

PALM BEACH COUNTY NEWS

Healing from history: Palm Beach County honors Delray Beach lynching victim with memorial | PHOTOS

By Scott Luxor
Sun Sentinel Correspondent • Aug 26, 2022 at 2:28 pm



In 2019, the Palm Beach County Board of County Commissioners decided to explore claiming the County Monument located at the Equal Justice Institute (EJI) National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, AL. Through the PBC Community Remembrance Project, they collaborate with communities to honor documented victims of racial violence and lynchings to create a dialogue about race and justice. The first official event on June 18th honored the unjust lynching and killing of Sam Nelson in 1926. Here, participants at the event in Pompey Park place soil from the lynching site into jars which will be distributed around the county to promote community conversations about social justice. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

There were more cases of lynching per capita in Florida, between 1900 and 1930, than in any other state, according to the Florida Historical Society.

It wasn't until March 29, 2022, that a U.S. landmark federal law, the [Emmett Till Antilynching Act](#), finally made lynching a federal hate crime.

The bill was named after 14-year-old Emmett Till who was lynched in Mississippi in 1955, which sparked a public outrage. Before the passage of this law, a federal antilynching bill had been in discussion for over 100 years, with none of the proposed bills ever passing.



This photo shows the inside of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery where one of the jars of soil will end up. (Equal Justice Initiative/Courtesy)

Palm Beach County became interested in the issue of recognizing lynchings when leaders learned about the [Equal Justice Initiative](#) and its creation of the [National Memorial for Peace and Justice](#), which opened in 2018 in Montgomery, Alabama. The EJI is a national organization that is committed to racial and social justice. Through its [Community Remembrance Project](#), it collaborates with communities to honor documented victims of racial violence and lynchings to create a dialogue about race and justice.

As a part of this effort, the Community Soil Collection Project gathers soil at lynching sites for display in exhibits bearing victims' names. That effort is done in concert with the [Historical Marker Project](#), which will place a [narrative marker near downtown Delray Beach](#) that will describe the violence that happened at that location in 1926.

The person who brought the idea to the county was Josephine Gon, vice president of Jewish Community Relations Council at the Jewish Federation of Palm Beach County, who visited the EJI center in Alabama in 2019 and learned about the Remembrance Project. She saw that they had on display over 800 rust-colored steel pillars hanging from a structure. Each one represents a county in the U.S. where a lynching took place. The names of each lynched person in each county, totaling over 4,400, is engraved on the markers.

After her visit there, Gon returned home and shared her experience with individuals in Palm Beach County. Eventually, they agreed to become part of the EJI project and started gathering people to create a coalition to take the next steps to make it happen locally. The end result from their efforts will be to bring a copy of one of the steel pillars from Montgomery. back to the area to be put on display in the county.



This is a photo of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery where one of the jars of soil from the lynching site will end up. (Equal Justice Initiative/Courtesy)

Local activists and researchers collaborated on a project that happened to time well with the new anti-lynching law and the Juneteenth holiday. The collaboration for the project is called the [Palm Beach County Remembrance Project Coalition](#), which included the Spady Cultural Museum in Delray Beach.

The effort culminated in a commemoration event of lynching victim Sam Nelson on June 18. The event, attended by hundreds of people at Pompey Park in Delray Beach, was serious, but not somber. The diverse crowd was engaged in the heavy issue of lynching, but they also were enthusiastic about the coming together of the community over the idea of healing.

Audience members took part in an interactive soil collection activity. Dirt was collected from the lynching site in Delray Beach and placed in large glass jars, one which will be placed in the The National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery.

The soil represents a historical link between today and the grounds where the hate crime happened in the past. According to the historical account, Samuel Nelson was reportedly taken from the Delray Beach Jail, which was in downtown Delray, in 1926. His body was found in the area of West Atlantic Avenue and Sims Road.



A participant at the event in Pompey Park place soil from the lynching site into jars that will be distributed around the county to promote community conversations about social justice. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

The accounts of what happened, combined with the new federal law making lynching a hate crime, helped to spur the reckoning that many people today are bringing to light to help heal for the future.

