

HOST: National Park Service Guide Eric Pominville

LISTENING CHALLENGE: Accepting we all “have feet of clay.”

PLACE: The National Mall, Washington, DC



# HOW TO HOLD A NATIONAL CONVERSATION

## WALKING THE NATIONAL MALL, WASHINGTON, DC

The idea to launch *The Bronzed Project* began for me while judging high school and college essays on social justice issues for the Harriet Beecher Stowe House’s annual national writing contest in 2017. The two winners, one for each category, were both impacted by the events that unfolded in Charlottesville, Virginia that same year. When the city council announced it planned to remove the statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee from a public park, many far-right whites converged on the town, which sparked violent protests, including the death of one woman and injury to others.

Zyahna Bryant, a Black woman who won the high school prize, had penned a letter to the council in 2016 to complain that the Robert E. Lee statue made her “feel uncomfortable and it is very offensive.” She insisted it was “time to reclaim the history of everyone in Charlottesville. Quite frankly, I am disgusted with the selective display of history in this city. There is more to Charlottesville than just the memories of Confederate soldiers.”

Her letter led to the city council’s vote which led to the protests, which, well, shows just how powerful the written word can be when it strikes heat at the right time.

As a graduate student in the 1980s at the University of Virginia, I walked the same street where Heather Heyer, the woman rammed by a car driven by a white supremacist, died. The controversial Lee statue stood in Lee park near my apartment. The university community always spoke of President Thomas Jefferson, the school’s founder and designer of the iconic

grounds, with reverence. I accepted it all, embraced it, as key pieces in a historical narrative, the Lee statue itself just a bronze point on a historical continuum, which I neither agreed nor disagreed with. It stood as a reminder to me of a war that killed more people than all of our other wars combined.

Reading Zyahna’s essay forced me to reflect more on my own interactions with Black people during my time in that southern university town. I used to play hoops at the city basketball courts, often the only white person, always the only woman. The Black men from town usually included me, often to spite the few white men that did play who wound up assigned to guard me. I had played for more than a decade, including in college, had Division I sprinter speed, and knew enough not to drive the middle. But, still, some of the white man would refuse to guard me and walked off the court. One Black guy, a huge center, made sure I stayed, so I did, and frequented those games for years.



“

[It is] time to reclaim the history of everyone in Charlottesville. Quite frankly, I am disgusted with the selective display of history in this city. There is more to Charlottesville than just the memories of Confederate soldiers.

”

Letter from high school student Zyahna Bryant to the Charlottesville City Council

Left: The contested Robert E. Lee statue in Market Street Park, Charlottesville, VA.

But once he swung by my apartment to say hello when I wasn't there and the other people in the complex called the police on him. I don't recall what we said to each other about it, but I know I did nothing and I now fully acknowledge my blind spot when it came to the Charlottesville those Black men knew. I know they never visited the famed gardens that line the back side of the lawn, the serpentine walls snaking in gracious curves, each garden a little different than the next. Anyone can sit there and read and study or just visit but they never came. Ever.

The basketball courts were just blocks away.

The Lee statue was part of the landscape for me, just like Monticello, Jefferson's verdant estate, just down the road nestled on one of the ridges of the aptly named Blue Ridge Mountains. I visited there often, lured by the quirky pulley system that opened the front doors and the mounted heads of animals on the wall that explorers Lewis and Clark brought back from their expedition and gifted to our third President.

I make no apologies, even now, for being totally fascinated with Jefferson's history and persona. Moving through the property was like being inside a brilliant mind, every piece carefully thought out, each innovation alight. In the 1980s no one spoke of Sally Hemmings, the slave and half-sister to Jefferson's wife, with whom Jefferson conceived several children. That complex and dark backstory came into public view decades later, and recently became part of the permanent museum exhibit on the estate.



“Thomas Jefferson was a rapist and racist and any other take on the story is pure lies. As a slave, Sally Hemings could not give consent.” Rev. Dr. Shelley Best, a Black woman who is CEO of the Conference of Churches in Connecticut, says this to me as I sit in her office, which is just a few blocks away from the Harriet Beecher Stowe House. I've come here after reading Zyahna's essay and hearing Dr. Best speak at a Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. breakfast at my university where she shocked me with her willingness to concede that, while she admired his groundbreaking civil rights work, “what does not get covered or talked about is his sexism and misogyny. We love him, but he violated so many women.”

Her close-cropped hair accentuates her dramatic geometric-shaped glasses. Blue bracelets move on her wrists as she sways her hands. Coltrane plays in the background.

