



HEIRS'
PROPERTY

MATTERS

Thriving in our 15th Year and Adapting to our Virtual World!

How the Center for Heirs' Property Preservation continues
to grow and to serve throughout the COVID 19 crisis.

[See page 5 for full story]

WHAT IS HEIRS' PROPERTY?

Most heirs' property in the Lowcountry is land that was either purchased by or deeded to African Americans after emancipation. Much of this land has been passed down through the

generations without the benefit of a will so that the land is owned in common by all of the heirs — whether they live on the land; help pay the taxes, or have never set foot on the land.

This unstable form of ownership puts heirs' property at high risk for loss because any heir can sell his/her percentage of ownership to another who can force a sale of the entire property.

A Note From Jennie



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We targeted our 15th Anniversary year as one of growth. We certainly did that - by adding Marion, Florence and Darlington Counties to the service area. But this past year we grew in unexpected ways, having to quickly learn how to adapt. Our talented staff was up for the challenge.

In response to COVID-19 we created a task force to study different options on continuing our critical mission. We moved to the Zoom platform, and the first time we used it we were pleasantly forced into upgrading our service due to overcapacity. Our growth continued both intellectually and creatively as we adapted annual in-person events into successful virtual ones like our Commitment to Justice Award and our Landowner Symposium. We grew these efforts on a national scale, with the just-completed, "*All Land is not Creating Equal: Unleashing Family and Community Wealth through Land Ownership*" - a virtual event celebrating the Center's 15th anniversary, along with the 35th anniversary of the The Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group, who helped spark the Center's start-up.

Much like the resilient people we serve, we will embrace new challenges and look forward to continued growth.

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One of the first internal challenges the pandemic brought to the Center was the annual Commitment to Justice Award, originally scheduled for March 19th at the Francis Marion Hotel. Commitment to Justice has traditionally been the largest fund-raising event every year for the Center. The honoree was to be Christine Osburn Jackson, who has touched and inspired so many while serving as an advocate for justice and racial equality.

On August 10th, the Center was able to provide a heartfelt and inspiring virtual tribute to Mrs. Jackson, all while practicing social distancing and keeping participants and viewers safe. The virtual broadcast originated from the Greater Charleston YWCA with WCBF's Carolyn Murray as emcee; Spencer Pryor as our keynote speaker; remarks from Rosalind Jones; Center board chair, Yvonne Knight-Carter and CEO Dr. Jennie L. Stephens. Everyone viewing that night was so honored to have Mrs. Jackson and her daughter Kim respond live and commenting personally on the tribute. Our first ever virtual event was a rousing success.



Commitment to Justice: A Virtual Success

Thanks to the 2020 Commitment to Justice Friends and Supporters

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Innovation: Drive Thru Wills Clinics!



Thank You to Volunteers at Wills Clinics: Attorney Amber Daniels, Charleston School of Law Students; Taylor Trabant, Christopher Lutz, Amanda Pikulski, Skylar Leaton, Shannon Bastarache, Patricia Dimsdale, Michelle Mapp, William Earnhart, Francesca Toledo, Elizabeth Smith, and Collin Davidson

Due to the COVID 19 crisis, the Center had to reinvent the way it did outreach. Thanks to Facebook Live, and Zoom, the virtual meeting software, the Center quickly adapted their in-person seminars into online webinars. The difficult issue remaining was how to tackle Wills Clinics, where one-on-one consultation and multiple witnesses involved in the procedure made a virtual option almost impossible.

Thanks to a rather ingenious legal team, the first-ever [at least to our knowledge], Drive Thru Wills Clinic was born! Our first effort was held at our Main office in Charleston on September 12th and proved so successful, every time slot that was available was filled. That led to a sequel, our second event at our Orangeburg office on October 3rd! Nearly 60 people were able to participate in receiving a free simple will!

"We really appreciated not only the support of the public for our Drive Thru Wills Clinics, but also for the help we received from other attorneys and law students who volunteered," said Hope Watson, Director of Legal Services for the Center. "We have a fabulous in-house legal team here at the Center, but to pull off events like these we need a little extra help."

