tulsa. She is reform-minded and willing to challenge the systemic inefficiencies and oppose policies she believes are harmful to students, teachers and advocates. Carby sees the board’s role as one that must actively challenge the status quo. She advocates for bridge building between the district, schools, and communities. Her focus is on accountability through data and rebuilding trust through community engagement.

A TPS parent and Tulsa real estate agent, Simmons, 50, positions herself as a stabilizing force seeking unity and collaboration over confrontation. She prioritizes maintaining a professional public image for the board, advocating for internal disagreements to be handled outside of meetings, and oversight through respectful dialogue and unity. Her vision of accountability is rooted in clear policies and community trust. She emphasizes supporting teachers and mitigating stress.

A District 3 resident’s perspective

In an interview with The Oklahoma Eagle, Williams provided her perspective on five areas of priority. They are: accountability and financial oversight; public engagement and transparency; the role of the TPS school board and its member; re-establishing the purpose of education; and protecting the system from politics.

Williams believes that more budget scrutiny and responsible stewardship of taxpayer dollars is necessary. She is frustrated by the board’s lack of interaction with citizens during board meetings, saying it demonstrates an unwillingness to engage with the public and respond to concerns. Board member roles are ambiguous, she said, and sometimes influenced by politics rather

than educational outcomes. Board members should focus on student achievement and instructional quality—not on governance or politics, she said. Education generally, in her view, should help students—especially Black and brown children—understand their place in the world, think critically, see themselves in the curriculum and be more exposed to experiential learning.

A School Board Member’s Primary Role

Question: In your view, what is the primary role of a school board member, and how do you see yourself fulfilling that role if elected?

Carby: The primary role of a board member is the fiduciary responsibility of how the district spends resources, voting on budgets, voting on policies, supporting the district, but also...asking questions about things that come up for board approval. I will be prepared for all meetings, asking questions, holding community meetings to better ensure that our communities understand what is coming before the board and how it impacts them. Hard decisions and conversations have to be made, but also not wasting time grandstanding during board meeting

Simmons: The primary role of a school board member is to represent the interests of students, families, and the community while supporting and holding the superintendent accountable for delivering results. That means setting clear goals, ensuring transparency, and making sure every decision we make puts students first. I’ll focus on collaborating not just with other board members, but with teachers, parents, and the community.

Cont. A7, District 3

Jason Lowe wins county seat, Camal Pennington wins OKC Ward 7

Ward 7
Matt Patterson
NonDoc

In elections across Oklahoma County on Tuesday, Camal Pennington defeated John Pettis Jr. in a hotly contested runoff to represent OKC City Council Ward 7, and Rep. Jason Lowe (D-OKC) swamped independent Jed Green to win a seat on the Oklahoma County Board of Commissioners for District 1. Meanwhile, Marvin Provo was reelected to the Millwood Public Schools Board of Education.

All election results are unofficial until they are certified by the Oklahoma State Election Board.

Camal Pennington wins OKC Ward 7 seat

Pennington won 64.46 percent of the OKC Ward 7 vote against John Pettis Jr., with 4,341 votes cast across all precincts reporting.

The seat opened up when former Councilwoman Nikki Nice was elected to Senate District 48 last year.

Pennington has worked as an attorney for the Oklahoma City American Federation of Teachers. Now, he is the executive director of It's My Community Initiative, which leads efforts to strengthen neighborhoods and empower families in financial hardship. He is also the board president for the Harding Fine Arts Academy charter school.

Pennington ran on increasing investment in Ward 7. In a debate hosted by NonDoc, he said that issue is the one he heard most while campaigning.

"When I'm knocking on doors, they're wondering why we aren't making the right investments in our kids," he said. "Why we aren't making the right investments in our neighborhoods, in our streetlights, in our streets."

Pettis was attempting a political comeback of sorts. He ran strong in the four-candidate Feb. 11 primary election, garnering 30.24 percent of the vote. He previously represented Ward 7 on the council but resigned in 2018 after being charged with embezzlement and intentionally failing to file state tax returns. He eventually pleaded guilty to the misdemeanor tax evasion charge after the embezzlement count was dropped. As part of a five-year deferred sentence through August 2025, he agreed to pay a \$5,000 fine and never run for office again.

In May, however, new Oklahoma County District Attorney Vicki Behenna "accelerated the dismissal" of Pettis' case, according to Pettis' June motion seeking expungement of the criminal case.

Ward 7 encompasses much of northeast OKC, running north and east from the intersection of Interstate 35 and Interstate 40. Although it includes the Chisholm Creek area south of Quail Springs Mall, Ward 7's western boundary



(TOP) **Jason Lowe and Camal Pennington** won election to an Oklahoma County Commission seat and an Oklahoma City Council seat, respectively, Tuesday, April 1, 2025. PHOTO **NONDOC** (BOTTOM LEFT) **Jason Lowe** spent eight years in the Oklahoma House. PHOTO **PROVIDED** (BOTTOM RIGHT) **Oklahoma City Council Ward 7 runoff candidate Camal Pennington** listens to a question during a debate co-hosted by NonDoc and News 9 on Tuesday, March 11, 2025. PHOTO **JAYLAN FARMER / METRO TECH**

mostly aligns with Interstate 235. It stretches east around Spencer and to the western edge of Luther. Like all wards, Ward 7 has a targeted population of about 85,000, but owing to OKC's sprawling eastern boundary, it is the largest by area.

Lowe headed to Oklahoma County as commissioner

As expected, Jason Lowe dominated Jed Green on Tuesday night with a whopping 85.24 percent of the vote. A total of 7,690 votes were cast.

The seat opened when former Commissioner Carrie Blumert resigned last year to become

executive director of Mental Health Oklahoma.

Lowe, who has represented House District 97 since 2016, ran on a platform of improving conditions in the Oklahoma County Jail. He emerged from a three-person Democratic primary on Feb. 11, defeating former State Sen. Anastasia Pittman and Midwest City Councilwoman and criminal justice activist Sara Bana.

With his election triggering another vacancy in the Oklahoma Legislature, Lowe will enter the county commissioner fray at a critical juncture as officials are exploring ways to bridge a

massive \$400 million funding gap for the new county jail, which has dominated the board's agendas for well over a year. Lowe said problems with the current jail served as the chief reason he decided to run for county commissioner.

"The reason I am running for Oklahoma County District 1, which I never planned on running for, is the Oklahoma County Jail," Lowe said in a forum earlier this year. "It is a mess. It is a place where people are actually going to die."

Lowe was elected to the House in November. His move from the Legislature to the Oklahoma County Board of Commissioners will trigger

a special election for House District 97. JeKia Harrison announced she is running for the seat earlier this year, and Aletia Timmons has also formed an HD 97 campaign committee after resigning as district judge.

District 1 covers a central part of Oklahoma County, including the core of Oklahoma City, and is bound by Jones, The Village, Del City, and a portion of southwest OKC.

Provo reelected to Millwood Public Schools board seat

Marvin Provo defeated Andre Coleman to win Office No. 5 on the Millwood Public Schools School Board with 54.71 percent of the vote.

A total of 488 votes were cast in the school district race. Provo and Coleman emerged from a three-person primary field in the February primary election. Provo, 84, was most recently reelected in 2020, when he ran unopposed. He has served on the school board since the 1990s.

Matt Patterson has spent 20 years in Oklahoma journalism covering a variety of topics for The Oklahoman, The Edmond Sun and Lawton Constitution. He joined NonDoc in 2019. Email story tips and ideas to matt@nondoc.com.

