

The death row lawyer has spent his life fighting racial discrimination in the US justice system. Over root bisque and sweet tea in Montgomery, Alabama, he talks to *Edward Luce* about confronting America's troubled history, overturning capital convictions – and his fears that 1960s-era civil rights gains are now being dismantled

My mind is in a flux. Before meeting Bryan Stevenson, America's best-known death row lawyer and, some argue, its most effective social activist, I have been cramming homework. I rose at dawn to devote the morning to Stevenson's Legacy Museum in downtown Montgomery. The exhibit's journey, which takes you from the Atlantic slave trade to Jim Crow segregation, ending with today's era of incarceration, will stick with me for a long time. To many among the droves that come from far farther afield than Alabama, it gives a crash course in an American history they barely knew. Few museums can top this for impact.

I meet Stevenson at Aya, a restaurant named after an African plant, with a menu you rarely find outside the Deep South. It is part of the Elevation Convening Center and Hotel, which is owned by the Equal Justice Initiative, Stevenson's non-profit group. As its name implies, the establishment sits atop a hill overlooking the city. The state's gleaming white Capitol looms prominently. Stevenson's museum is a few blocks from that. Martin Luther King Jr's Selma-to-Montgomery march, which catalysed the 1965 Voting Rights Act, went down this hill. After a drizzly morning, the sun has come out. King's destination is visible.

Opposite the hotel is Montgomery Square, Stevenson's newest exhibit, which has just opened. In the middle sits a partial sculpture of Rosa Parks, the African-American woman whose refusal in 1955 to give up her seat for a white passenger triggered the 13-month bus boycott that brought the civil rights struggle to national and worldwide attention. The city remains majority Black. Parks's hands are holding up her passenger ticket number, 7053, which was how she and thousands of other battered and bruised arrestees were booked by Montgomery's all-white police.

"What did you think of the museum?" Stevenson asks as we shake hands. I tell him how struck I was. When Stevenson moved here in 1989, it was as though the civil rights era had never happened. "This city had 59 markers or memorials to the Confederacy but you couldn't find the word 'slavery' or 'enslavement' anywhere," he says.

Wearing a brown jacket, cardigan and slacks, Stevenson seems at least a decade younger than his 66 years. We have taken the restaurant's private room. A mix of soul music and Motown pipes in. Although Stevenson grew up in southern Delaware, from where he catapulted himself to college (having been the first in his family to be legally permitted to go to high school), he has chosen the Deep South.

After Harvard Law, he picked a penurious civil rights job in Atlanta but was quickly drawn into pro bono work for death row prisoners in Alabama. On a scale of one to 10, death row cases and Alabama are both 10s. Capital convictions are the toughest to overturn; Alabama is the worst state to fight them. The state's justice system is still egregiously non-colour blind.

In 2013, Stevenson petitioned the Alabama Department of Archives and History to commemorate Montgomery's role as the centre of the domestic slave market after the Atlantic passage slowed to a trickle following Britain's 1833 Slavery Abolition Act. "They told us it would be too controversial," he says. "In 2013," he repeats. This was in Barack Obama's second term. The EJI persisted and won. Stevenson's museum and three other sites, including a park honouring the more than 4,400 segregation-era victims of lynching, are among the results.

In contrast to our Hollywood schooling, many Jim Crow-era lynchings were announced in advance by the newspapers, took place in daylight and were cheered by unhooded crowds. The crime could be as trivial as looking the wrong way at a white woman. After segregation came incarceration. America's prison population exploded from 500,000 in the early 1970s to more than 2mn today. "They took off the white robe and put on the black robe," said Anthony Ray Hinton, one of the clients Stevenson saved from death row.

Alabama's past is neither dead nor past. Stevenson tells me that on the fourth Monday in April, the state will celebrate its annual Confederate Memorial Day. On the first Monday in June, it will take a day to honour Jefferson Davis, president of the slave states, who lived in the Confederacy White House here at the start of the civil war (he later shifted it to Richmond). Next January, as always, Alabama will commemorate an amalgamated Martin Luther King/Robert E. Lee Day. MLK



Caran Murphy

Lunch with the FT Bryan Stevenson

'Hope is our superpower'

Day is a federal holiday. General Lee led the Confederate army.

