

**Yewon Lee**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: James Clemens High School, Madison, AL

Educator: Elizabeth Vaughn

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## **In Remembrance**

The year was 1892. A record number of atrocious lynching had taken place in throughout the United States, predominantly the Deep South[1], often by mobs of vigilantes claiming to bring justice with hundreds of townspeople, even children, watching. Fast forward 130 years, and the struggle for racial equality still continues. In today's day of current protests, police brutality, and systemic racism, we take a look at art for a new, powerful perspective on bringing light to American civic progress and progress still to be made.

The *National Memorial for Peace and Justice* is the United States' first memorial committed to revealing victims of lynching and African Americans affected by racially motivated terror throughout American history[2]. Over an area of six acres in the historical city of Montgomery, Alabama, in which Rosa Parks's infamous bus protests took place[3], the memorial utilizes a unique design of sculpture to bring remembrance to victims of racial violence and acts of terror. The first notable monument that meets the visitors as soon as they enter the park are sculptures of enslaved, chain-bound men and women struggling with shackles and horrific details of lynching that directly capture viewers' attention of historical injustice through both visual narrative and text. Especially moving is the pavilion of over 800, six-foot tall, suspended steel monuments hanging from the ceiling by thin, gray metal cylinders, each with the name of a county, names of those lynched in the county, and the dates of lynching. As viewers move through the monument, they can read a three dimensional white lettering plastered on the walls with running water emphasizing the memorial's solemnity—"Thousands of African Americans are unknown victims of racial terror lynching whose deaths cannot be documented... They are all honored here." [4]

The Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), a non-profit advocacy group based in Montgomery, worked on the memorial until 2018 when it opened to the public. The EJI, dedicated to "challenging racial and economic injustice" [5] helped reveal hundreds of lynching cases that had never been documented. Since 2010, the staff of EJI worked to look into specific lynching cases in addition to the trauma that racially motivated violence brought to African Americans, since publishing a report that found more than 4400 lynchings between 1877 and 1950, eight hundred more cases than previously recognized [6]. This is incredibly significant as once forgotten victims of unsanctioned racial violence are finally being uncovered through EJI's initiatives. EJI founder, lawyer, and social activist Bryan Stevenson commented that his directed projects "confront the truth of our past" [7] as his organization continues to conduct both historical and current-day research, guiding policymakers and Congressional representatives in justice and equal opportunity reform. As visitors make their way from the pavilion to the surrounding park, they can see a rows and rows of duplicate stelae carefully arranged in the lawn. Every steel monument inside the pavilion has a duplicate lying outside for the respective county to claim the monument and place it within a public space in the county in order to bring historical awareness to the Deep South and "more honestly confront the legacy of slavery, lynching, and segregation" [8] according to the EJI. The Community Remembrance Project ultimately stands to encourage citizen collaboration within county communities in the South and engage in uncovering the truth about American lynching history in efforts to honor lynching victims bring about meaningful conversation about connections to present day racially-motivated inequality issues.

This memorial is especially powerful and personal in the present time of the Black Lives Matter movement against police brutality and racism. In fact, the memorial tour ends with a tribute to the effects of the lynching era on African Americans, contemporary matters of police violence, and allusions to today's flawed, racially biased justice system through the words of Martin Luther King Jr. and Toni Morrison. Overall, the artwork evokes a sense of empathy from viewers, one that requires viewers to truly confront the context of injustice and truth in the United States, which should be the ultimate goal of the memorial—to tear down xenophobia at its roots by educating each other and through historical learning, which has the ability to revolutionize American consciousness. The memorial is a symbol of American progress made thus far, nevertheless serves as a continual reminder to recognize the failures of justice in our country and act upon inequality and to never again allow a repeat of history's oppression and violence.