Gov. Accountability and Financial Oversight; Public Engagement and Transparency, among key campaign issues

FROM A6

District 3

Board Division

Question: Can you give an example of a difficult situation where the board is divided—how would you handle that disagreement, and what principles would guide your decision?

Carby: Currently the board is divided on what the role is of the board. I think it is imperative that, as a board, we look at fundamentally what our responsibilities are and what that process looks like as it relates to how we operate within the district. For that to happen, there needs to be relationship building so there's respect amongst board members so that we can move in a way that better serves our students.

Simmons: When the board is divided, it's crucial to stay focused on what matters most, improving student outcomes. I approach tough decisions by listening carefully to all sides, reviewing the facts, and considering the impact our decisions will have. I believe

in respectful dialogue.

Board Transparency and Interaction

Question: Do you believe the board should change how it interacts with the public? If so, what steps would you take to improve transparency and community dialogue?

Carby: Realistically, I think that you cannot always answer public comments or questions in real time at board meetings. There should be better follow up about questions, but there also should be a better understanding of what's coming before the board so that the public has a chance to ask prior to that.

Carby added that communities should be constantly updated to make sure they understand board agendas prior to the meetings.

Simmons: While there are legal limitations on how board members can respond during public comments, that doesn't mean we can't do better and be more accessible.

Simmons said she advocates for more opportunities aside from the board meetings to connect directly with the community via other forums.

TPS Accountability

Question: What does accountability mean to you as a board member?

Carby: Accountability is us looking at the data of where our schools actually are. It's about looking at each site to see where our gaps are within our education system.

Carby said when resources are not placed where they are needed the most to move student success, the system fails its students.

Simmons: As a board member, I would hold myself accountable by listening to concerns, communicating openly, and making decisions based on what's best for our students, teachers, and parents. I would expect the same from the superintendent and district leadership.

Simmons added that this includes clear goal-setting, monitoring progress, and asking tough but fair questions.

Teacher Support

Question: What specific policies would you push for to improve teacher retention, and how would you ensure those policies are actually implemented? What type of teacher support would you advocate? What do you

think about the level of autonomy teachers should have in the classroom?

Carby: As a former educator, I know how imperative it is for teachers to have time to actually work on their lessons and in their classrooms, it would be important to ensure that they aren't constantly losing valuable plan time due to meetings.

Carby suggested mentors for novice teachers, site-specific professional development and treating teachers as the professionals they are. Higher retention rates lead to a better experience and an understanding of students that is only gained in the classroom.

Simmons: To retain great teachers, we need to offer competitive pay, manageable class sizes, and up to date resources for classrooms. As highly trained professionals, they know what is best for their students. I will fight alongside them to defend their right to teach in the classroom with no political interference or agendas that have no place in our schools.

Kimberly Marsh, who reported and wrote this story, is a senior contributor to The Oklahoma Eagle. She has devoted a big part of her career to chronicling the policies of Tulsa's city leaders.



Rep. Tom Cole shown at a meeting in Baltimore in 2024. PHOTO MARYLAND GOVPICS/COURTESY PHOTO

Rep. Tom Cole Says DOGE Is ‘Pretty Responsive’ to His Concerns

On a telephone town hall with constituents, the senior appropriator said lawmakers can get results by flagging issues with the Department of Government Efficiency.

DOGE
Em Luetkemeyer
Oklahoma Watch

Oklahoma Rep. Tom Cole told constituents with concerns about government-slashing efforts at the Department of Government Efficiency that he’d been able to get it to change course when it set its sights on projects related to his district.

He said he’d been able to get results by flagging issues to DOGE like any other agency, adding that while it’s made some mistakes in its efforts to cut spending, it had reversed course in at least one instance when his office brought an issue to its attention.

“We’ve found, at least, if you work it just like you would any other government agency, they can be pretty responsive,” Cole said in his telephone town hall on Thursday.

He pointed to his staff working with DOGE to get a Social Security office in Lawton, Oklahoma, off of a list of terminated contracts — one of many that DOGE reversed course on. He also largely defended DOGE’s work.

“We think this is a bad decision,” Cole said his office told DOGE about potentially closing the Social Security

office. “And [DOGE] relooked at it and they agreed so. But this is where members have to be pretty aggressive and engaged.”

The Atlantic reported Wednesday that Cole met with Elon Musk over cigars and bourbon and advised the Trump ally, who heads DOGE, to consult lawmakers before making cuts. Cole said Musk had committed to fixing any errors.

“So far,” Cole told the magazine, “I’ve found them to be good to their word.”

Cole, the chair of the House Appropriations Committee, is one of several lawmakers elected to represent areas that President Donald Trump won who have faced questions from constituents this week about DOGE and the Trump administration’s efforts to expand executive power.

During his hour-long town hall, the majority of questions Cole faced from constituents were DOGE-related. Callers who said they were from Oklahoma brought up potential cuts to programs like Social Security

and Indian Health Service. They also laid out concerns about federal office closures and layoffs.

Though the event wasn’t in person, the largely calm conversations Cole had were a tone shift from recent town halls held by Republicans — some of which caught enough attention that they resulted in the chair of the National Republican Congressional Committee advising representatives to stop hosting town halls in person. Now, while Congress is in recess, representatives on both sides of the aisle are catching heat from constituents.

Cole didn’t receive the same arguing, shouting and heckling as some of his colleagues. But, most callers were still worried about DOGE.

“I’m very concerned about Congress’s constitutional duties, that those are being taken over by DOGE,” one caller told Cole. “I would like to know what steps you’re willing to take to make sure that the constitutional duties of Congress remain with Congress, and not with the executive

branch.”

Cole had a response ready.

“I try to do it by pretty aggressively defending congressional power,” Cole said. “I think there’s a lot of things out there that you hear that may or may not be true.”

He used the example of Tinker Air Force Base, located in Oklahoma, where rumored layoffs did not happen.

“We live in an extremely contentious time,” Cole said. “It’s a high degree of polarization and partisanship, but we also work together to get things done better than you may think. And so at the end of the day, I always just urge all of you to have confidence in the country’s institutions.”

This story was produced as part of a partnership between NOTUS, a publication of the nonprofit, nonpartisan Allbritton Journalism Institute, and Oklahoma Watch.

Em Luetkemeyer is a NOTUS reporter covering the federal government for Oklahoma Watch. Contact her at emmalineluetkemeyer@notus.org

Lawmakers Eye TOUGHER SENTENCING LAWS

Sentencing Laws

Keaton Ross
Oklahoma Watch

Lock them up and throw away the key. That’s the idea behind Title 21, Section 13.1 of the Oklahoma Statutes. Criminal defendants convicted of one of the 22 offenses outlined in the statute, including murder, first-degree rape and human trafficking, must serve at 85% of their sentence behind bars before becoming parole eligible.

Oklahoma lawmakers are considering several additions to the 85% list, with backers arguing a tougher approach is needed to crack down on violent crime and domestic abuse. The Domestic Violence Fatality Review Board reported a record-breaking 122 domestic violence homicides in 2023.

Bills increasing prison time for certain domestic violence crimes, including domestic abuse by strangulation and abuse of a pregnant woman, have advanced with bipartisan support during the first half of the legislative session.

Meanwhile, several Democrats have opposed Senate Bill 631, which adds discharging a firearm into a building to the 85% list. Sen. Michael Brooks, D-Oklahoma City, argued on the Senate floor that it could lead to lengthy sentences for property damage.