She continues to share her views on how we can eulogize but also truly recognize the attributes and failings of people we honor in public spaces.

“So part of my work I’m doing now that fascinates me as a faith leader is on the healing of Black women. We need to recognize that the approach in the Black church does not always recognize the needs of women even though they are the majority of the church.”

She recalls a pilgrimage she made to see the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in Washington, DC.

“It’s big and stunning. It’s beautiful. We do remember the good that Martin Luther King did. We are all flawed. We all have feet of clay.”

*We all have feet of clay.*

This line came back to me again and again as I worked on my project and tried to reconcile the various positive and negative story threads of my own ancestors’ narratives. We can hold opposing feelings in our minds and hearts, we can adjust, meet in the middle, see value where it exists and challenge flaws by simply speaking the facts rather than hiding them.

I still admire Jefferson, I think to myself, while listening to Best. His writings and university impacted me so deeply and in such constructive ways. But I must also allow myself to “adjust” the dial of my own self-created narratives, to let the sound of others carry to me uninterrupted. Dr. Best deserves airtime.

On my way out, I stop by a photography exhibit in the main entryway composed of images Dr. Best inherited from her paternal grandmother. Her family story.

Instead of bronze, she has only black and white, light and shadow, and, for most of them, no names. Typed captions provide titles and dates.

- *Unknown Dignified Gentleman, 1890, in delicate glasses, long dress coat, and sporting a full mustache.*
- *Unknown Union Soldier (right), 1865, with small sloping shoulders, and an immaculate uniform, including white gloves.*



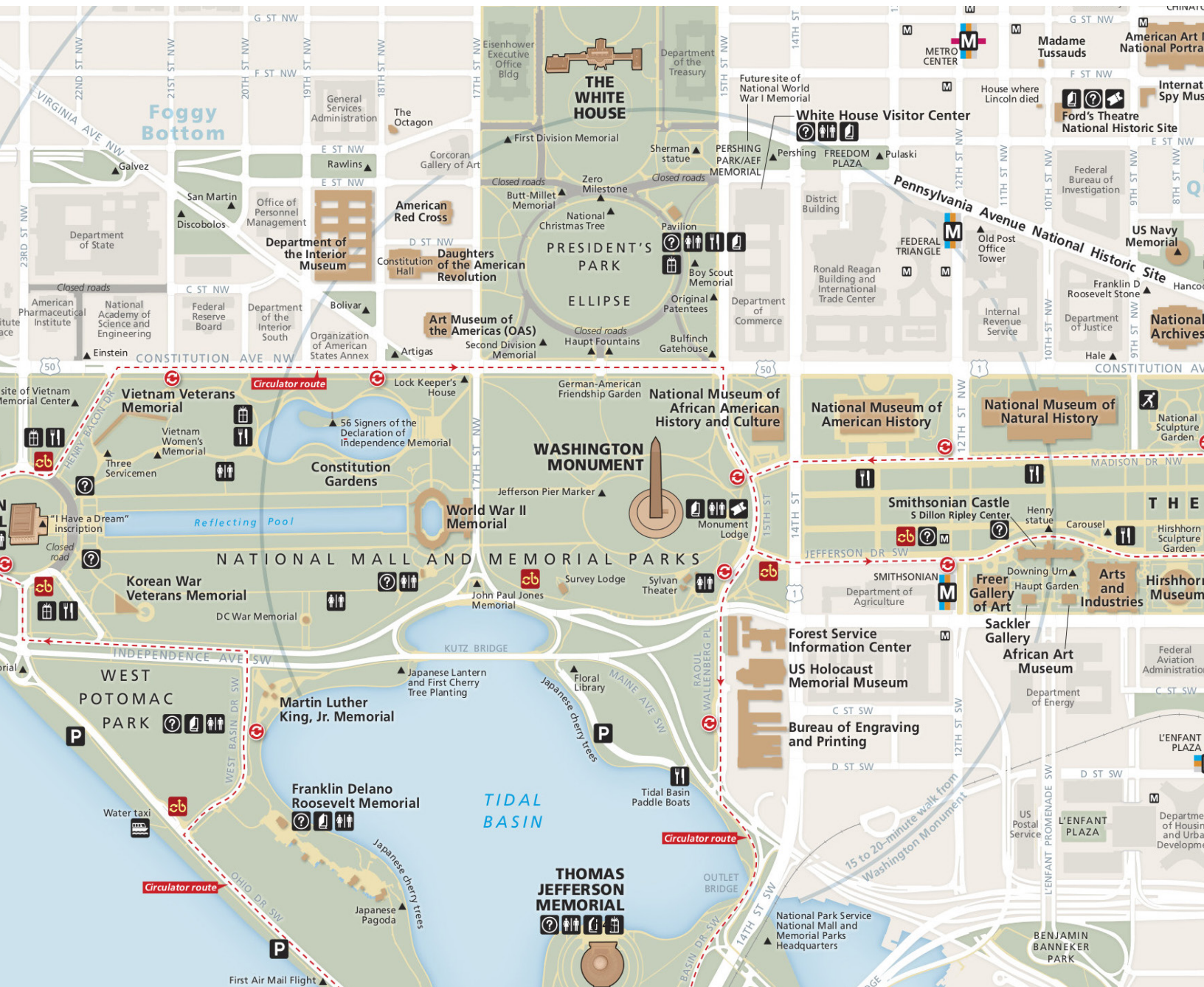
She points to the largest image, which includes two children dressed in white, the young boy, around age 4, has a sassy belt on. Her grandfather. We both reflect on how uncommon it was for anyone to pay for a professional photograph in 1901, or in any of the decades prior. To have so many carefully crafted shots of Black relatives who go all the way back to living as slaves in the south might be the closest thing to a bronze statue they had available.