A longtime Floridian's perspective

Mark Schneider, a member of the Palm Beach County Remembrance Project, tells the account of what happened to Sam Nelson the day of the lynching.

"There are actually Delray City Council minutes for the evening of Sept. 27, 1926," he said. "The account states that a police chief came to the council to try to explain what happened. He had jailed a Black man named Sam Nelson on a charge that he had assaulted a white woman in Miami, but he didn't know where the charge came from.

"The jailor then said that an unknown man came to him from Miami and asked the chief to release Nelson into that man's custody," Schneider said. "The chief refused. When he left the jail that night at midnight, according to the testimony, Nelson was still there. But when he came back in the morning, that cell door was battered down and the man had been abducted."

According to Schneider, the city council then said that their concern was that the police department be absolved of any responsibility for this abduction, which they were, only based on the one-person account given by the sheriff himself.

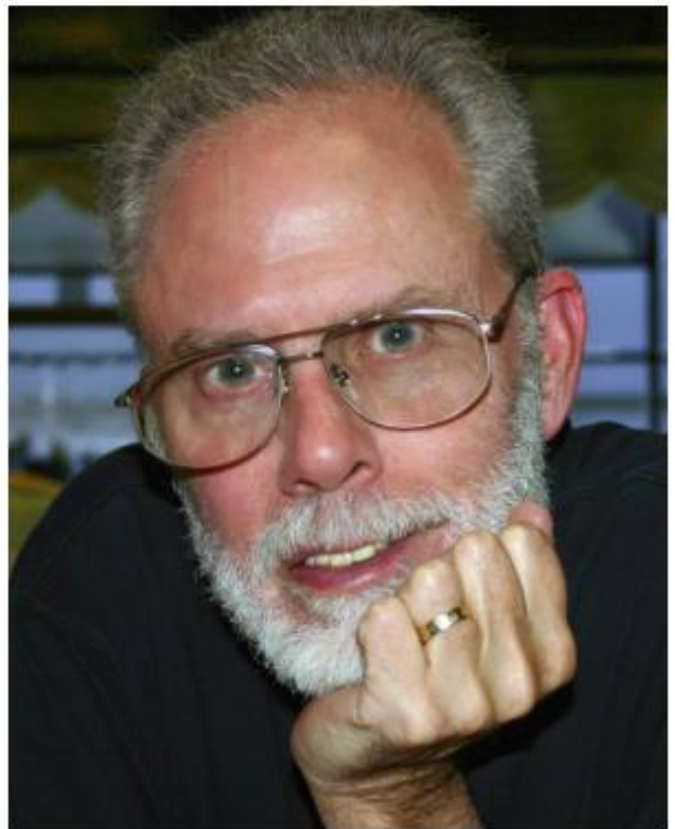
According to the notes, there was no indication of remorse for victim, who was later found lynched west of Delray. Schneider said that this matter-of-

fact attitude shows how lynchings were almost in the realm of being accepted at the time.

Schneider remembers racism being present during his longtime residency in Florida.

"I speak from the perspective of somebody who moved to Florida from New York in 1954. I moved here when this was a segregated state," he said. "I still remember that there were separate water fountains at the Trailways bus station, segregated schools, and separate Black and white parts of town. I remember that the degree of intersection between the white community and the Black community was largely through servants in the households."

Schneider said he became acquainted with the project to memorialize lynchings several years ago. At that time, he decided that he would work toward encouraging the Palm Beach County Board of County Commissioners to pursue working with local memorials.



Mark Schneider is a member of the Palm Beach County Remembrance Project. (Mark Schneider/Courtesy)



Soil from the lynching site was gathered into jars with the lynching victim's name on it. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

Because of his strong interest in getting involved with the project, Schneider was asked to serve on the Palm Beach County Community Remembrance Project committee.

“We have liaisons for our county with the EJI based in Montgomery, Alabama, which has created The National Memorial for Peace and Justice that highlights the 4,400 people who were victims of lynchings between 1877 and 1950,” Schneider said. “Reconciliation is a very strong theme in the EJI project. That requires a recognition of our history by both the white and the Black communities.”

