

The Grandmother of Juneteenth

How activist Opal Lee sparked the movement that turned a cherished tradition into our newest national holiday

HAVE YOU EVER had a gut feeling about something? I felt, positively, like I hadn't done enough with my life. I'd finished college, gotten a master's degree, taught school, worked as a social worker, had children. We had a farm. Our food bank served 500 families a day. I was volunteering for Habitat for Humanity. But even into my 80s, I had a nagging feeling that I should be doing more.

And I had always thought that Juneteenth was a day everybody ought to know about: the day in 1865 when the last of the people held in bondage in Texas learned they were free. So, in 2016, I began a march from Fort Worth to Washington, D.C., to draw attention to Juneteenth. I didn't walk the whole way, but I did make it to Washington. In 2019, I started a petition, and we garnered 1.5 million signatures in favor of the holiday. People talked about it. And, of course, the death of George Floyd and the demonstrations for social justice that followed have helped draw attention to the cause. The fact that Juneteenth became a national holiday in my lifetime—I'm still on cloud nine. I could do a holy dance except they'd say I was twerking!

Older people don't always remember this, but we have power. We have so much to teach the younger



Lee in her library at home

generations. I know some people are afraid. They don't want to be bothered, or they draw into themselves. But the future depends on us. We can't be satisfied with just having Juneteenth made into law. We've got joblessness, homelessness, health care, climate change. If we don't address these things, nobody's going to. We have to educate, because the books don't always tell the truth. I've seen pictures in textbooks of Black folks picking cotton, and they almost looked like they were enjoying themselves. I picked cotton, and ain't nothing enjoyable about it. You have to stand up and say, "These things cannot happen anymore."

Lately, you hear talk about our differences, but under our skin we are the same. We bleed red blood, all of us. Freedom isn't something just for Black people to celebrate. It's for everybody. I'd like to see our country celebrate freedom from Juneteenth to the Fourth of July. Now that would be a celebration! If each one of us could convince one person who's not on the same page, we could do it. It's not gonna happen in a day or a week. We have to work on it. Slowly. Persistently. That's how change happens.
—As told to David Hochman

Retired teacher Opal Lee, 95, lives in Fort Worth, Texas. On June 18 she will lead a multicounty fundraising walk called Opal's Walk for Freedom.

The History of Juneteenth