# THE BRONZED PROJECT

The fact she visited the MLK Memorial on the National Mall, considered it a vital part of her evolution and self-awareness as a Black woman, directed me on my next step in my project. I knew I needed to track down a veteran National Park Service guide on the Mall, someone who has seen generations of Americans processing the ultimate public space for bronzed, marble, and stone memorials.

After months of trying, I finally convinced the National Park Service to allow me to take a walk with a veteran guide, Eric Pomerville, who has served there for decades.



**I** spy his silhouette 20 feet away, his sable beard forming a V against his chest, his National Park Service green slacks a splash of color on an overcast May day in Washington, DC. Eric Pominville, a career guide with decades in the field at places like the Civil War battlefields of Antietam and Gettysburg, and, now, the National Mall, has agreed to talk to me about hearing and sharing narratives with the public as he works by statues and memorials.

Why interview him, he asks, as he walks towards me, and not some high-level administrator in the NPS?

Because I want a veteran storyteller and story-catcher on the ground in “America’s Front Yard,” a catchy phrase NPS staffers use when referring to the green lawn running from the Lincoln Memorial past the Washington Monument to the foot of the US Capitol.

Maybe here, among some of the memorials that don’t commemorate individuals but broad events, such as World War II, I can learn something about the benefits of creating spaces where people can project narrative as they move past bronze and marble rather than absorb a specific person’s story.

Just before meeting Eric, I ran my own family history reel as I roamed the circle of marble pillars, one for each state and the US territories, that form the World War II Memorial.

“We didn’t know if we were going to win,” my father told me when I was young. “Things were not looking good.”

He never gave any details about the four years he served in the Army in Calcutta, India from 1941-1945, other than this dark portrait of fear and anxiety, but he did give me a tin cigar box lined with cedar filled with rupees and other exotic coins. As a 10-year-old girl, I remember cherishing the mystery of that box, the closest I came to traveling beyond New England.

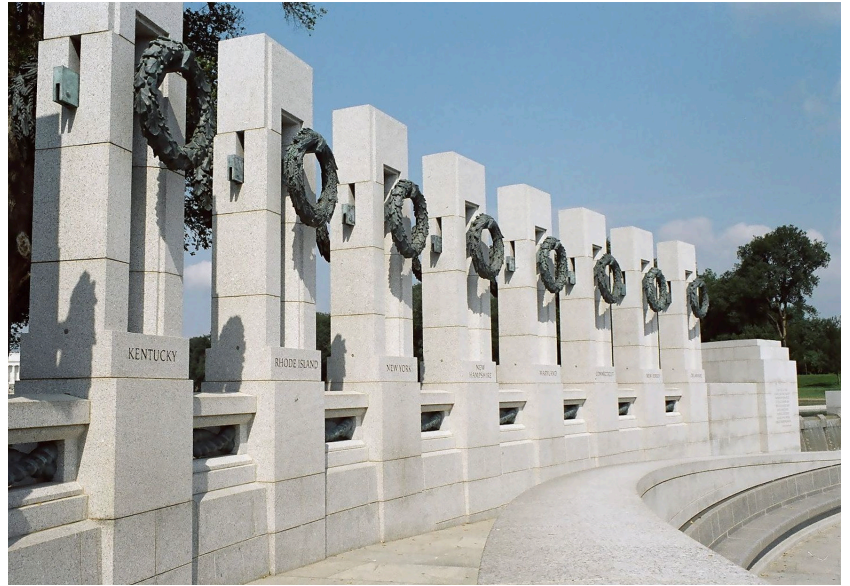
*“We didn’t know if we were going to win.”*