The bill, authored by Senate Pro Tem Lonnie Paxton, advanced along party lines and is eligible to be considered in the House. Paxton has maintained that law enforcement and district attorneys will retain discretion to decide if a shooting was accidental.

“If someone is going to shoot into my house,

I’m scared of them and don’t want them on the street,” Paxton said on the Senate floor.

Additions to the 85% crime list would significantly increase prison stays, according to estimates from the Department of Corrections. For instance, domestic abuse by strangulation has an average sentence length of 10.99 years, but prisoners serve an average of just 1.68 years in state custody. That would increase to at least 9.34 years as an 85% crime.

Another bill to increase prison sentences, Senate Bill 599 by Warren Hamilton, R-McCurtain, remains alive. The measure, which advanced to the House on a party-line Republican vote, would establish a mandatory life without parole sentence for anyone convicted of sexually abusing a child under 14.

The bill also allows prosecutors to pursue the death penalty, though current U.S. Supreme Court precedent outlaws capital punishment for non-homicide offenses. Florida and Tennessee have passed similar legislation in an attempt to get the high court to reconsider the issue.

“We don’t want to infringe on the accused’s rights, but children have rights too,” Hamilton said. “The message we’re trying to send is that we’re not going to put up with people who commit heinous crimes against children.”

Where Reform Bills Stand

While proposals to pause the death penalty and scrutinize civil asset forfeiture stalled, several other criminal justice reform measures have momentum at the Legislature’s unofficial halfway point.

House Bill 1460 by Tammy West, R-Oklahoma City, passed without objection off the House floor on Thursday. The bill eliminates several fines and fees, including a \$40 per month supervision fee assessed to defendants on district attorney’s probation and a \$300 per month fee charged to inmates enrolled in the Department of Corrections’ GPS monitoring program. The bill would cost the state about \$10 million per year in revenue if enacted.

The lower chamber also approved House Bill 1968 by Rep. Danny Williams, R-Seminole, which would establish a full-time Pardon and Parole Board with salaries



PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

of \$85,000 per year. Criminal justice reform advocates have long pushed for the change, arguing that Oklahoma’s parole board don’t have enough to adequately review cases during a 10-hour work week. Several neighboring states, including Kansas, Missouri, Arkansas and Texas, employ a full-time parole board.

“I want the Pardon and Parole Board to give people a chance to go out and prove they’ve truly redeemed their life,” Williams said during an Oct. 29 interim study on sentencing reform.

Lawmakers will shift focus back to committee work in the coming weeks. The deadline for bills to pass out of committee in the opposing chamber is April 10.

Other bills to watch:

- House Bill 2235 by Cyndi Munson, D-Oklahoma City: Updates compensation

for wrongful convictions to \$50,000 per year. Current law caps payments at \$175,000 regardless of time served.

- Senate Bill 595 by Darrell Weaver, R-Moore: Creates a list of minimum standards that county and city jails must abide by.
- Senate Bill 251 by Todd Gollihare, R-Kellyville: Increases funding to rural counties to establish mental health and diversion programs.

House Bill 2422 by Scott Fetgatter, R-Okmulgee: Requires sex offenders whose victim was 13 or younger to be chemically castrated to become parole-eligible.

Keaton Ross covers democracy and criminal justice for Oklahoma Watch. Contact him at (405) 831-9753 or Kross@Oklahomawatch.org. Follow him on Twitter at [@_KeatonRoss](https://twitter.com/_KeatonRoss).



The Joseph Harp Correctional Center is seen on Oct. 10, 2024.
PHOTO BRENT FUCHS/OKLAHOMA WATCH

Walters Awarded Staff Nearly \$600,000 in Bonuses

Walters

Jennifer Palmer
Oklahoma Watch

Top Advisor, Matt Langston, Got a \$45,000 Check in January.

Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters awarded nearly \$600,000 in end-of-year bonuses to Department of Education staff in 2024.

Most employees received an amount equal to 2.5% of their annual salary, an average of \$1,700.

A few received significantly higher amounts, payroll data shows. They include the department’s chief academic officer, Walters’ executive assistant, the director of social studies and the open records coordinator.

Chief Policy Advisor Matt Langston received nearly \$45,000 in January, \$34,000 more than a typical paycheck, according to payroll data on the state’s transparency website. It’s unclear whether that reflects a raise, a bonus, or both. It’s coded as regular pay. A spokeswoman for Walters, Grace Kim, would not answer questions.

“The press office does not comment on personnel matters,” Kim said.

Langston is one of the agency’s highest-paid employees, earning approximately \$130,000 in 2024, which is estimated because three months of the agency’s payroll data are missing from the website.

Langston ran Walters’ 2022 campaign for superintendent and is CEO of the Austin, Texas, based political consulting firm, Engage Right. The firm last year worked with Texas House candidate Stormy Bradley, public ethics reports show. Bradley was defeated in the Republican primary in March.

Langston is registered to vote in Texas, records show, indicating he’s not an Oklahoma resident. Governor Kevin Stitt ended remote work for state employees as of February 1, and Walters did so for his staff in early 2023.

In June, a group of lawmakers asked Attorney General Gentner Drummond to investigate whether Langston was a so-called ghost employee. Republican and former House member Mark McBride, who initiated the request, defined a ghost employee as “an individual who is listed on the payroll but does not actually perform the duties associated with their position.” That, he said,

Chief Policy Advisor Matt Langston received nearly \$45,000 in January, \$34,000 more than a typical paycheck, according to payroll data on the state’s transparency website.



Matt Langston, part time chief advisor to Oklahoma state superintendent Ryan Walters, stands in the back of the room during the Oklahoma State Board of Education meeting at the Oliver Hodge Building on Thursday, June 27, 2024, in Oklahoma City.

PHOTO DANIEL SHULAR, TULSA WORLD

would constitute a misuse of public funds and undermine public trust.

Drummond declined to pursue the investigation.

Langston did not respond to an email or phone call seeking comment. Kim, a spokeswoman for the department, said the press office would not comment on personnel matters. Questions sent to general counsel Michael Beason and program manager Kellie Keefe were referred back to Kim.

Public employees’ gross pay, dates of employment and title or position are public record under Oklahoma law.

The department paid more than \$600,000 in bonuses to staff in December, payroll records show. Walters did not receive one; the superintendent’s salary is set in statute at \$124,373.

Chief Academic Officer Todd Loftin received an additional \$18,000 in December; the records show he received an additional \$15,000 in July as well. Loftin earns \$120,000 a year.

The records show that Lexi Flanagan, Walters’ executive assistant, and Brenda Beymer-Chapman, the agency’s director of social studies, each received just over \$9,000, about 13% of their respective salaries. Flanagan graduated from McAlester High

School in 2016, where Walters was a history and U.S. government teacher.

Marley Billingsley, the agency’s open records coordinator, received a bonus of just under \$9,000.

In addition to the agency-wide end-of-year bonuses, Walters intends to implement a performance-based bonus program at the agency this month, according to an email dated December 12. In the email, he told staff those bonuses would be paid this month and tied to annual performance evaluations.

We asked Kim to provide details of this initiative but did not receive a response before publication.

Walters, in his agency’s budget request to the Legislature, requested an additional \$2.3 million to cover a 6% cost-of-living salary increase for Education Department staff and an increase in benefit costs. Senators in an appropriations committee meeting in February questioned the need to fund a cost-of-living increase, considering the department has decreased its employee count.

He told the committee the agency employed 520 people when he took office in January 2023. There were 387 on the payroll as of January 31, according to the state’s transparency website.

