

FIRM NEWS

SolomonSimmonsLaw and Schulte Roth & Zabel Send Cease-and-Desist Letter on Behalf of 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre Survivor Lessie Benningfield “Mother” Randle

April 14, 2021

Tulsa-based civil and human rights attorney Damario Solomon-Simmons of SolomonSimmonsLaw and Schulte Roth & Zabel LLP (SRZ) have sent a cease-and-desist letter to the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial Commission (“Commission”) on behalf of Lessie Benningfield “Mother” Randle.

Solomon-Simmons, SRZ and a team of civil and human rights lawyers represent the only known survivors of the Tulsa Race Massacre, 106-year-old **Mother Randle**, 106-year-old **Viola “Mother” Fletcher** and 100-year-old **Hughes Van Ellis**, who are still awaiting justice for Greenwood nearly a century after the brutal attack. The cease-and-desist letter is the latest legal action to help provide healing and justice to the survivors and descendants of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre.

On March 23, 2021, Phil Armstrong, Project Director for the Commission, participated as a panelist for an event entitled “Better Conversations — Reconciliation, Resilience and Public Memory,” hosted by the Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum. While describing the experience that visitors would have at Greenwood Rising, a history center being built by the Commission, Armstrong expressly referenced Mother Randle, stating “... she’s affectionately called Mother Randle and she’s what we know as the last known living survivor in Tulsa, and I think there may be another,

but unfortunately you know we're at that point where ... I think she's 106 years old, but we are dedicating much of this work to their lives.”

Mother Randle not only has no association with the Commission, or the Greenwood Rising project, but the Commission expressly refused to meet with Mother Randle and her representatives despite repeated requests to do so. The Commission did not allow Mother Randle (or any living survivor) any input regarding the formation, membership or goals of the Commission when it was founded. The Commission has not discussed with Mother Randle how she feels about the Commission's narratives that “Greenwood is Rising,” “Tulsa Triumphs” or that “Tulsa is leading America's journey to racial healing,” while Mother Randle still lives in poverty because of the Massacre and its continued harm. By invoking Mother Randle's name without her consent and stating that the Greenwood Rising project is “dedicated” to her, the Commission creates the false impression that they support Mother Randle's quest for justice and that she is a direct beneficiary of the Commission's work.

“My family and I were shocked to hear that the Commission is ‘dedicating’ much of their work to me since they have refused to meet with me, did not allow me an opportunity to participate in the Commission's planning, and declined to enter discussions on how, a living survivor of the Massacre, feels about their activities around the Centennial.” **Mother Randle** said. “However, my family and I still invite the Commission to meet to discuss how the Commission could tangibly support me and the other two known survivors who have waited 100 years for justice.”

On May 31, 1921, one of the worst acts of domestic terrorism in U.S. history completely decimated Tulsa's thriving, all-Black community of Greenwood. A large white mob, including members of the Tulsa Police Department, the Tulsa Chamber of Commerce, the Tulsa County Sheriff's Department and the Oklahoma National Guard, as well as other city and county leaders, overwhelmed the approximately 40-square-block community, killing hundreds of Black residents, injuring thousands more, burning down over one thousand homes and businesses and stealing residents' personal property.

In the litigation related to the Massacre, an amended petition filed in February 2021 seeks to abate the public nuisance of racial disparities, economic inequalities, insecurity and trauma that the City of Tulsa's unlawful actions and omissions caused and continue to cause, and aims to return the Greenwood District, once known as Black Wall Street, back

to the prosperous area it was prior to the devastating events of May 1921. In May 2020, **Human Rights Watch** published a groundbreaking report documenting the impact of the Tulsa Race Massacre and the systemic racism that followed, and called for reparations. Today, this area still remains poorer and in worse health than the rest of the city. SolomonSimmons Law, in conjunction with Schulte Roth & Zabel LLP; J. Spencer Bryan and Steven Terrill of BryanTerrill, P.C.; Professor Eric Miller of Loyola Marymount College of Law; and Maynard M. Henry, Sr., Lashandra Peoples-Johnson and Cordal Cephas of Johnson Cephas Law PLLC, are working to not only secure justice for survivors and descendants of the massacre, but also to raise attention to the 100 years of continued harm the Tulsa Race Massacre has caused Black Tulsans.

Practices

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LITIGATION