The memorial itself does not project any of the fear and doubt my family narrative brings into the picture. Designed in a neoclassical style with military arches, symbolic pools of water, and a wall of gold stars, one for each “100 American service personnel who died,” it says loud and clear: We Won.

For me, here, my father now dead more than 40 years, it’s all about that box, about my father’s fear as a soldier and the sense that for many years no one knew who would win the wars against the Japanese and the Germans. And, yes, that’s *wars*, plural, something the memorial makes clear with two distinct arches, one marked PACIFIC for the conflict with the Japanese and another ATLANTIC for the conflict with the Germans.



## THE BRONZED PROJECT



Clockwise from top: the author at the WWII Memorial; pillars for individual US states, an aerial view of the memorial grounds; a panorama.

Source: author photo, Wikimedia Commons





Many visitors, Eric later tells me, don't even grasp that the US fought two wars on two fronts.

They forget or never learned.



My mother, Connie Sullivan Collins (left), also served. She joined the Navy Reserves, or more specifically, the WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service), and intentionally failed the typing test so they'd give her a more interesting job. The ploy worked and they trained her as a cartographer for pilots in the Pacific, and gave her an office just outside of Washington, DC in Suitland, Maryland.

Unlike my father, she was elated to leave a small town in Massachusetts for the city. One Christmas I ordered her a copy of a black and white photo of WAVES marching on the Mall in front of the Washington Monument, just a few hundred yards from the WWII Memorial built in 2004.

Both sides of the immense circle have bas relief bronze panels that depict scenes of soldiers leaving home, engaging in battle with the Germans or Japanese, of military funeral processions and an ecstatic soldier kissing a woman in the streets the day the World War ended. I can choose to fit my own parents into any of the panels, since none honor an individual, just the general narrative of those who served.

"Well, I tell the public that the monuments tend to reveal far more about the people that build the memorial than the generation they are pretending to honor," Eric says.

In 1946, no one wanted to think about the war, he says, as we start our conversation on the PACIFIC side of the memorial. Everyone wanted to move forward.

He then proceeds to blow apart my assumption that a representational memorial would somehow be less controversial.

"We would not have the World War II Memorial if not for the unique psychological needs to build the Vietnam Veterans Memorial then the Korean Memorial. Suddenly, people were asking why isn't there a World War II Memorial. There was tremendous pressure on the federal government, belatedly, in the mid-1990s, with many of the [WWII] vets dying, to do something. Anything was better than nothing."

And the controversy began.

Many felt the National Mall had reached capacity and the endless requests for more memorials and statues risked undermining the elegant





power of the existing design. When the first blueprints started coming out for the World War II Memorial, which showed it would interrupt the iconic clean line of sight from the Lincoln Memorial to the Washington Monument, critics came out in force.

In a 2005 article for *artUS Magazine*, Mark Durant exclaimed, “The World War II Memorial reflects a cultural wishful thinking, as if we could have a history without the collective shame, embarrassment, guilt, rage and/or sense of betrayal associated with the Vietnam War.”

The militarist, neoclassical design itself felt like a throwback to another time, another national mindset.

*Time Magazine* called it a memorial to blah.

I laugh when Eric shares this quip with me.

I tell him about an article I read that said in 2003 Congress officially declared the National Mall a “substantially completed work of civic art,” the year before they completed the World War II Memorial. Yet since then America’s Backyard has seen the addition of the National Museum of the American Indian (2004), Martin Luther King Jr Memorial (2011), and the National Museum of African American History and Culture (2016).

Various groups continue to press to put up yet more statues and monuments, Eric tells me. He points towards the Capitol and explains that work has begun on some sort of presidential memorial.

“The National Coalition to Save the Mall is still a viable organization. When the surveyors were laying stakes for the World War II Memorial, obstructionists would come in the middle of the night and pull them out!”

