The Resiliency of the Center

[See pages 4 and 5 for full story]
WHAT IS HEIRS’ PROPERTY?

Most heirs’ property in the Lowcountry is land 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, all of the heirs own the land in common - 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 [their] percentage of ownership to another who can force a sale of the entire property.

Resiliency

The dictionary defines resilience as the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties [i.e., the ability to bounce back]. The COVID-19 pandemic, which has now been with us for almost two years, has certainly impacted us all. I’m proud of not only our resiliency during this crisis, but our creativity in finding innovative ways to carry forth our critical mission. We have found ways to reach others beyond the borders of South Carolina.

From delivering the Center’s replication model to help those in the Mobile Basin, to using virtual methods of delivering seminars, workshops and events, this newsletter will document just some of the milestones we have achieved over the last few months.

Our future couldn’t be brighter. It’s humbling to see our model not only implemented elsewhere but our expertise recognized in articles, stories, and media across the country. I like to think that our work since 2007 has helped shine a light on this important issue. I thank you for your trust and support over the years in building a model that will continue to help and influence our work and mission to serve a larger, more diverse population in all corners of our nation. Ultimately, the goal is to make sure all landowners have access to the tools needed, so they will no longer be labeled as “historically underserved.”

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2021 Commitment to Justice: Honoring Dr. Millicent E. Brown

With another upswing in COVID cases our annual Commitment to Justice award had to evolve quickly from a hybrid event to a virtual one. It was still an incredible evening on September 9th as the Center honored Dr. Millicent E. Brown with the 2021 Commitment to Justice award! We celebrated Dr. Brown as a true warrior and lifelong activist for civil rights!

Thank you to our powerful keynote speaker, Pastor Thomas Dixon. We also appreciate Dr. Tamara Butler, Executive Director, The Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture; our Board Chair, Yvonne Knight-Carter and our CEO, Dr. Jennie Stephens, for their comments and reflections on Dr. Brown’s achievements.

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Mobile Basin Heirs’ Property Support Initiative takes Center’s Replication Model to Mississippi!


Dr. Jennie L. Stephens and Vangela Wade, from the Mississippi Center for Justice, review documents prior to the announcement.

On Thursday, October 14th, a national press event announced that the Center’s replication model, something that has been a big part of the Center’s Strategic Plan over the past few years, was about to be implemented in Mississippi! It’s called the Mobile Basin Heir’s Property Support Initiative. Our partner, the Mississippi Center for Justice, will use the Center’s replication model in helping low-income Mississippi families hold onto inherited land. This effort, advocates say, would build wealth and preserve biological diversity by promoting better forest management. The project came to fruition with support from our partners, World Wildlife Fund and Kimberly-Clark. Live 5 News anchor Ann McGill hosted the streaming press event.

Of course, the most important thing about the Mobile Basin Heirs’ Property Support Initiative will be the impact on the landowners who have needed help for so long. One such story comes from the Robbins family siblings. You can watch their powerful story on the Center’s YouTube page. Hear them discuss the heirs’ property issue that prevents them from using their family land to help create generational wealth. It’s people like the Robbins that this project will help!

Talk about resiliency; it is indeed astounding to see the work and mission of the Center now being used in other places around the country! And even more surprising accomplishing this during a pandemic. Your help in moving our work forward through these difficult times has been deeply appreciated.


Photo Courtesy: Mississippi Center for Justice.
Landowner Symposium Thrives

Our staff showed off their resiliency by making this year’s 6th Annual South Carolina Rural & Limited Resource Landowner Symposium a record event and the most successful ever for the Center! Nearly 300 people registered either in-person or online for this informative two-day hybrid event! Our speakers and panelists ranged from Carbon Credits to Environmental Justice.

The inspiring keynote address was delivered by Dr. Faith Rivers James, the Assistant Provost for Leadership at The Citadel and who has been a leader in the property preservation movement.

Another highlight from the first day of the Symposium was an evening honoring our new graduates and all participants in our Woodland Community Advocate program. What an inspiration to all of us. As was mentioned during the session, the WCA’s are the evangelists of the Center’s work and mission. Congratulations, new graduates!

Landowner Symposium Sponsors

USDA: Natural Resources Conservation Service of South Carolina, Office of Advocacy and Outreach, National Institute for Food and Agriculture, Southern Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education (SARE), AgFirst Farm Credit Bank, Enviva, SC Sustainable Forestry Initiative Implementation Committee

Resilient Landowners

Landowner Anthony Williams characterizes resiliency. Mr. Williams participates in the Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Program (SFLR). His nearly 65 acres of land are in Orangeburg County, 37 acres have been recently planted in pine trees. Center Foresters David Bourgeois and Kenneth Dunn were there earlier this year to assess the success of the planting and to flag out boundaries for land yet to be planted.

Mr. Williams reflected on meeting up with David shortly after learning about the Center and being approved for the SFLR program. “Dave gave me all the guidance I needed.” He smiled as he went on about getting his trees planted earlier than other people in the area. “David and I and my wife were actually putting out the marker flags while they were planting the trees right behind us.”

“I was born and raised on this land,” said Mr. Williams, standing just steps away from where his childhood home once stood. “It is a different feeling though for my kids. They just aren’t as attached to the land as I am. My hope in planting these trees is that it might help them fall in love with the land.” Sustainable forestry is helping Mr. Williams generate wealth for his family’s future, and he is also using other methods to help his children and grandchildren bond with the land. “I took my grandkids out and had them plant two trees on the land. I will keep bringing them down here as long as I’m alive and show them those two trees they planted.” Mr. Williams trees, as well as his family, together are growing strong.
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, 2020, and August 31, 2021. If we have left anyone out, please let us know and accept our sincere apologies.

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National Exposure

Part of the Center’s mission is to create awareness around the issue of heirs’ property. You can’t ask for greater exposure than to be featured on a national newscast. September 2nd, the Center’s CEO, Dr. Jennie L. Stephens, appeared on the NBC Nightly News with Lester Holt. Dr. Stephens was interviewed as part of a story on how FEMA is changing its policies to allow people living on inherited land, or heirs’ property, who couldn’t prove ownership, to apply for critical disaster aid. The story also centers around Bucksport, South Carolina. Its heirs’ property residents could not access FEMA funds in the wake of several natural disasters. The Center hopes to continue shining a light on the issue of heirs’ property, as well as the people it impacts. Just like the families that were featured in Bucksport.

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