I confess I am shocked that I did not know this. "And now the [Trump] administration is renaming military bases after generals who fought and killed to preserve slavery," Stevenson says. He courteously deflects my suggested glass of wine by explaining the difference between local sweet tea, which he orders, and everyone else's. "You have to put sugar in while it's still hot [before icing it] so it integrates into the taste," he says. "In the north you ask for sweet tea and people look at you like you're crazy." The sugar boost is instant; I do not regret copying his order.

What moved him to set up a museum? Stevenson says he was spurred by two things. The first was the effect of visiting Berlin. "You couldn't go 200 metres without seeing monuments and memorials, the *Stolpersteine* ["stumbling stones" or small pavement plaques] honouring the victims of the Holocaust," he says. "When I reflected on the cultural landscape of America, I thought, we don't have any of these features." A statue of Jefferson Davis still holds pride of place inside the Capitol a mile or two from where we are meeting. "I mean, are there statues of Adolf Hitler in Berlin?" he asks rhetorically.

We are politely interrupted by Quinn, our infectiously smiling waitress, who wants our order. Stevenson picks a creamy root bisque followed by Caesar salad. I choose a dish of creole shrimp and grit fritters. We share a side of "Ms Edna's biscuits", which come with butters made from sorghum and sweet potato and an unspecified preserve (jam). They taste sinfully good on the buttermilk bread.

Stevenson's other spur was his fear that the legal system was going backwards. A movement that relies on rulings from above, rather than pressure from below, will start to wither. "The courts were moving on," he says. The media was also losing interest. In 1993, Stevenson overturned the conviction of Walter McMillian, who had been framed for the murder of a white woman. Stevenson's victory saved McMillian from the electric chair and set him free. Along the way, Stevenson strung out the execution date with successive appeals. He got CBS's *60 Minutes* to report on McMillian's plight.

who were cruel, or when you started abusing drugs, or when you came back traumatised from war?"

What can you say to someone who is about to die that way, I ask. As Stevenson responds, Roberta Flack's version of the song "You Make Me Feel Brand New" is playing in the background. It catches my throat. "I would be saying to him that your life has so much meaning, power and dignity. Your death will not be forgotten," he says. "I am going to be your witness but I'm also going to be your messenger, a part of the crusade that takes this act of barbarism and misery and turns it into something more like justice."

At no point during our conversation does Stevenson raise his voice or betray bitterness. He looks me in the eye and smiles while he is talking. It strikes me that he cannot afford the luxury of pessimism. He tells everyone, Black or white, innocent or guilty, that they are worth more than the worst thing they have ever done. "If you have stolen, you are more than a thief," he says. "If you've told a lie, you are not just a liar. If you are racist, you are more than a racist. If we can figure out the other things that you are then maybe we can get you to a place where you don't do those things any more."

The Reverend King said that 11am on Sundays was America's most segregated hour. I wonder whether Stevenson attends a local church. He has never found time for romance, describing himself as married to his work. He tiptoes around my question. He grew up loving church music and is an accomplished pianist. He moved from a cramped apartment in downtown Montgomery to a small house with just enough space to fit a piano. When you enter, that instrument is all you see, he says. He plays to himself: "Piano is the only thing that can get me out of my head."

Does he regret that vacation home in the Bahamas that he could now have if he had chosen a more lucrative career path? Stevenson laughs. "No, I've never really had any regret," he says. "I feel fortunate. I get to hear and see things that are so rich. The powerful opportunity when you stand next to condemned people, disfavoured people, you can feel the magic, the grace and awe of mercy, that people want to be heard, to turn violence into redemption." You do not seem to lack purpose, I suggest. "If people can find purpose, if they can find something that motivates them, that is true wealth," he says.

Quinn is back and will not take no for an answer on dessert. I protest that my bloodstream has turned sugary with all those sweet tea refills. Stevenson concurs. She convinces us to share a sweet potato cream caramel cake, which seems almost diabetic at this point. "You're going to love it," she insists. We have no trouble proving her right.

King talked about the arc of history bending towards justice, a theme that Obama developed. I tell Stevenson that I am sceptical that there is such a thing as historical predestination. What does

he feel about the direction of today's America? He returns to the subject of history. "Hope is our superpower," he insists. But he also confesses to fear. America has never said "never again" to slavery and bigotry in the way that Germany has said "never again" to its darkest past, he says.