The flow of our conversation picks up at this point; Eric adjusts his metal rimmed glasses. He’s clearly thought a lot—perhaps more than any other American on the Mall today—about the history and purpose of this public space for national conversation. The number of memorials on the Mall has nearly doubled in just 20 years, but that hasn’t translated into more productive discourse in this sacred national space.

A history and literature major in college, Eric was suffering through a lousy desk job at a law firm when a friend called to see if he wanted to earn money while talking about history as a guide at the Civil War Antietam battlefield in Sharpsburg, Maryland. He grabbed the summer slot and stayed on to work what the NPS workers call the “cannonball circuit,” which includes places like Antietam and Gettysburg.

I listen, riveted, as he talks about how seldom visitors come up to him at the Jefferson Memorial to ask if he thinks Jefferson is a hypocrite or how shocked he is every time when “another Black youth gets shot and there is not a rally at the MLK Memorial.”

We joked about the controversial placement of the World War II Memorial, but it’s the lack of civic engagement in this vital public space on issues like race, class, gender, politics and other cultural issues that disturbs him most. What’s the point of adding an endless parade of museums, memorials and statues if they stand static in the yard?

“Never in our lifetime have we seen the Constitution under such duress so why aren’t we taking over these public spaces? I wish I had the answer. People often come here for the patriotic pat on the back. They are on vacation and don’t want to have to think.”

It’s not just the lack of engagement, but also a lack of knowledge about historical context. Eric claims about 99 percent of visitors to the World War II Memorial completely miss that the north side panels tell the

story of the war with Germany and the south side panels tell the story of the war with Japan.

“There was a woman on a tour who thought we had fought with the Germans in World War II.”

I simply don't know what to say when Eric tells me this. Without better historical context, it doesn't matter if a person is looking at a statue of an individual or a memorial to a general event. They will get nothing out of the narrative and fail to be illuminated about whatever is being memorialized if they don't know any backstory.

Eric chastises some young teenage boys for running along a marble wall as we move down a ramp to the wall of gold stars and the Rainbow Pool. The NPS had to put up large signs making it clear visitors could not play or bath in the pool.

“Imagine if you said let's have a wedding at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Just wait 50 years and they'll be issuing permits for weddings at the wall.”

He's being slightly facetious. Slightly.

“We need to put up huge signs to tell people to behave respectfully.”

They simply don't know what they are looking at. They don't know about the more than 620,000 Americans and estimated 70 to 85 million people worldwide who died in WWII. They don't know how important quiet, respectful places, like the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington Cemetery, are for those that need a space to mourn, honor, and reflect.

The lack of historical and civic knowledge, the lack of basic etiquette training, contributes more to the rancor and violence of our current public discourse than any bronzed statue anywhere.

I expect Eric to be a bit glum as we exit the interview and the Memorial, but instead he tells me all that any of us need to hear.

“Well, the golden rule for any storyteller, know your audience, right? You have to develop a sixth sense for that. You have to go fishing. Personally, I just have to say ‘Thanks for being interested. Thanks for caring.’ What really kills is indifference. People who don't have questions and don't really care and take memorials at face value and never question if there is a subtext, that really shocks me.”





I circle the World War II Memorial one last time, my family narratives now pushed to the background, as I think about the larger national story and our desperate need for constructive discourse in public spaces. Eric told me that veteran NPS guides like himself “are an endangered species. They are in love with tech. They are going to have little robots.”

Nothing he said chills me more than this piece of news. Now more than ever we need experienced liaisons in the field guiding us on what we should know about the past and how it relates to the present and future. We need *human* story-sharers, story-collectors, and professional moderators, because on many levels we have forgotten how to use America’s Front Yard or even our own town squares and front porches to empower and expand our democracy.

The next day on my Washington, DC journey, I head to George Washington University in search of a famous bench and Professor Max van Balgooy, co-founder of Engaging Places, and the sort of professional who plans to do all he can to keep people like Eric Pominville in the field.

But first, the bench.



“The lack of historical and civic knowledge, the lack of basic etiquette training, contributes more to the rancor and violence of our current public discourse than any bronzed statue anywhere.”



There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves. There is no suitable memorial, or plaque, or wreath, or wall, or park, or skyscraper lobby. ...there's no small bench by the road... And because such a place doesn't exist...the book [her 1988 Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Beloved*] had to."

That's author Toni Morrison, who died in 2019, speaking in an interview in 1989 that led to the creation of her program, *Bench by the Road Project*, started in 2006 on the occasion of her 75th birthday. The goal: to create a public space—a black steel bench—in communities across the country with the sole purpose of encouraging Americans to discuss race and related heavy issues.