Jennifer Palmer, who covers education for Oklahoma Watch, has more than two decades of experience in news reporting. Palmer’s work has been recognized with awards in public service reporting and investigative reporting. She is a native of Norman and a graduate of the University of Oklahoma, where she was also a columnist for The Oklahoma Daily.



An aging prisoner at the Joseph Harp Correctional Facility in Lexington receives medication on Oct. 10, 2024. Oklahoma's elderly prisoner population continues to rise despite reforms aimed at streamlining medical parole and compassionate release.

PHOTO KEATON ROSS/OKLAHOMA WATCH

Aging Prison Population Strains Corrections Budget

Prison
Keaton Ross
Oklahoma Watch

Picture a prison yard in a Hollywood blockbuster. There's a fenced-in field where young men lift weights and play basketball on a hot summer day. Correctional officers look on from a guard tower ready to sniff out any disturbance.

In Oklahoma, a more accurate image might be a group of gray-haired men standing in a pill line or a dialysis patient struggling to get out of bed and use the restroom.

Nearly one in six Oklahoma prisoners was 55 or older as of Dec. 31, according to Department of Corrections data. While the state has made progress in reducing its overall prison population, this demographic of aging inmates has doubled since 2009 and almost quadrupled since 2000.

The elderly population, which is more prone to chronic health conditions than the general public, is stretching the state's corrections budget and prompting officials to

rethink core healthcare functions like medication delivery and medical appointment scheduling. Criminal justice reform advocates say there are methods to safely reduce the aging population, including requiring parole boards to consider a person's age and health as a mitigating factor and making the post-release placement process more efficient.

The Department of Corrections allocated \$111 million for health services in its fiscal year 2025 budget, a 91% increase from the \$58 million spent in 2015. Total state appropriations to the agency have increased about 15% over the past decade.

The Legislature has also boosted funding to the University Hospitals Authority, which provides care to prisoners needing surgery or specialized care. The agency allocated \$177.3 million, more than half of its total budget, to indigent and inmate care in FY 2025.

In a January budget presentation, Department of Corrections Executive Director Steven Harpe cited the aging population as one of the agency's greatest challenges. He said officials will likely have to purchase a long-term care facility or convert existing space into a hardened medical unit to accommodate prisoners with chronic illnesses.

The agency's goals for 2025 include expanding telehealth capability to reduce medical transports and contracting with an off-site pharmacy to pre-package medication and deliver it directly to prisoners. The agency spends nearly \$2 million per month on prescription drugs for approximately 19,000 prisoners.

"Care has gone up," Harpe said, citing nurse recruitment efforts. "We're able to see more people and have more appointments, and we measure all of those things. At the end of the day, it's still difficult."

Legislative Reforms Aren't Working

The Legislature has considered several proposals over the past decade to reduce the aging prison population. House Bill 2286, passed in 2018, authorized prisoners 60 or older convicted of nonviolent offenses to request parole after serving 10 years or one-third of their sentence. Three years later lawmakers enacted Senate Bill 320, which expanded the criteria for medical parole.

The reforms have not translated to higher parole grant rates. Oklahoma Watch reported this month that only six prisoners have been granted medical parole since Senate Bill 320 took effect in November 2021. About one in five prisoners convicted of a violent offense advanced past stage one of a two-part parole hearing in 2024.

Nicole Porter, the senior director of advocacy at The Sentencing

Cont. A11, Prison

The Oklahoma Eagle

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

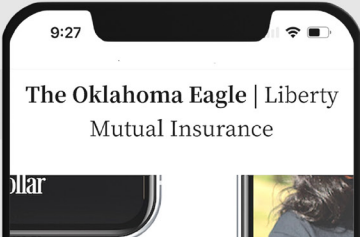
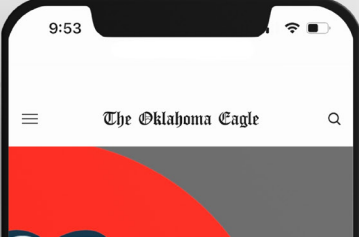




PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

House demands that lawmakers do more to “spur the release of elderly and medically vulnerable prisoners.”

FROM A10
Prison

Project, said there are several reasons why expanding eligibility isn’t a catch-all solution. Appointed parole board members often face external pressure to not grant or recommend release to perceived public safety threats. The application process can be cumbersome without the help of an attorney or nonprofit group.

Some states have tried to spur action by streamlining the residential placement process or requiring parole board members to assume that elderly or medically frail prisoners are not dangerous unless proven otherwise. Numerous studies have found that recidivism tends to decline as people age.

“There’s some uncertainty right now, but given certain trends around declining state budgets and this increased aging population, maybe those circumstances will come together and create the conditions for lawmakers to think seriously about what should happen,” Porter said.

Parole Candidate ‘Not the Kid I Was at 18’
At age 19, Michael Gibson was convicted of

“**There’s some uncertainty right now, but given certain trends around declining state budgets and this increased aging population, maybe those circumstances will come together and create the conditions for lawmakers to think seriously about what should happen.**”

Nicole Porter, senior director of advocacy, The Sentencing Project

first-degree murder and sentenced to life with the possibility of parole in 1969. He appeared on the Pardon and Parole Board’s docket 51 years later in November 2020 after completing an 18-month peer recovery support program.

More than 50 people, including two former Pardon and Parole Board members and two former wardens at the Joseph Harp Correctional Center, submitted letters of support for the 70-year old’s release. His sole misconduct in the 21st century was for putting a piece of cardboard in a cell door in 2012.

“Today I am almost 70 years old, and not the kid I was at 18,” Gibson wrote to the board. “I feel sure that I have matured to the point that I am an excellent candidate for parole or commutation, as do many others who know me best.”

The board declined to advance Gibson to a more comprehensive stage two hearing. He died at a hospital in Oklahoma City on Wednesday after battling a terminal illness.

“If you can’t get that man through stage one, you’re going to have these old people in prison forever,” said Sue Hinton, a retired journalism professor and criminal justice reform advocate who regularly attends Pardon and Parole Board hearings.

Hinton said parole board members are much more likely to recommend release if

they speak directly with a prisoner or their designee, but that doesn’t always happen. The stage one hearing for prisoners convicted of a violent offense consists only of an initial application review. Those who are denied must wait three to five years to reapply.

“I think we have some fine people on the parole board, but we’re asking a lot of them for very little pay,” she said.

One bill moving through the Legislature, House Bill 1968 by Danny Williams, R-Seminole, would establish a full-time Pardon and Parole Board with three alternate members. Board members are currently classified as part-time state employees and expected to work an average of 10 hours per week. The proposal, which has a March 27 deadline to advance off the House floor, would cost about \$673,000 per year to implement.

During an Oct. 29 interim study on sentencing reform, Williams said lawmakers can and should do more to spur the release of elderly and medically vulnerable prisoners.

“It doesn’t make any sense to keep really sick people that aren’t dangerous,” Williams said.

Keaton Ross covers democracy and criminal justice for Oklahoma Watch. Contact him at (405) 831-9753 or kross@oklahomawatch.org. Follow him on Twitter at [@KeatonRoss](https://twitter.com/KeatonRoss).



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(918) 425-6613

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Fax:

918-584-1958

Prayer Line:

918-584-PRAY

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Morning

Worship 10:45

Wednesday

Bible Study

Noon and 7:00



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FEATURED

Why Libraries Are Still
a Lifeline for Black K-12
Students

One of the last public spaces where Black kids
Libraries, A13



FEATURED

Can This Chicago
Preacher Save ‘The
Blacksonian’?

Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III’s plan to push back
Blacksonian, A15



PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

Deal Will
Wipe Out
\$30B in
Medical
Debt
Backers
Say it’s
Not
Enough

Medical Debt
Noam N. Levey
Word In Black

The deal prevents the debt being sold but
proponents say it can’t solve a crisis that now
touches around 100 million people in the U.S.

Underscoring the massive scale of
America’s medical debt problem, a New
York-based nonprofit has struck a deal to
pay off old medical bills for an estimated
20 million people.
Undue Medical Debt, which buys
patient debt, is retiring \$30 billion worth
of unpaid bills in a single transaction with
Pendrick Capital Partners, a Virginia-
based debt trading company. The average
patient debt being retired is \$1,100,
according to the nonprofit, with some
reaching the hundreds of thousands of
dollars.
The deal will prevent the debt being
sold and protect millions of people from
being targeted by collectors. But even
proponents of retiring patient debt
acknowledge that these deals cannot solve
a crisis that now touches around 100
million people in the U.S.
“We don’t think that the way we
finance health care is sustainable,” Undue
Medical Debt chief executive Allison Sesso

said in an interview with KFF Health
News. “Medical debt has unreasonable
expectations,” she said. “The people who
owe the debts can’t pay.”
In the past year alone, Americans
borrowed an estimated \$74 billion to
pay for health care, a nationwide West
Health-Gallup survey found. And even
those who benefit from Undue’s debt
relief may have other medical debt that
won’t be relieved.
This large purchase also highlights the
challenges that debt collectors, hospitals,
and other health care providers face
as patients rack up big bills that aren’t
covered by their health insurance.
Pendrick’s chief executive, Chris
Eastman, declined several requests
to be interviewed about the debt sale,
which has not been previously reported.
But Eastman acknowledged in a 2024
podcast episode that collecting medical
debts has grown more challenging as
Cont. A14, Medical Debt

Why Libraries
Are Still a
Lifeline for
Black K-12
Students

Libraries
Quintessa Williams
Word In Black

As Black history and identity are
erased from classrooms, libraries
remain one of the last public spaces
where Black kids can learn and read
freely.

At their best, libraries do more
than provide resources — they

Cont. A14, Libraries

Financial aid and medical expense reductions championed by debt relief advocates



PHOTO ADOBE IMAGES

FROM A13

Medical Debt

regulators have restricted how collectors can pursue patients.

Pendrick has now shuttered, which Sesso said provided strong motivation for this deal. “This was a really great opportunity to get a debt buyer out of the market,” she said.

Undue Medical Debt pioneered its debt relief strategy a decade ago, leveraging charitable donations to buy medical debt from debt trading companies at steeply discounted prices and then freeing patients from the obligation to pay.

The nonprofit now buys debts directly from hospitals, as well. And it is working with about two dozen state and local governments to

valuable in preventing people from sinking into debt.

But many government officials see retiring people’s unpaid medical bills as part of a larger strategy to make it easier for patients to avoid debt in the first place.

“Turning off the tap is what’s really important in the long run,” said Naman Shah, a physician who directs medical affairs at the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health. The county is working to improve local hospital financial aid programs for patients. But Shah said debt relief is key, as well.

“It’s easy to criticize band-aids when you’re not the one who’s cut,” he said. “As a physician, I take care of people who have cuts, and I know the importance of stitching them back up.”

Undue Medical Debt’s latest deal, which it is spending \$36 million to close, will

“

It’s easy to criticize band-aids when you’re not the one who’s cut.

Naman Shah, physician, Director of Medical and Dental Affairs, Los Angeles County Department of Public Health

leverage public money to relieve medical debt in communities from Los Angeles County to Cleveland to the state of Connecticut.

The approach has been controversial. And Undue Medical Debt’s record-setting purchase — financed by a mix of philanthropy and taxpayer dollars — is likely to stoke more debate over the value of paying collectors for medical debts.

“The approach is just treating the symptoms and not the disease,” said Elisabeth Benjamin, a vice president at the Community Service Society of New York, a nonprofit that has led efforts to restrict aggressive hospital collections. Benjamin and other advocates say systemic changes such as ensuring hospitals offer sufficient financial aid to patients and reining in high medical prices would be more

help patients nationwide, according to the nonprofit. But about half the estimated 20 million people whose debts Pendrick owned live in just two states: Texas or Florida.

Neither has expanded Medicaid coverage through the 2010 Affordable Care Act, a key tool that researchers have found bolsters patients’ financial security by protecting them from big medical bills and debt.

The patients eligible for debt relief have incomes at or below four times the federal poverty level, about \$63,000 for a single person, or debts that exceed 5% of their incomes.

About half the debts are also more than seven years old. These have been donated to Undue Medical Debt by Pendrick, the group

Cont. A15, Medical Debt

Quiet corners of libraries, nationally, “Are Under Threat”

FROM A13

Libraries

create belonging. As the nation celebrates National Library Week and its theme “Drawn to the Library,” libraries are among the few public spaces where Black children don’t have to justify their curiosity. Where they can read poetry, explore science fiction, learn about their ancestors, and dream freely.

But as schools nationwide become battlegrounds over censorship, the quiet corners of libraries — both public and school-based — are under threat.

A report released Monday by the American Library Association reveals a disturbing trend: Efforts to strip books from library shelves are on the rise, and they’re being driven by organized groups. The report found that “elected officials, board members and administrators initiated 72% of demands to censor books in school and public libraries.”

The books under attack often revolve around race, history, and identity, and the most targeted novel is by a Black author: “All Boys Aren’t Blue” by George M. Johnson. Toni Morrison’s classic “The Bluest Eye” is the third-most challenged book. Organized efforts to ban books often target them under the guise of “parental rights” and “curriculum transparency,” but the ALA found parents are behind only 16% of attacks on books.

“As the organized attempts to censor materials in libraries persist, we must continue to unite and protect the freedom to read and support our library workers, especially at a time when our nation’s libraries are facing threats to funding and library professionals are facing threats to their livelihood,” American Library Association president Cindy Hohl said in a statement.



PHOTO KLAUS VEDFELT / GETTYIMAGES

Censorship Is a Racial Justice Issue

The ALA’s report reveals 821 documented attempts to ban books in 2024, down from 1,247 in 2023. But the organization warns that the decline is due to tactics like library workers being afraid of being fired for reporting censorship.

According to the most recent data from PEN America, more than 30% of banned or challenged books centered on characters of color or were written by authors of color. These bans don’t just limit what Black children can read — they reshape what they’re allowed to know. When history is whitewashed and diverse voices are silenced, Black students are left with a fractured mirror — one that reflects little of who they are or what they come from.

Filling the Literacy Gaps

Book censorship isn’t the only challenge Black students face. Educational inequities — fueled by underfunded schools, overcrowded classrooms, and limited access to advanced coursework — also create barriers to achievement. Libraries, in this context, can serve as academic lifelines.

ALA research shows that regular library use is strongly linked with improved reading outcomes. For Black students, who face systemic literacy gaps — just 17% read at or above proficiency by eighth grade, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress — libraries aren’t just helpful, they’re essential.

“The most important thing is that children continue to read,” Effie Lee Morris,

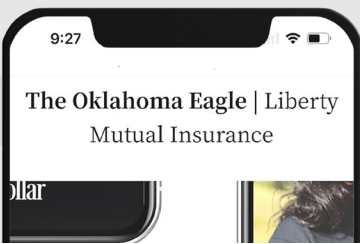
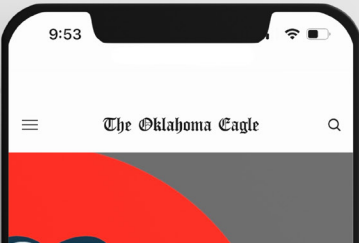
the first African American president of the Public Library Association, said in 2002. Giving students “the opportunity to make their own decisions about what they read can lead to a new awareness of the role of reading in their lives.”

