

Landmark lawsuit seeks reparations for 1921 Greenwood Riot

By Walter Higgins

Special to Sentinel-Voice

OKLAHOMA CITY, Okla. (NNPA)—In what could become a landmark case for the reparations movement in the United States, a group of high-profile attorneys have filed a federal lawsuit on behalf of survivors and descendants of the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot.

The suit, which was filed last Monday in the U.S. District Court, claims the city and the state of Oklahoma were partly responsible for the destruction of the Greenwood District, also known as "Black Wall Street."

Attorneys in the case, members of the Reparations Coordinating Committee (RCC), include Harvard Law School Professor Charles Ogletree and attorneys Johnnie Cochran, Dennis Sweet and Willie Gary.

The mission of the RCC is to research and seek reparations on behalf of the contemporary victims of slavery and for the period of discrimination Blacks faced afterward.

Ogletree mentioned to the press that he sees no obstacles to the lawsuit, even though critics raised questions regarding the statute of limitations on the case as early. Ogletree added that his legal team feels the case was reopened once the state of Oklahoma authorized the Riot Commission in 1997. The commission issued a report in February 2001 with five recommendations, one of which was to pay reparations to the survivors and descendants of the riot.

All of the attorneys are working pro bono and

stressed the importance of seeking justice for the riot.

"When I read the commission report I felt fairly optimistic that Oklahoma was trying to do the right thing," said RCC attorney Michele Roberts. "That emotion didn't last long when I found out that Oklahoma and the mayor of Tulsa shockingly said sorry, but we can't help you. I knew that this was something very important that I would be spending a lot of my time on, and the notion of being paid for it is outrageous."

The co-chairs of the RCC are Ogletree, Randall Robinson, activist and author of "The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks," and Adjoa Aiyetoro, chief legal consultant for the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America.

"This is one of the most important moments in the history of Black struggle in the United States and around the world," said Robinson at the press conference held at the Greenwood Cultural Center.

The group appeared firm in their commitment to the case. "We stand on your shoulders, and we have an obligation to fight hard and leave no stone unturned," said Johnnie Cochran. "We believe in this cause, this is endemic to who we are as African-Americans."

Tulsa Reparations Coalition Chair Mark Stodghill, who helped to secure the RCC, said the suit was the result of a two-year process to secure reparations for the survivors and descendants outside of filing a lawsuit.

"The survivors can wait

no longer," said Stodghill. "The city has been silent. Mayors [M. Susan] Savage and [William] LaFortune both said they were in favor of reparations for survivors but not from city coffers."

"If the state and the city are restrained from paying reparations by state law and the only way to move them in that direction is through the courts, what course do we have left," asked Stodghill.

Tulsa attorney James O. Goodwin, of Goodwin & Goodwin law firm, part of a

local counsel team, says the suit will be an attempt to make good on the promise of former Tulsa mayor Loyal J. Martin when he said, "The real citizenship of Tulsa weep at this unspeakable crime and will make good the damage...to the last penny."

Goodwin said the effects of the riot still linger today. "The pain is still there, survivors are still alive, why not?" asked Goodwin. "Justice delayed doesn't mean justice goes away."

The 16-hour melee in

1921, described as the worst riot in American history, left about 300 Black citizens dead, destroyed from \$3 million to \$5 million in property—more than 30 blocks of the Greenwood area, including 191 businesses and 1,256 houses.


Even though the focus of the lawsuit is reparations for survivors and descendants of 1921, Aiyetoro stated the lawsuit is related to national litigation for reparations.

"It's connected to all African-descended people who

were subjected to violence from White supremacy in the U.S.," said Aiyetoro. "This allows us to do a case that is helpful for raising the issue nationally and internationally."

"By looking at the Tulsa race riot, we are going after reparations for African descendants, which means we are attacking the mob violence that said we can destroy your city when we want to."

Walter Higgins writes for the Oklahoma Eagle



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Oprah's Book Club sticking to classics

NEW YORK (AP) - Oprah's Book Club is back, and this time she's sticking to the classics.

Winfrey, who announced last April that she was suspending her club because she could not find any worthy books, revealed Wednesday night that she was bringing back her club after a 10-month hiatus. She said she had been reading works by William Shakespeare, William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway and wanted to celebrate these and other writers from the past.

"I'm back in the business of recommending books ... but with a difference," she told the Association of American Publishers in Washington, D.C. Winfrey was being honored at the annual meeting with a lifetime achievement award.

Winfrey did not say when she would make her first pick, or who the first author would be. She expects to make three to five choices a year, and plans to visit a location related to the book or author.

The new club is tentatively titled "Traveling With the Classics."