Even though I read *Beloved* decades ago in college, one scene holds in my mind like a searing movie clip that's part of the photo album of my life. A Black female slave tries to escape with her child, white men with dogs in hot pursuit. When they corner her, she chooses to kill her two-year-old daughter rather than have the child return to a life of slavery. When I began nosing around for various people and organizations working to improve the national dialogue, and came across the *Bench by the Road Project*, I shivered when I learned Toni Morrison was the power behind it.

I had to find myself one of those benches.

And, in a piece of wonderful serendipity, the Toni Morrison Society that oversees the *Bench by the Road Project* had placed one on the campus of George Washington University in the heart of the nation's Capital.



Susan McElhinney on the GWU bench placed by Morrison's Bench by the Road Project.

Source: Author photo

I was already on my way there to see Professor Max van Balgooy. Once again, the pieces of my road trip knit together in some magical pattern.

The plan: to meet Max on the bench and discuss race, class, politics and how to build and sustain Engaging Places.

But first my friend, the sculptor and photographer Susan McElhinney, and I had to find the bench. Max himself had never heard of it, despite his own expertise in how to use public spaces for dialogue and civic engagement. It felt especially right to be there with Susan, a 70-year-old white woman from southern Virginia, who has spent decades working through her own feelings and thoughts on race in America in her creative work, with special focus on sculptures of Black figures from Rosa Parks to Trayvon Martin.

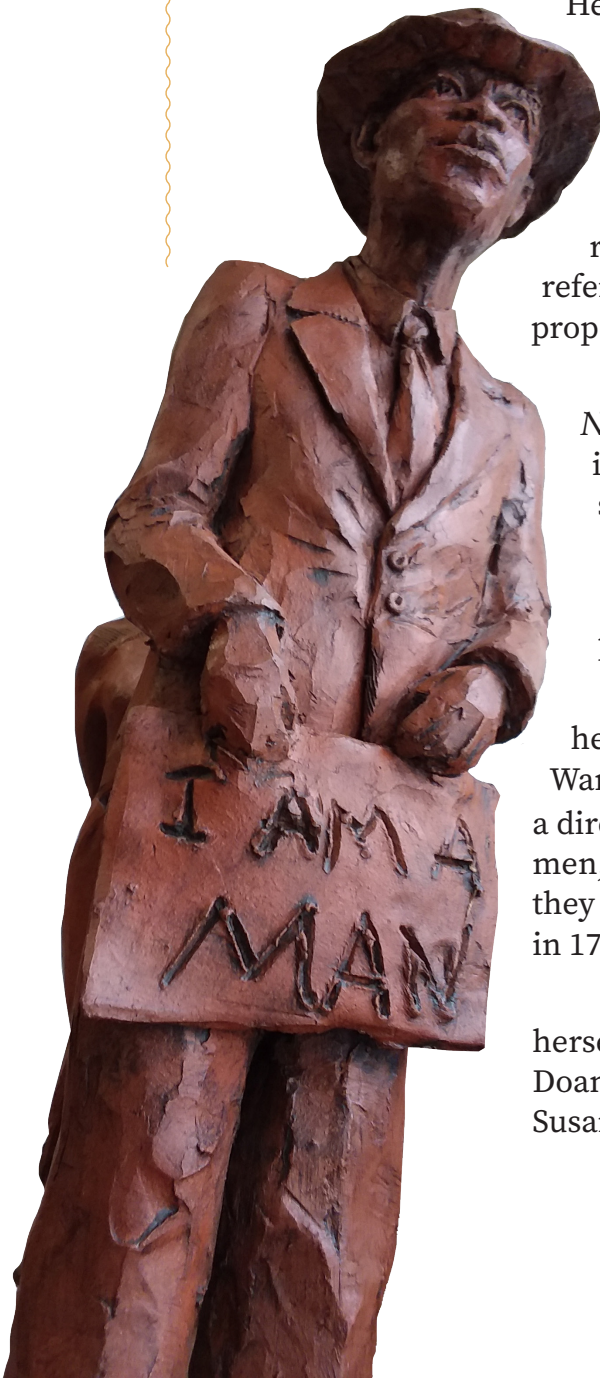
Her studio in Arlington, Virginia, is stacked with figures, some recognizable like Congressman John Lewis, others representative, such as a working Black man leaning on a shovel. All are part of her effort to round out her own family narrative, all white, going back to the Mayflower, with a few relatives that used the N-word in the 1950s when referring to Black people that worked around the family property in rural Virginia.