An unanticipated dividend to both clinics was the fact that several clients made an unsolicited donation at the free event. One note from a grateful donor read: "Thank you so very much...The great work you do here at Heirs' Property has helped so many and I'm happy to say I'm one of the recipients...I can have some peace of mind I left my house in order." [transcript of handwritten note from Orangeburg]

Having a Will and completing probate are the cornerstones of preventing heirs' property. So with the resounding success of these creative and unique Drive Thru Wills Clinics, look for additional events like these, in result of the pandemic, happening again soon.

The Center is able to provide these free Wills Clinics as a result of funding provided by: Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, Frances P. Bunnelle Foundation, Coastal Community Foundation, Gaylord & Dorothy Donnelley Foundation, SC Bar Foundation, Surdna Foundation, USDA National Institute of Food & Agriculture, and US Endowment for Forestry & Communities.





Strong & Determined

Like the trees that surround her, Lillie McGill stands proud on her family land. She has been involved with the Center's Sustainable Forestry Program since 2014. She lives on her 25-acre property in the town of Kingstree. She manages her family land for forestry. Her husband of 51 years, Norman McGill, has passed away. When Mrs. McGill was younger, she used to walk to school with her future husband, never dreaming that they would one day marry. She and her husband bought the land her husband's family once sharecropped. Recently her daughter purchased the home where her grandparents once lived. It's now on the National Register of Historic Places and she hopes to restore it and turn it into a bed and breakfast. Mrs. McGill is working with a private forest consulting group to get her timber cut and has a small wetland on her property that she would like to conserve.

"Her brother told her that the wetland has quicksand on it," said Steve Patterson, Director of Forestry for the Center. "I think Mrs. McGill is a very special lady, however, she is also very determined. She did not seem too worried about that quicksand when she put on her rubber boots and grabbed her bush axe to lead us through her property on a site visit."

Strong and determined is how Steve describes her and Mrs. McGill just laughs, "I'm not exactly sure about that," she said. "The Center has helped me over the years. From making sure my affairs are in order by completing my will, to helping me with forestry and conservation in making my land work for me."

Mrs. McGill stays active with her family land; her son lives nearby and helps. She stays connected in all things related to forestry. She attends the local

forestry association meetings and participates in the Center's Forestry Workshops, often inviting others in her community to share in these events.

"I tell those in my community about the Center," said Mrs. McGill. "They offer folks a lot of information that will help them. They also provide opportunities to network with others. It's important that your land works for you and they help others like me with ways to do that."

Last year she applied for the NRCS's Conservation Stewardship Program to install a pollinator habitat plot on her land. She is excited to grow sunflowers and blueberries for help with bee pollination.

"We applaud her for jumping in and maximizing every opportunity for her family land," Patterson said. "I know I look forward to seeing those wildflowers flourish under her care."

MATTERS

THANK YOU!

YOUR GIVING MATTERS...in every way that you do it!

Please consider making a monthly gift. For us...it feels like a pat on the back every time it appears!

The following donors made gifts to the Center between September 1, 2019 and August 31, 2020. If we have left anyone out, please let us know and accept our sincere apologies.

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FLASHBACK TO THE BEGINNING

15 years really doesn't seem all that long ago. This photo was taken at the Center's first office located on Dorchester Road. The outdoor sign is surrounded with early volunteers and staff members. The faces may change but the mission remains constant and unwavering.

"When people ask me about what the Center does, I respond with protecting heirs' property and promoting the sustainable use of land to build generational wealth for underserved families. But really, at the core of our mission, it's simply justice — social, economic and environmental. We believe the American dream needs to be colorblind. The Center has spent the past 15 years advocating for racial equality and our mission will continue into the future demanding justice."

◆ Dr. Jennie L. Stephens, CEO, Center for Heirs' Property Preservation



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Donna McQueen



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Left, Donna McQueen, Staff Attorney, Orangeburg Office;
Right, Janessa Taylor, Resource Development Assistant*

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