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

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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 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
learned about it from his father, Benjamin. 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

versity in Washington, D.C. getting a graduate degree at Georgetown University. "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 important," 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 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.