The ALA notes that every library visit, every new library card, and every storytime you take a child to serves as an act of resistance. They’re also asking people to “Contact your members of Congress by phone or email and ask them to protect federal library funding.”

The Oklahoma Eagle

Our Mission

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



Trump administration suspended Biden era regulation barring credit reporting of medical debts nationally

FROM A14

Medical Debt

reported.

The nonprofit plans to pay for the rest of the debts over the next year and a half, though all collections have stopped against patients. It also plans to spend an additional \$40 million — or \$2 a person — to process the debts, find patients, and inform them that their debts have been relieved.

Sesso, Undue’s chief executive, said she hopes the debt purchase will keep policymakers focused on enacting longer-term solutions to the nation’s medical debt crisis.

She applauded state leaders for taking steps to bar medical debts from their residents’ credit scores. But she said action is also needed in Washington, D.C. However,

“It’s really a national problem that has to be solved at the national level.”

Allison Sesso, chief executive, Undue Medical Debt



PHOTO PIXABAY: [HTTPS://WWW.PEXELS.COM/PHOTO/EMERGENCY-SIGNAGE-263402/](https://www.pexels.com/photo/emergency-signage-263402/)

the Trump administration has suspended regulations enacted under former President Joe Biden that would have barred credit reporting of medical debt nationally, and congressional Republicans are now moving to revoke the new rules.

“There is a limit to what state and local governments can do to solve this problem,” Sesso said. “It’s really a national problem that

has to be solved at the national level.”

KFF Health News is a national newsroom that produces in-depth journalism about health issues and is one of the core operating programs at KFF—an independent source of health policy research, polling, and journalism. This article first appeared on KFF Health News and is republished here under a Creative Commons license.



When he heard about President Donald Trump's threats to cut funding to the National Museum of African American History and Culture, Rev. Otis Moss III, leader of Trinity United Church of Christ, did his homework. He told his congregation that Trump's ability to change the museum is limited, and he put the NMAAHC in the church's budget.

PHOTO GETTY IMAGES

Can This Chicago Preacher Save ‘The Blacksonian’?

When he heard President Donald Trump threatened the National Museum of African American History and Culture, Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III came up with a plan to push back.

Blacksonian
Quintessa Williams
Word In Black

With some 3 million visitors a year, the National Museum of African American History and Culture is one of the most popular attractions on the National Mall in Washington. It houses everything from slave trade records to the prop spaceship Parliament-Funkadelic used in its concerts.

President Donald Trump’s crusade against diversity has attacked nearly everything touching on race, from freezing federal investigations of civil rights violations to scrubbing Harriet Tubman from a website on the Underground Railroad.

But when he came for the Smithsonian Museum’s National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. — a.k.a. The Blacksonian — Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III, senior pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, came up with a backup plan.

On March 27, Trump signed an executive order, “Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History,” declaring NMAAHC — one of the most popular attractions in Washington, with some 3 million visitors

a year — and a few others as institutions that divide America. The order states that the museums undermine the nation’s “remarkable” history by casting it “in a negative light,” and directs Vice President JD Vance to clear the museum of its liberal “ideology.”

Ten days before the order, Kevin Young, the NMAAHC’s director, went on indefinite personal leave. The cascade of bad news left historians on edge and Black Americans concerned that the groundbreaking museum would survive Trump 2.0.

Enter Rev. Moss — and the Trinity congregation.

Last Sunday, Moss came to the rescue of NMAAHC by announcing that Trinity “is placing the museum in our annual budget.” He then asked parishioners to join him by donating \$25 to the museum, the price of a basic membership, to show their faith.

It’s good news, given that the National Museum of African American History and Culture is not a federal institution and is principally funded by donations. Only a

small portion of its financial support comes from the federal government.

Moss also pointed out that Vance, the vice president, is merely one of 17 members of the NMAAHC’s governing board. As such, Moss said, Vance has no legal authority to make unilateral decisions concerning the museum.

To seal the funding deal, Moss officially opened the floor for a motion. More than one member placed his proposal into a motion. When called for a vote, the contingent of ayes had their say.

It’s unclear exactly how much money Trinity collected, or how much the church will donate to the museum. But no matter how that happens, the reverend said, approving a plan to save NMAAHC is a point of pride.

“When people ask why you contributed to the museum,” he said, “just tell them, ‘I go to a church that is unashamedly black and unapologetically Christian.’”



Artist Stephen Towns has his work in the collections at the National Museum of African American History and Culture and the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D. C., among other art museums nationwide

PHOTO PROVIDED



Gilcrease Museum Welcomes Artist-In-Residence

Stephen Towns Will Serve As The Inaugural Artist

DR. JERRY GOODWIN
The Oklahoma Eagle

Renowned America artist Stephen Towns will serve as the inaugural Gillies Artist-in-Residence. His work has been featured in publications such as The New York Times, Colossal, Artforum, The Washington Post, Hyperallergic, Cultured, Forbes, AFROPUNK, and American Craft.

“I am excited to work with Gilcrease Museum, the University of Tulsa, and local community leaders to learn about the rich history and culture of Oklahoma. I anticipate that this will be my most ambitious residency,” he said. “I hope my experience in Tulsa will inspire my current practice and evolve into a new direction in my work,” said Towns.

During his residency from March 24 through April 12, Towns will have access to the Gilcrease Collection through the University of Tulsa’s Helmerich Center for American Research. He will meet with local leaders, artists, and historians and tour impactful sites such as the Greenwood neighborhood and Black Wall Street.

“We are honored that Stephen has agreed to take part in the renewed residency program and are eager to see how his time in Tulsa influences future work,” said Brian Lee Whisenhunt, executive director of the museum.

“The Gilcrease Collection is enormous and holds great promise of inspiring artists every year for the next century. It’s been a pleasure

ruminating about how unique holdings – such as the Eddie Faye Gates collection – might inspire the practice of creatives from any discipline. We’re incredibly thankful to the donors who have supported the Gillies Artist-in-Residence Program fund, which is supporting artists’ engagement with the Gilcrease Collection and Tulsa community.”

Towns was born in 1980 in Lincolnville, S.C., near Charleston, and now lives and works in Baltimore. Trained as a painter, he received a degree in fine arts in studio art from the University of South Carolina and has developed a rigorous, self-taught quilting practice. In 2018, the Baltimore Museum of Art presented his first museum exhibition, “Stephen Towns: Ruminations and a Reckoning.”

In 2021, Towns was the first Black artist-in-residence at the Fallingwater Institute at Frank Lloyd Wright’s renowned Fallingwater House in Pennsylvania. That same year, Towns was awarded the Maryland State Arts Council’s Individual Artist Award. In 2016, he was the inaugural recipient of the Municipal Art Society of Baltimore Travel Prize.

Towns’ work is in the collections of the National Museum of African American History and Culture and National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C.; Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Mo.; Art

+ Practice in Los Angeles, the Baltimore Museum of Art, the Boise Museum of Art in Idaho; the City of Charleston, S.C.; and the Rockwell Museum in Corning, N.Y., among many others.

Towns, who will visit with TU students and faculty during his residency, will return for a public lecture on Nov. 5 at the campus’ beautiful Lorton Performance Center. Details of that event will be shared www.gilcrease.org and www.utulsa.edu this fall.

