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REMEMBERING THE RACE RIOTS, BRICK BY BRICK

Group aims to honor victims of 1919 racial violence with glass bricks installed at sites where they died

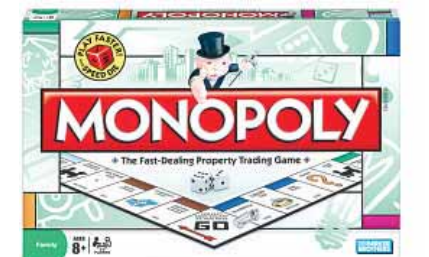
MICHAEL LORIA REPORTS, PAGES 4-5

Markisha Johnson designs glass markers last month at Firebird Community Arts studio to commemorate the victims of the 1919 Chicago Race Riots. PAT NABONG/SUN-TIMES

UPCOMING DESANTIS VISIT TO SUBURBS BECOMES FACTOR IN MAYORAL RACE



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Documentary shows board game's so-called creator borrowed ideas from others, including a Chicago woman

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Bally's begins luring new dealers to the table for Chicago casino

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★ TOP NEWS

ETCHED IN CHICAGO'S COLLECTIVE MEMORY

1919 race riots memorial project will honor victims with glass bricks at sites where they died all across the city

BY MICHAEL LORIA, STAFF REPORTER
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Thousands of people pass by Adams Street and Wabash Avenue every day, climbing the stairs to the L, or heading to the Art Institute or other spots in the Loop.

Few may know that corner is a murder scene, part of the 1919 riots during which, for an entire week, gangs of white Chicagoans terrorized their Black neighbors, who also fought back.

In all, 38 people died, and at least 537 were injured. Of those killed, 23 were Black.

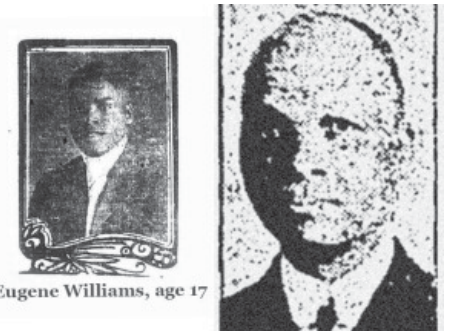
Now, a plan is in the works to install memorials at that site and other scenes of the riots.

"It's about using art to reach the public in a way I never could," said Peter Cole, a history professor at Western Illinois University in Macomb. Cole has taught the history of the riot to his students since joining the university in 2000.

Cole came up with the memorials idea on a 2018 trip to Germany, where he came across similar memorials documenting the Holocaust. So in 2019, he joined longtime anti-violence worker Franklin Cosey-Gay to form the Chicago Race Riot of 1919 Commemoration Project, a group dedicated to sharing the history through public art and organized under Bronzeville-based nonprofit Organic Oneness.

After spending a few years raising money and developing the design, the group recently began making the pieces — glass bricks, each bearing a victim's name. The bricks will be installed on the streets approximately where people were killed, one memorial for each person.

The group has made a few bricks already and plans to have around seven installed by the start of summer, in time for an annual bike



Eugene Williams, age 17

Eugene Williams drowned in Lake Michigan on July 27, 1919, after being hit in the head with a stone thrown by a white man. Paul Hardwick, as shown in the Chicago Defender, was shot to death in the Loop two days later.

CHICAGO RACE RIOT OF 1919 COMMEMORATION PROJECT

tour of key sites from those riots. The bricks will be placed in the pavement or sidewalks, along with information about each victim.

Inspiration from abroad

The bricks were inspired by Stolpersteine, a series of Holocaust memorials a German artist began making and installing on city streets throughout Europe in the early 1990s.

The Stolpersteine are concrete bricks installed in the street outside the residences of Holocaust victims. Each bears a brass plaque with the name and life dates of the person who lived there.

Cole was moved; the bricks made him think about the story of the Chicago riots.

In 22 years at Western Illinois, Cole estimates he's taught about the riots to 2,500 students.

