MPR News | Minnesota Now Minnesota Now - National exhibit exploring Jesuit history with slavery debuts at University of St. Thomas 01M496A5TG3KYSJAK26ZHH5GKN

NINA MOINI: A new immersive exhibit debuting at the University of St. Thomas this week is asking visitors to confront a painful chapter in the history of the Catholic Church and United States slavery. What we inherit, Truth, Repair, and a Promise to the Future tells the story of more than 300 Black people who were enslaved by the Jesuits and sold in 1838 to help pay the debts of Georgetown College. The exhibition centers the voices and experiences of their descendants, including our guest, Monique Trusclair Maddox, President and CEO of the Descendants Truth and Reconciliation Foundation. Thank you very much for your time today, Monique.

MONIQUE TRUSCLAIR MADDOX: Thank you for having me.

NINA MOINI: When people walk into this exhibit, there's a lot of history to confront. Some folks may not know the details. What are you hoping they leave with? What are you hoping folks understand about 314 people who were enslaved and sold in 1838 we're talking about? Can you give us a little more context about what happened back then?

MONIQUE TRUSCLAIR MADDOX: Yeah, absolutely. So in 1838, my ancestors, along with many other ancestors, were sold by Georgetown College in order to save it from financial ruin. We know that the Jesuit Order owned and sold our families because that's all a part of our historical records, and the archives are really what brought this story to life. It talked about the names of the individuals, their ages, their height, and a little bit of description about what life was like for them on those plantations in Southern Maryland.

So when you ask what I would want people to take away from this exhibit, I'd want you to see that these were humans. They had faces and they kept families. And their families are me and many of my other relatives who remain a part of this church and a part of sharing the history of this enslavement.

NINA MOINI: And, Monique, I understand that you actually discovered you were a descendant not too long ago, 2016. Can you tell us about how that felt and what you learned?

MONIQUE TRUSCLAIR MADDOX: Oh, that was a painful time for me because it was Palm Sunday, April 2016, when I was leaving mass at Our Lady of Grace Church in Edina, Minnesota, that I learned through this New York Times article that my family was a part of this history. I read this article out of curiosity. Just on my passing way to go home, what do I do on my way to go home?

But then once I got home and looked at the photos that were included as a part of that article, I saw a photo of a grave that I came to know was a relative of mine, but it was also in the cemetery where my father's buried, my grandmother, and my brother, and so many of my relatives intergenerationally that were a part of this, and I had no idea until 2016.

NINA MOINI: Monique, wow. What a story. It is about, though, once you find out things that happened, the question of where do we go with this knowledge? Where do we go from here? And I understand the Descendants Truth and Reconciliation Foundation was created through a partnership between descendants, like yourself, and the Jesuits. How did that partnership come about, and what does it look like?

MONIQUE TRUSCLAIR MADDOX: Yeah. So when our families learned this history, descendants wrote to the Superior General in Rome and said, we want you to acknowledge the sin that has been caused by our families. And so he wrote back to us and said, yes, this was a sin against God, against the dignity of humanity. And so that began a conversation where descendants of Jesuit enslavement and the Jesuits began out of that order from their Superior General to begin listening sessions and begin talking.

And so we began to have racial dialogue and using restorative justice practices to come to an agreement of, how do we remain in this church? How do we go down a moral path for reconciliation rather than a legal path? And so we began those discussions. It took two years of discussions before we actually came to an agreement to go back to those principles on which our families were sold and say, let's do good on those promises that were broken at that time and let's honor those people.

NINA MOINI: And what we're discussing right now, the term really is restorative justice. Can you tell us about the touring exhibition? And Jesuits are very involved in the Catholic education. Can you tell me why it was important to come to St. Thomas to debut the project and get these conversations started there?

MONIQUE TRUSCLAIR MADDOX: It was twofold, because in January, we had a private foundation come to us and say, we like the work that you're doing. It's a Minnesota-based foundation. And they said, why can't you do something here to tell this story? And so we began to plot and think about how do we begin to share our story here in Minnesota? And at the same time, I was meeting with Dr. Yohuru Williams from the Racial Justice Institute at the University of St. Thomas, and he was a keynote speaker for our Joseph M. Stewart speaker series this year.

And we came together to talk about America 250 and what does it look like for all Americans. And so Yohuru and I began to talk about bringing this exhibit as a part of America 250 in the classes that he was teaching as well. And our local donor was so excited that we could partner with the University of St. Thomas on this.

NINA MOINI: Yes. And Yohuru Williams has been on our program many times. We really always appreciate him coming by. So many people working together to make something like this happen. And I want to just zero in on something you talked about, the use of archival records, and you talked about how these were real people with real voices, real faces, real stories. They have descendants, like yourself, still living today. Can you talk to me about what it was like seeing, experiencing photographs, testimony from these folks and these historical records, just putting those to life again?

MONIQUE TRUSCLAIR MADDOX: Yeah. We know that archives generally have a name or a number, but it doesn't have really what life was like for those individuals. And so when we went to Georgetown University's archives, we learned a lot more about the people on those plantations. We began to uncover who their relatives were, where they worked, what their day was like. And so when we look at all of the people that were on those plantation lands and where they were sold to, the geographies are so similar.

And so we really can connect with Southern Maryland to Louisiana, where I was born, and many descendants still remain. Although, descendants are all over this country, many remain in Southern Maryland and many remain in Louisiana from these particular sales. So the lives of these individuals and the families they left behind are all still vibrant. Yes, they are still struggling, and that's what you'll see in this exhibit. A lot of statistics about what slavery left behind.

So when emancipation ended, slavery didn't just let everybody become whole. You'll see statistics in there that really are bolstered by a lot of research that's been done to talk about the disadvantages and this disingenuous promises that were kept.

NINA MOINI: And too, Monique, I think it's easy to think about other places sometimes or the South, but Minnesota having its own history is also really important. What do you think Minnesotans need to focus in on?

MONIQUE TRUSCLAIR MADDOX: Well, when you study your history, then you uncover the real truth. And so what we have found through our archival research is that it's a more full story. It's a more complete story. There are some painful pieces, but what we have found is there are ways to take traumatic experiences and try to uplift people. And that's why we do things like our Aging with Dignity program as a part of our honoring our ancestors and the people who left behind.

We help our seniors, in many of the communities that I've named, be able to live in their homes with the support of people around them with grab bars, railings, wheelchairs. And we also help our scholars be able to go to school because we know the cost of education is so expensive these days. We are also providing scholarships for those students of this history.

NINA MOINI: Monique, it's so important to talk about history, the present, and the future. Thank you for bringing those things together for us. We really appreciate your time.

MONIQUE TRUSCLAIR MADDOX: Thank you.

NINA MOINI: That was Monique Trusclair Maddox, President and CEO of the Descendants Truth and Reconciliation Foundation. The exhibit, What We Inherit, Truth, Repair, and a Promise to the Future, is on display at the University of St. Thomas through November 7.