Gilcrease Museum

The Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art, known as the Gilcrease Museum, houses a comprehensive collection of the art, culture, and history of North America. Thomas Gilcrease, a citizen of the Muscogee Creek Nation, established Gilcrease Museum in 1949 in Tulsa, Okla. Today, the interdisciplinary collection contains more than 350,000 items. The museum represents hundreds of Indigenous cultures across North and South America, with material culture and archaeology ranging from 12,000 BCE to the 21st century. The collection includes more than 350 years of American paintings, sculptures and works on paper, including the largest public holdings of art of the American West. For more information, see www.gilcrease.org.

Parent Child Center Recognizes 35th Anniversary



The Parent Child Center of Tulsa is highlighting 35 years of service to Tulsa by encouraging families to share their stories with the organization.

PHOTO PROVIDED

DR. JERRY GOODWIN
The Oklahoma Eagle

The Parent Child Center of Tulsa (PCCT) is celebrating 35 years of transforming lives and strengthening families. It is calling on the community to participate this milestone by sharing their personal stories of resilience and impact.

Since 1990, PCCT has helped thousands of Tulsans and surrounding community families, equipping parents with the tools to build stronger, healthier homes for their children. Now, as the organization looks to the future, it wants to honor the voices of those touched by its mission – clients, donors, volunteers, and community supporters alike.

“For 35 years, PCCT has been a place of hope for families in and around Tulsa. I have personally seen parents find strength

in our programs, children thrive in safer environments, and volunteers pour their hearts into making a difference,” said Melanie Anderegg, CEO of The Parent Child Center of Tulsa.

“This milestone isn’t just a celebration – it’s a call to action. We need our community to help us honor the past, share their experiences, and inspire the future. Every story matters, and we want to hear yours.”

PCCT is launching a community-wide call for stories, inviting those impacted by its services or who have supported its mission to share their personal experiences.

Whether it is a client whose life was changed by PCCT’s programs, a volunteer who found purpose in giving back, or a donor who has seen the direct impact of their generosity, these stories will help highlight the organization’s legacy and inspire future

generations to focus on family strengthening and continue the fight against child abuse and neglect.

These shared experiences will be featured throughout the year as part of PCCT’s 35th birthday celebration, highlighting the strength and dedication of the Tulsa community.

How to Participate:

- Visit <https://forms.office.com/r/4jCviYoBSH> to share your story.
- Submissions are open to anyone who has participated in PCCT’s programs or supported its mission over the years.
- Participants can choose to remain anonymous if they prefer.

To mark this special occasion, PCCT will host a year-long celebration, including community gatherings, a special birthday event, and storytelling initiatives that bring to life the voices of those who have been part of its mission. The stories collected will be featured across various platforms, including social media, newsletters, and a commemorative campaign that reflects on the organization’s journey and vision for the future.

The Parent Child Center of Tulsa

Since its founding in 1990, PCCT has been dedicated to preventing child abuse and neglect, supporting families, and fostering healthy childhood development through education, treatment, and advocacy. Each year, PCCT serves thousands of families through its programs, which are made possible by the dedication of its donors, volunteers, and community supporters. In 2024, PCCT served over 96,000 children and families.

For more information about PCCT’s 35th birthday celebrations or to share your story, visit <https://forms.office.com/r/4jCviYoBSH> or learn more about PCCT at <https://www.parentchildcenter.org> or pr@parentchildcenter.org.

Events

Mar. 7-29

She Makes Art + Music exhibit, poetry and performances, and music concert to be hosted at Liggett Studio, 314 S. Kenosha. The exhibit will be on display from March 7-27, with an opening on March 7 at 5 p.m. The poetry and performances will be on March 27. The music conference is scheduled for March 29. For more information, visit www.liggettstudio.com/shemakesart.

Mar. 28

“Sister Act – The Musical” will be performed by the Theatre Department at Booker T. Washington High School, 1514 E. Zion St. The scheduled performances are March 28, 7 p.m.; March 28, 2 p.m. and 7 p.m.; and March 30, 4 p.m. Majeste Pearson is the music director. For more information, see [Sister Act - The Musical](#).

Mar. 29

The Links, Incorporated is sponsoring Black Family Wellness Expo at Tulsa Community College, Northeast campus, 3727 E. Apache St., 11 a.m. – 2 p.m. The program is a part of the organization’s National Impact Day of Service. For more information, contact tulsalinksbfwe@gmail.com or (918) 852-7456.

Apr. 3

Booker T. Washington High School Distinguished Hall of Fame Foundation Ceremony and Scholarship Dinner will be held at 6 p.m. at the Greenwood Cultural Center, 322 N. Greenwood Ave. Honorees include Inez Black, Kevin Lockett, Nicole Lynn, Sabrina Goodwin-Monday, Bill Nelson, J. Kevin Ross, M. Reginald “Ice” Terry, and Pastor LeRon G. West. The guest speaker will be Millard House II, superintendent of Prince George’s County Public Schools. For more information, contact tulsabtw.hof@gmail.com.

Apr. 16

Travis Guillory – Senior Concert at the Greenwood Cultural Center, 322 N. Greenwood Ave., 6:30 p.m.

Apr. 17

Greenwood Cultural Center is presenting its Legacy Award Dinner. Nate Burleson of “CBS Mornings,” “The NFL Today,” and host of “Hollywood Squares” will be the Legacy Award honoree. For more information, call (918) 596-1020 or visit www.greenwoodculturalcenter.org.

“HISTORY COMES ALIVE”

FEATURING
THURGOOD MARSHALL
AND
CORETTA SCOTT KING

(PORTRAYED BY DR. JIM ARMSTEAD AND REBECCA MARKS JIMERSON)



“History Comes Alive” will feature in-character performances of Thurgood Marshall and Coretta Scott King at Booker T. Washington High School on April 11. PHOTO PROVIDED

Honoring Legacies: History Comes Alive In Tribute To Civil Rights Icons

DR. JERRY GOODWIN
The Oklahoma Eagle

The Booker T. Washington Foundation for Excellence invites the community to commemorate history with an unforgettable event, “History Comes Alive,” featuring powerful portrayals of Thurgood Marshall and Coretta Scott King.

The program will be performed on April 11 at 9:15 a.m. and 10:15 a.m. at the Ellis Walker Woods Auditorium, Booker T. Washington High School, 1514 E. Zion St., in Tulsa.

The event holds particular significance as it follows the solemn anniversary of April 4, 1968, when the world lost Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to an assassin’s bullet. With this program, the Foundation seeks to honor his legacy and inspire the next generation through reflections on the civil rights movement and its leaders.



Rebecca Marks-Jimerson will present Coretta Scott King at the Booker T. Washington Foundation for Excellence’s “History Comes Alive” on April 11. PHOTO PROVIDED

Dr. Jim Armstead will channel the spirit and brilliance of Thurgood Marshall, the first African American U.S. Supreme Court Justice. Armstead is a Chautauqua Scholar Performer, portraying over three hundred characterizations nationwide.

A retired professor from the U.S. Naval War College, Armstead frequently lectures on international law and national security affairs, including the United Nations. Rebecca Marks Jimerson, a Booker T. Washington alum and Chautauqua Scholar, will embody the strength and grace of Coretta Scott King, a tireless advocate for justice and equality.

Garrett Bland, a BTW alum and recent graduate of Tennessee State University in Nashville, will be the moderator. A gifted communications engager and storyteller, he will bring his unique talent to this event, enriching the audience’s experience.

