

Listening for Good: Reflections on Our Experience in Montgomery



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As Black History month ends, we are reflecting on a profound experience we shared while in Montgomery, Alabama for a Fund for Shared Insight core funder meeting, and what it means for our work at Irvine. The Fund for Shared Insight is a funder collaborative that pools financial and other resources to support foundations and nonprofits striving to support and adopt feedback loops to have greater impact on those we seek to serve.

Originally the meeting was going to be held in Boston, but the core funders made the unanimous decision to shift the location to Montgomery so we could visit [The Legacy Museum](#) and [The National Memorial for Peace and Justice](#). Our decision was inspired by a powerful keynote presentation we heard at the Fund's [Listen for Good Gathering](#) earlier that year. Bryan Stevenson, the founder and Executive Director of the [Equal Justice Initiative](#) and the Museum's creator, curator and caretaker shared his belief that nonprofits and philanthropy need to "get proximate" to those we serve. In his words, "When we are close, we hear things we can't hear from a distance. We see things we can't see from a distance."

As funders and deep believers in the power of listening and feedback, we decided to "get proximate" to our country's history of racial and economic injustice to hear the voices that can inform our work. At Irvine, we see it as essential because of our goal of a California where all low-income workers – most of whom are people of color – have the power to advance economically.

Together, the Museum and the Memorial tell previously hidden stories of enslaved men, women and children, and connects this country's history of slavery, racial injustice, and economic inequality to our current system of mass incarceration. Here, we offer personal reflections about our experience from our own Black and White perspectives.

Kelley's experience:

*"If we have the courage and tenacity of our forebears,
who stood firmly like a rock against the lash of slavery,
we shall find a way to do for our day what they did for theirs."
—Mary McLeod Bethune**

I moved slowly through the museum, reading every story and embracing the painful images and sounds. I unashamedly let my tears flow, as my people deserve to have my tears. I wondered, why this experience for my people? From where did they draw their strength and courage? How did they "stand firmly like a rock against the lash of slavery"?

I listened to the negro spiritual that accompanies the image of a grandmother caged behind bars in a warehouse – the same lyrics I've sung in my Grandma's church; "walk with me, Lord, walk with me" but with such conviction that her voice will remain with me in my heart and in my mind.

Our visit to The Memorial for Peace and Justice was even more personal and painful. There are 800 iron markers strategically positioned at the Memorial, representing 4,000 lives lost to American terrorism in the form of lynching — each about five feet tall and engraved with names, dates, and the counties where lynching occurred.

On September 18, 1893, in Pine Apple, Alabama, Riley Gulley was lynched. There are no words to describe the impact and how exceedingly personal this trip became when I saw our surname on the jar of dirt that was collected from the base of the tree where he was hung. Pine Apple is located right next to Greenville, Alabama, where my father-in-law Leo Gulley was born and raised. EJI shared with us the story of his lynching and we subsequently traced our family history, only to discover that Riley was my husband's 3rd, Great Uncle. He was lynched when he was only 23 years old.



Kim's experience:

*"History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived,
but if faced with courage, need not be lived again."
—Maya Angelou*

As a White woman, I approached the day feeling a great responsibility to take in all I saw and heard. As we entered the museum, I felt the power of place, knowing we stood on the site of a former slave warehouse, located near the slave market where tens of thousands of Black men, women, and children were bought and sold.

As I slowly walked through the museum, the narrative of how slavery didn't end but merely evolved unfolded. My tears flowed as I learned more about how intentional, calculated, and visible the racial injustice and terrorism was over time.

I think of my family and can't imagine being torn from them (as 2 million were); fearing each day that a loved one could be lynched without cause; leaving everything behind to flee north as a refugee; or placing an ad as a newly freed slave describing separated family members (which rarely led to reunifications).

My stomach dropped when I saw photos of White crowds, including children, carrying hateful signs, watching publicly advertised lynchings, or seeing those images in newspapers and on postcards.

I wonder what my family would have done if I had grown up in the South? At the Memorial, I read the names of individuals lynched in two Mississippi counties where my husband's parents and grandparents grew up; I wish they were alive to answer my many questions.

We are both grateful for our experience, albeit difficult yet necessary. As supporters of Fund for Shared Insight, it reaffirms the importance of truly embracing and reflecting upon these lives to more fully understand and fight against the racial injustice that continues today. Their stories and voices force us to ask intentional questions about our individual and collective responsibility – and help us determine the best way to serve. It's an experience neither of us will forget – nor should we.