The first full-time female staff photographer for *Newsweek*, Susan faced her own forms of prejudice in her career, but she's more interested in the storyline of Black people right now. She carries what she calls "the water of guilt."

"If I did not face it [her family's racist habits and past] then I would be a Trump," she confides.

But she remains justifiably proud of many of her ancestors, including the American Revolutionary War hero and thorn-in-the-British side, Israel Putnam, a direct descendent, who famously (allegedly) said to his men, "Don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes," as they stood up to the Redcoats at the Battle of Bunker Hill in 1775.

Susan's niece has Putnam's revolver and Susan herself hangs a portrait of a Colonial female relative, Doanda, in her living; the painting includes a brooch that Susan still owns.



Dr. Best had her black and white photographs, Susan her portraits.

All of us have family narratives with characters with Feet of Clay and characters whom we admire—often it might even be the same person.

“I think we’re close,” Susan says as we roam around the urban campus of George Washington University looking for the bench. She looks at a Google Map on her phone.

Yes, I think, this entire project makes me feel as though I am closing in on something I didn’t have before I started, something I can only describe as being *tuned in* like a radio receiver. I never thought I needed a *Bench by the Road*, conversations on the Mall, road trips to see my own bronzed relatives to snap me out of my passive response to the increasingly corrosive national conversation. We all have to care more, listen better, stop by the road and sit down because the politicians won’t—or can’t—do it for us.

We spy the black metal bench in front of Lisner Auditorium, the university’s performance hall on 21st Street NW. Everyone around us is either on the move from one place to the next or listening to a school guide talk about a bronze hippo (don’t ask) a few feet away.

Over here, I want to shout, look at Toni Morrison’s bench. Do you understand how desperately we all need such spaces?

I sit. Susan takes a photograph.

We both linger, knowing I must meet Max in his office in a few minutes. We realize that his building is right across the street, but none of us knew that when I agreed to the new location for his interview. As I learned on the National Mall talking with Eric Pominville, simply having such spaces isn’t the same as having the skill sets to use them well.

When I finally meetup with Max, I ask him to come to the window and point out the black bench across the street. He shakes his head in disbelief and says he never knew about it but now will bring his classes there.

Because he’s all about using historic sites to “better respond to communities,” improve knowledge, and celebrate ways places can engage people and facilitate dialogue.

“More adults visit historic sites than go to colleges and universities. There are more museums in the U.S. than Starbucks and McDonalds combined. There are more people who attend museums than attend all professional sports.”

This is what he does, draws people in and reinterprets historic sites so visitors will feel the power and authenticity of a place, memorial, or



The nice thing about museums, unlike universities or schools, is its free choice learning. People can go when and where they want to and can take in as much or little as they like.



statue. And it's working. I'm startled by these facts and see that they form the road map I need to bring my road trip experience to as many people as possible.

Let's all start with historic spaces, develop a better sense of the past and context, and move outward.

National polls show that museums remain some of the most trusted institutions in America, way above politicians, academics and government institutions. Max confirms this.

"The nice thing about museums, unlike universities or schools, is its free choice learning. People can go when and where they want to and can take in as much or little as they like."

He moves like an engineer, with a contained manner, his cotton checkered shirt neatly pressed, a fitting look for a professional who seeks to reengineer how to maximize the potential of places like President Lincoln's Cottage in Washington, DC or President James Madison's home, Montpelier, in Virginia.

We chat about my visit to the World War II Memorial, and share our different family histories around that war. His parents from Indonesia and the Netherlands, mine from small New England towns.

"For most people, history is their family history."

But if we only want to validate our own family history then that can lead to the myopic story selecting that's plaguing our national discourse. Someone like my friend Susan, now waiting outside for me, deliberately broke from her white American family heritage story and veered off into Black narrative lines in her creative work that she has little natural connection to.

As Eric said, "What really kills is indifference. People who don't have questions or don't really care and take memorials at face value and never question if there is a subtext."

Max admits that during his early years as a museum professional, he embraced the idea that museums had all sorts of cool stuff that the experts and curators would tell you about and visitors stood there as passive receptors.

"But my feelings have evolved. Museums and historic sites can be places where we come together. You are not empty vessels that I will fill but together we can learn.... Museums on the cutting edge recognize that visitors have stories to tell and perspectives about the past. Instead of being the voices of the curator or the expert we're now moving toward a place where we're facilitators and conveners."