The organizers have said the event will serve as a remembrance, reflection, and recognition of the spirit of the civil rights movement,



Dr. Jim Armstead will portray the late Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall at the Booker T. Washington Foundation for Excellence’s “History Comes Alive” on April 11. PHOTO PROVIDED

celebrating the courage and vision of those who paved the way for freedom and justice.

For more information, contact Rebecca Marks-Jimerson at (918) 734-1223.

Booker T. Washington Foundation for Excellence

Established in 1993, the Booker T. Washington Foundation for Excellence is an independent 501(c)(3) organization whose mission is to enhance all aspects of academic endeavors for the students, faculty, and administration at Booker T. Washington High School in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The Foundation funds grants for teaching positions, high-stakes test preparation, teacher training, classroom equipment, and educational enrichment – all in the high school’s 100-plus-year tradition of excellence in academics, arts, and spirit. The Board includes alumni, parents, administrators, and community leaders passionate about supporting Booker T. Washington High School.



Garrett Bland will serve as moderator for the “History Comes Alive” program for the Booker T. Washington Foundation for Excellence on April 11. PHOTO PROVIDED

Events

Apr. 30

2025 Women’s Leadership Summit will be held at the River Spirit Casino Resort, 8330 Riverside Pkwy. According to the organizers, the full-day program will be dedicated to empowering, elevating, and celebrating women leaders. The program theme will be “Courageous Leaders Driving Impact.” The full-day summit For more information, contact <https://leadershiptulsa.org/womens-leadershipsummit/>.

May 18

Witness! An Evening of Spirituals will be held at the Greenwood Cultural Center, 322 N. Greenwood Ave., 6 p.m. – 8 p.m. Doors will open at 5 p.m. The sounds of rich history in the tradition of the spirituals, also known as “freedom songs,” will be performed. The featured singers will be Joel-Lyn McCormick (Soprano), Phil Armstrong (Tenor), Joseph Bias (Baritone), and Donald Ryan (pianist). The program is a benefit concert for the Greenwood Cultural Center. For more information, visit eventbrite.com.

Jun. 13-14

African and Indian Table Talk presents “Across Generations: The Freedman’s Journey in Indian Territory” conference. More information to be provided soon.

Aug. 9

100 Black Men of Tulsa will be hosting the Marvin Blades Golf Classic at the Bailey Golf Course in Owasso. For more information, visit <https://www.100blackmentulsa.org/>.

Aug. 17-23

National Business League will host its 125th-anniversary pre-conference at Tuskegee University in Tuskegee, Ala., Aug. 17-20, and conference in Atlanta, Ga., Aug. 20-23. For more information, visit <https://national-businessleague.org/>.

Sep. 6

NeonPrairie Music and Camping Festival to feature a variety of entertainers, Sept. 6-7. For more information, see www.neonprairiefest.com.



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ONEOK FIELD -
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◆.918

OASIS
FRESH MARKET

◆.03

TIFFANY CRUTCHER
FOUNDATION

◆.02

COMMUNITY WINS AT DREAMLAND KICKBALL

In celebrating of the **Dreamland Festival**

**MAR
23
2025
OASIS
FRESH
MARKET
VS.
TERRANCE
CRUTCHER
FOUNDATION**

Kickball
Sam Levrault
Photos, Sam Levrault Media
The Oklahoma Eagle

Tulsans from across the city came together at ONEOK field March 23rd, all in the name of community and kickball. They gathered to participate in a kickball game that also served as community fundraising event in celebration of ten years of the Dreamland Festival, a community event featuring music and other arts, scheduled for September.



The Sunday afternoon game was a matchup between Oasis Fresh Market and the Terrance Crutcher Foundation. Both teams were “Diamonds,” as emblazoned on the backs of their jerseys printed by local company Town Apparel, as well as representing the number “10” in recognition of ten years for the festival. An impressive roster of over fifty community members were seen either on the teams or part of the referee crew on the field, full of familiar faces and friendly smiles.

GAME DAY OASIS FRESH MARKET VS TERRANCE CRUTCHER FOUNDATION



TEAM CAPTAIN AARON “AJ” JOHNSON

TEAM OASIS FRESH MARKET, HEADED BY TEAM CAPTAIN AARON “AJ” JOHNSON, OWNER AND CEO OF OASIS FRESH MARKET, A FULL-SERVICE GROCERY LOCATED ON 1725 N. PEORIA AVE., STARTED THE GAME OFF WITH AN EARLY LEAD BEFORE ENDING THE GAME WITH A 3-2 VICTORY.

AFTER THE GAME, JOHNSON PRAISED THE EFFORTS OF THE ORGANIZATION AND DESCRIBED THE GAME AS A GREAT EVENT. THOUGH THRILLED ABOUT HIS TEAM'S VICTORY, JOHNSON ALSO SHOUTED OUT DR. TIFFANY CRUTCHER AND HER TEAM, TERRANCE CRUTCHER FOUNDATION. HE DESCRIBED HOW THE GAME WAS AN GREAT EXAMPLE OF COMMUNITY BONDING.

“PEOPLE COMING TOGETHER FROM ALL DIFFERENT COMMUNITIES, DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS, BUT WE SHARE THE COMMON GOAL,” JOHNSON SAID IN AN INTERVIEW WITH THE OKLAHOMA EAGLE. “WE ALL LOVE NORTH TULSA. WE CARE ABOUT THE DEVELOPMENT [AND] ARE ALL INVESTED IN THAT.”

WHEN REFLECTING ON THE COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT BOTH ON AND OFF PITCH, JOHNSON DESCRIBES THE DAY AS “REALLY WHAT [THE EVENT IS] ALL ABOUT: WHEN EVERYONE CAN COME TOGETHER, EGOS ASIDE, AND [AS] ONE HEART, ONE BAND, ONE SOUND.”





TEAM CAPTAIN DR. TIFFANY CRUTCHER

Dr. Tiffany Crutcher led the other half of “Diamonds” onto the field today in black jerseys as captain of Team Terrance Crutcher Foundation.

Crutcher, executive director of the local non-profit, was all smiles and positive vibes after the match. “It felt great,” she said in an interview with The Oklahoma Eagle. “I told everybody there’s only one winner out there today, and that’s community. Community came together for a really, really great cause: to raise funds for students at McLain [High School] and for the Dreamland Festival.”

Crutcher also highlighted the positivity exuded by both teams. She described the event as “a beautiful display of community, two great organizations doing just great work in the community, serving community.”

The kickball game was more than a simple playground game for those involved. Crutcher explained the impact the community event can have: “Every ball we kick is a seed that we’re planning for the future generation, for Greenwood, for the ancestors,” she said. “Dr. Martin Luther King talked about chaos and community – Today we chose community.”



HONORING THE WILLIAMS DREAMLAND THEATRE

Dreamland Tulsa is a community-driven organization dedicated to enriching Tulsa through music, art, and cultural development. The organization, led by Steph Simon, organizes the annual Dreamland Festival, which honors the Williams Dreamland Theatre, a prosperous and beloved venue that was destroyed during the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. The festival was created to provide a platform for artistry to be elevated, expressed and appreciated.

The ‘Kickball Kickoff’ was a fundraising event in support of the festival. Simon explained that the goal of the event was to obtain funds for the festival.

When reflecting on the success of the community match, Simon praised the engagement of all involved. “Everybody came out, played for the calls, and community won today,” he said. “It was a great picking [of players]. It was very hard to choose, knowing so many people in the city, but everyone came out, gave 110%.”