Schneider said June 18 was the first big event. They’re going to be doing stages of a process for getting acceptance as an official EJI partner. To do that, the coalition needs to show their plans for community engagement. Schneider said that, after the latest event, conversations, historical markers and future student essays are meant to bring awareness in order to help the community move forward.

“We’re most interested in having events that join all segments of the community together in ceremonies that recognize that, by confronting our past, we can begin to heal wounds that are old and still resonant within people,” he said.

Schneider explained the soil collection process for the ceremony for Nelson. They collected soil at the original lynching site and then brought it to the June 18 event to be placed into six large jars. One of the jars will go to the Equal Justice Initiative grounds to be on display in the National Museum of Peace and Justice in Alabama. The other five will be displayed around the county and one will likely go to the Historical Society.

Spark for the local initiative

Gon, co-vice chairman of the coalition project, was appointed to the Palm Beach County Remembrance Project committee as a representative of the Jewish community. It was her visit in 2019 to the Equal Justice Initiative National Memorial for Peace and Justice that spawned the effort for the Palm Beach County initiative.

She said that, at the museum in Alabama, there’s a duplicate of each one of these statue-like memorials lying on the ground to be claimed by those counties. The idea is that each county will create their own plan to memorialize victims.



Josephine Gon of the Jewish Federation of Palm Beach County was the initiator for the idea to work with the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

“I saw that there were two victims in Palm Beach County, including Henry Simmons and Samuel Nelson,” Gon said. After I saw that, I felt that Palm Beach should claim theirs. So when I came back, I approached the county commissioner and shared my experience and my wishes that we do that here.”

Since the county has been approved as an entity to get the memorial statue, as well as a partner of EJI, the next steps beyond the June event is to do community outreach and engagement, so that there are conversations about the history of lynchings.



Members of the PBC Remembrance Project were responsible for the commemoration event. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

“Another aspect of this effort is an essay contest for high school students,” Gon said. “We will be launching it in September, as part of the ongoing education process. We will be doing it independent of the school system, but offering it to students to participate.”

Charlene Farrington

Charlene Farrington is the executive director at the Spady Cultural Heritage Museum in Delray Beach. She was one of the main speakers at the lynching memorial event in June. Her work at the museum is to highlight the positive contributions that local African Americans have made throughout history in Palm Beach County.

After the commemoration event, Farrington said that it was both moving and hopeful for her.



Charlene Farrington is the director of the Spady Cultural Museum. She spoke at the June event commemorating the lynching of Sam Nelson in Delray Beach. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

“The commemoration event of Sam Nelson’s lynching was a very emotional occurrence for me,” she said. “I was very thankful that the community came out. Topics like this are very tough to talk about, and not everybody can face it. So, in order for it to be effective, we need a good cross section of our community, and they came. I was so thrilled.”

Dorritt Miller

Dorritt Miller is the deputy city administrator for West Palm Beach. She is part of the coalition that is facilitating the discussions of the history of social justice to the area.

“My going through this project, and working with EJI, reinforces exactly how and why we’re trying to seek racial justice,” she said. “Learning about the history and hearing the various speakers at the Delray event at Pompey Park talk about what happened in 1926, it’s clear that we still have issues even today.”

She said that moving forward and healing is the priority for the coalition’s work.

“The balanced mood of the event was intentional, because the commemoration was about a terrible memory, but then we talked about hope for the future,” Miller said. “Certainly, based on who attended the event on June 18, it shows that the community can come together over something like this.”



Dorritt Miller, right, is the deputy city administrator for West Palm Beach. She is part of the coalition that is facilitating the discussions of the history of social justice to the area. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

Miller said that the diversity of support for the coalition's efforts was clear at the commemoration as well.

"I do think we have come a long way, just by looking at the diversity and the people who attended," she said. "The people were from all walks of life. Even the coalition that put this event together is diverse. When this happened originally in 1926, you would never have Blacks, whites and Jews all together for such an event."

While the work of the coalition has just begun with the event surrounding Nelson, it will be an ongoing project.

"The whole project is a journey," Miller said. "But the event showed that it was a momentous occasion for everybody."