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OPINION

Keeping memories of the Rosewood massacre alive

By Ronnie Lovler
Special to The Sun



Some people have been struggling for years to let us know that Black Lives Matter, even before Black Lives Matter came to the fore of our collective consciousness. Lizzie Jenkins is one of those people.

Jenkins, a historian now in her 80s, is the founder of The Real Rosewood Foundation in Archer. It exists to preserve knowledge, awareness and cultural sensitivity about a massacre that wiped out the small African-American community almost a century ago.

Jenkins is committed to keeping the story of the 1923 Rosewood massacre alive, because it is part of her family history and because she thinks it directly impacts all of us.

She and I connected over the tipping-point Minneapolis police killing of George Floyd earlier this year and my recollections of my own experiences during the 1967 riots that occurred in my hometown of Newark, New Jersey.

“From my perspective [remembering] is important,” Jenkins said. “Basically, the movement is replaying and reflecting on roadwork that came before.

“It is educating people who really did not know the seriousness of hate and injustice. This is bringing forth what we have lived all of our lives,” she said.

Jenkins hadn’t been born yet when the Rosewood massacre occurred, leaving at least eight people dead, six blacks and two whites. It began over allegations of a black man’s sexual assault of a white woman.

The charges triggered a race riot and Rosewood, which had been home to more than 100 people, was destroyed. Ku Klux Klan members and unaffiliated whites ran rampant over the community. All that is there now is an official state marker.

Jenkins has long labored to keep the memory of Rosewood alive. Recently, an exhibit was held at the Matheson History Museum in Gainesville commemorating Rosewood. Jenkins is about to publish a book on the history of Rosewood.

Jenkins first learned about Rosewood from her mother, whose sister, Mahulda Gussie Brown Carrier, was one of the first black women educators in Florida.

“My aunt was the Rosewood school teacher and I remember her in my house and in my life when I was very young,” Jenkins said.

Jenkins’ aunt was there because she no longer had a home of her own. Her husband, Aaron Carrier, was one of the men attacked in the aftermath of Rosewood, saved from being killed by a compassionate white sheriff who whisked him to safety. Jenkins’ Aunt Mahulda was also attacked.

One night, Jenkins' mother began telling her children the story of Rosewood and of Sister, as she affectionately called Jenkins' aunt. As a child, Jenkins said at first, she didn't quite get it.

"I had no idea what she meant. The first thing that came to my mind was that this was going to be a story about roses in the woods," she said.

But it was hardly a flowery tale. It was a story of horror, where Jenkins' mother relayed the tale of how Sister was attacked in her home. "Their father and my Papa (Jenkins' grandfather and father) had to come from Bartow to rescue her.

"I finally went to sleep on her story," Jenkins said. "But for some reason the story attached itself to me and my heart. When I got up the next morning, it was fresh on my mind.

"And I said to her, 'Mom I want to hear more,'" Jenkins recalled. "That story became our story and we talked about it often and I carried it to school every day. I took it to college. I took it to work. But never talked about it (outside our home).

Rosewood's story stayed buried for decades but resurfaced in the 1980s when journalists began digging into the story. By that time, Jenkins was active, too. Eventually, the state of Florida granted \$2.1 million in reparations to Rosewood descendants, including money for scholarships.

But Jenkins couldn't let it stop there. She founded The Real Rosewood Foundation in 2003, and now is hard at work preparing for the centennial commemoration of the massacre. She hopes to build a museum that she plans to call the Rosewood Multicultural Education and Artistic Center.

"My passion is because of the stories my mother told me," she said "We are going to continue to teach and educate people in memory of my aunt," Jenkins said. "Ever since we are telling this story of peace and reconciliation. And we hope more positive things will happen. "

Ronnie Lovler is a journalist, writer and former correspondent for CNN in Latin America. She is an adjunct professor at both the University of Florida and Santa Fe College and is on the boards of several local organizations including the Matheson History Museum and the Civic Media Center.