Just as the north's victory in the US civil war was undone by the withdrawal from the south of federal troops in 1877, so today the gains of the 1960s civil rights era are being dismantled while we sleep. "If people do not know their history, they are liable to repeat it," he says. "If you are saying that Haitians are 'eating their cats and dogs', or depicting the Obamas as chimpanzees [an AI video that Donald Trump reposted], or that Somalis are 'garbage', or the rhetoric of violence and cruelty in this misguided Iran war. We are talking about annihilating people. History teaches us that when you do that, really horrific things can happen."

He mentions the purging of books about slavery from libraries and the erasure of historic figures such as King, Parks, Frederick Douglass and WEB Du Bois from school curricula. I suggest to Stevenson that scholars of "whiteness studies", with lucrative courses in diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) training, have also caused harm. Mandating employees to take corporate training courses in which they are told they are

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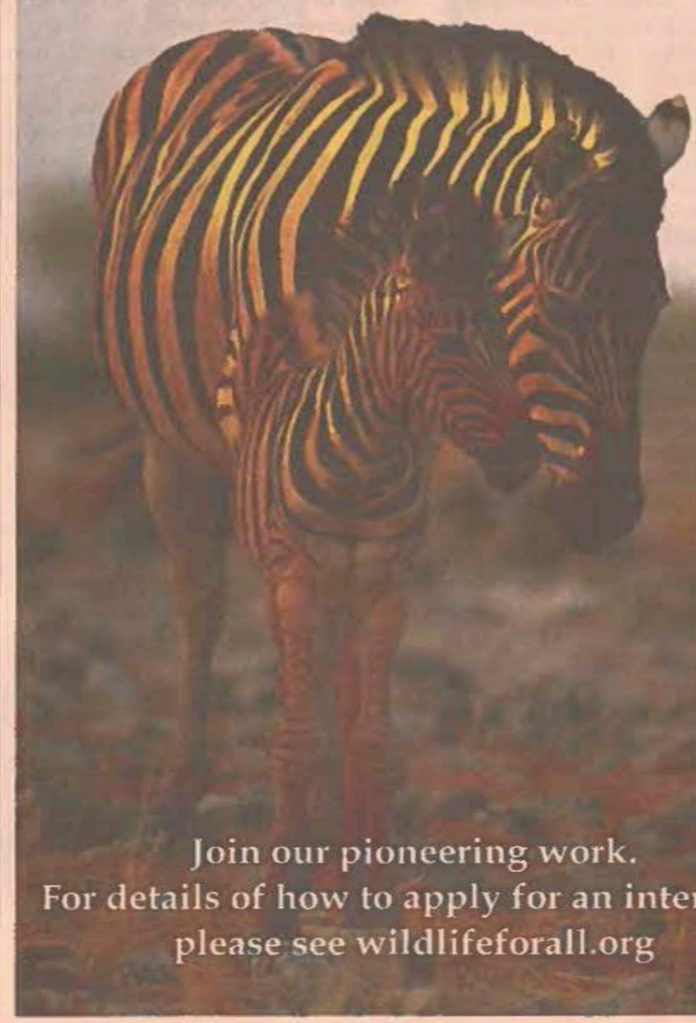
from the oppressor race strikes me as an odd way of healing divisions. This plays into fear and anger, rather than hope.

Stevenson strongly agrees. "You're absolutely right. If you really want things to change, do the thing that makes the change. I don't have much interest in creating a lot of language that is excluding." The DEI sword can cut both ways, he adds. When Joe Biden promised to pick a non-white woman for the Supreme Court, he thereby short-changed his nominee, Ketanji Brown Jackson, the first Black female ever to sit on that body. In practice, Jackson is eminently qualified. But Biden's announcement gave an opening to far lesser people to brand her a "diversity hire".

Our time is almost up. Quinn has nanded the bill to Stevenson. I retrieve it. "So you're heading back to DC?" he asks. Yes, I say, back to the asylum where crazy things happen before breakfast every day. He laughs. As we say goodbye, I feel an unfamiliar sense of elation. I try to put my finger on it. Although Montgomery has a bloody history, and Stevenson's road is stony, he has been sharing his hope. To someone based in Washington, this induces vertigo. It strikes me that I have been listening for more than two hours to a man who speaks kindly about others and believes we can do better. It takes me some time to recover.

Edward Luce is the FT's US national editor

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