But, he noted, "more people than I've ever taught walk by those places every day," and



Parts of the glass markers for the 1919 Chicago Race Riot commemoration project are seen last month on a table at Firebird Community Arts studio in the Garfield Park neighborhood. PAT NABONG/SUN-TIMES

donors. That includes \$52,000 from Niantic, the company behind Pokemon Go, to pay the artists creating the memorials.

Project FIRE

When it came time to find an artist, Cosey-Gay called Project Fire, the flagship program of Firebird Community Arts, a glassblowing studio on the West Side of Chicago. The program is for youth impacted by violence.

“The goal was to get the young people in Project FIRE involved in this process, to create these markers and have this opportunity to talk about history and how we experience history in the present day,” said Pearl Dick, the program’s artistic director.

The studio eventually decided on bricks made of six glass sheets, each with a different design, fused together, measuring 8 inches long, 4 inches wide and 2 inches thick.

More than making the memorial, however, commissioning the Project FIRE participants for the project was about getting them to engage with the history as they learned about it through newspaper stories from the time.

Markisha Johnson, 22, a Project FIRE participant since 2018, said her high school classes touched on the riots but never got to the essence of what started it.

So in working on the memorial, her biggest takeaway has been what sparked it — and also learning that a white police officer prevented a Black officer from arresting the man who killed Williams.

“It makes me think of sadly many situations,” said Johnson, citing, among other cases, the killing of Laquan McDonald by a Chicago police officer in 2014.

She’s working on a piece for the project based on historical photographs of houses that were destroyed by gangs in the riot. A few of her fellow participants knew about the riot beforehand, but “not one person really knew the intensity of it,” she said.

When visitors come across the memorial pieces on the streets of Chicago, she hopes they learn a little about what happened — but also remember the issues of accountability facing society today aren’t new.

“Don’t be shocked by it happening in your time because it’s always been here. What kind of solution can we come up with to change what’s happening?” Johnson said. “You can’t find a solution for something that you’re not aware about.”

Michael Loria is a staff reporter at the Chicago Sun-Times via Report for America, a not-for-profit journalism program that aims to bolster the paper’s coverage of communities on the South Side and West Side.

bricks could be discovered by anyone.

“That’s the genius of art in the public space,” Cole said. “They can reach those who never had the time or the interest to care.”

The events of 1919

The glass brick being installed in the ground near Adams and Wabash will bear the name of Paul Hardwick, a Black man who was about 50 years old when he was shot to death on July 29, 1919 in the Loop. But he wasn’t the first to die in the riots.

The violence began on July 27, when Eugene Williams, a Black 17-year-old, drowned in Lake Michigan after a white man hit him in the head with a stone after Williams crossed into what was considered at that time the whites-only side of the beach. The failure to arrest his killer sparked the riot.

The history isn’t always taught in schools. Cole, a native of the South Florida, first learned about what happened while he was getting a graduate degree at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.

Cosey-Gay, a native of the South Side, learned about it from his father, Benjamin.

“He’s not a historian, but he talked to me

about the city when I would ride the bus with him,” Cosey-Gay said. When they would pass the 29th Street beach, where Williams was killed, his father talked about the riot.

It stuck with him when he became an anti-violence worker as an adult. “We talk a lot about violence at the surface, but we don’t talk about the root causes. I thought it was an origin story for Chicago that was impor-



Peter Cole (left) and Franklin Cosey-Gay, co-directors of the Chicago Race Riot of 1919 Commemoration Project, stand at Adams Street and Wabash Avenue, near the site of Paul Hardwick’s murder. PAT NABONG/SUN-TIMES

tant,” Cosey-Gay said.

Cosey-Gay became director of the University of Chicago Medicine’s Violence Recovery Program in 2018. He began working on the project a year later after he met Cole at a community meeting on the South Side.

Their project has since received funding from the city’s Department of Cultural Affairs and Chicago Monuments Project and other



Cole was inspired by Stolpersteine, a series of Holocaust memorials a German artist began making and installing on city streets throughout Europe in the early 1990s. PETER COLE/PROVIDED