*Conveners.*

From the Latin *convenire* to “unite, be suitable, agree, assemble” from *com* (together) and *venire* (to come).

To come together, usually for some public purpose.

Museums and historic sites are good places to start.

Finally, after a year on the road visiting bronzed family relatives, Max just told me how to build a plan forward to make best use of my project. Skipping down the winding backsteps of his office building, I feel empowered by what I’ve learned from Eric and Max, not discouraged.

*A good place to start.*

On my way to meet my friend Susan for lunch, I pause again at the bench. I had hoped to sit there with my 96-year-old mother, Connie Sullivan Collins, but she wasn’t strong enough to make the trip. I couldn’t imagine a better spot to talk with her about her own evolving sense of values as a white girl raised by a working-class Catholic family in the Great Depression in a small New England town. Coming to Washington, DC during World War II as a WAVE drastically altered her life trajectory and, with it, her entire cultural and political mindset.



Somehow, she moved from being a woman told by her father that his daughters could not work in the family paper mill to joining the military in 1944 when locals considered that taboo for young ladies and mocked her.

Somehow, she moved from embracing the conservative values of the Republican party, even serving as President of Republican Women in Connecticut in the 1960s when my father made two bids for Congress, to voting for our first Black President, Barack Obama.

Somehow, she moved from her strict Catholic upbringing with clear-cut views about premarital sex, same-sex marriage, the celibacy requirements for priests, and the church's stance on GBLTQ issues to embracing her transgender grandson, my only child, Donald Collins. She was the first to bring him to the men's department to buy clothes when he came out at age 17.

Did you think in the sixties that we'd have a Black president? I ask her on the tape.

A few seconds of silence follow, then her strong New England accented "no" sounds.

"I thought it was great. I was very open. Obama was a family man, highly intelligent. Mother gave me the independence and confidence, all good traits, to be flexible in politics and with people in general."

Even though in this moment of listening I am outside on a sunny May day in Washington, I see my mother, all 100 pounds of her, a frail figure draped with a white cotton sweater as she sits on the end of her couch at home. Her green eyes still have spark, her gloriously thick white hair still flips with a bit of a wave in the back.

I was fortunate enough to know my grandmother, Elizabeth O'Neil Sullivan, the very woman whose family line produced the bronzed relatives I've been visiting. She lived 89 years, dying when I had just finished graduate school. Growing up I heard amazing tales of how she fed 13 people every day—her nine children and extended relatives with nowhere else to go during the Great Depression—on her husband George's salary. Sometimes she'd intentionally put out freshly baked cupcakes so the kids would come home from school, sneak the treat and then be less distraught when they found out there was nothing for dinner.

An accomplished musician who played the violin as a teen with the Boston Symphony and took classes at the Boston School of Fine Arts, where she was an accomplished illustrator and painter, she closed all of that down after marrying George Sullivan and producing one child after another for years on end. Later, when George broke free of working for others to start his own Sullivan Paper Company, even though no daughters were allowed

in the mill, it was Elizabeth who designed the company logo (still used today) and many of the initial paper designs. She'd window shop retail stores looking at dress patterns for ideas. Later, when my grandfather died, she took the reins of the company until my Uncle Richard Sullivan took over.

So, it's no surprise it was Elizabeth who battled with her husband George Sullivan to sign the release form so their daughter Connie could join the WAVES at age 20.

As the second oldest daughter, my mother helped out a lot with the other eight children. To let her go was a blistering loss to my grandmother.

"But Mother said this is such a wonderful opportunity. You can go to Washington. I wish I had this. I want you to go to Washington."

Elizabeth knew it meant that Connie could go to a city with room, board and salary. She knew it meant she could secure a free college education after the war on the GI Bill, which my mother did at Boston University. There, in Cambridge, she met my father, he, too, a poor Irish Catholic New Englander securing an education on the GI Bill, in his case Harvard Law School.

The war shook up the world but it shook up their personal worlds as well, mainly for the better, and that in turn set in motion a more mobile way of thinking and being in the culture.

"I was so impressed with Washington."

The tape plays on.

"I would sit in on the Senate, the Congress, the Supreme Court. Remember, I took you children to Washington [in the 1970s]. I wanted you to have respect for the government."

I remember. And I want to have respect for my government too, which is why my road trip continues, always looking for people, like my mother, Shelley, Susan, Eric, and Max, who might hold secrets to how we can evolve as individuals and a democracy and return to truly civil civic dialogue.

