

Q&A with Kristen Green

Something Must be Done About Prince Edward County *A Family, A Virginia Town, A Civil Rights Battle*

Do you consider SOMETHING MUST BE DONE ABOUT PRINCE EDWARD COUNTY to be more of a memoir than history or vice versa?

It's really both. Historians can approach history with surgical detachment. I didn't have that luxury. I attended an academy that my grandfather helped found specifically for white children. Our family's longtime housekeeper had to send her daughter away to get an education. I married a multiracial man, and we have multiracial children. The story is too personal not to have aspects of it be memoir.

Why did you decide to write this book?

After working for years as a journalist, I realized I had grown up in a town with this amazing history that I had never learned. I needed to find out the full story of my hometown that my classmates and I hadn't been taught at the segregated academy I attended. And I wanted to understand the role that my family played in that story.

What did you find most challenging about the project?

The biggest challenge was that the time period I wanted to address spanned more than 60 years. I needed to explain the entire school closure history, which started with a student walkout to protest the conditions of the black high school in 1951 and ended when the county's public schools were forced to reopen in 1964. I also wanted to explain the effect of the closures on the community. This meant I really had to cover a lot of ground.

How did you go about writing this book?

It was a journey. I started by reading history books. I combed through newspaper accounts. I conducted dozens of personal interviews with my own family members, black students affected by the school closures, and teachers and administrators at the white academy. I moved to Farmville for a summer, and I spent a lot of time reflecting on what I learned along the way.

What was your relationship with your grandparents?

I loved Mimi and Papa very much. We lived nearby and saw them several times a week. We went on vacation with them and celebrated every holiday with them. They doted on my brothers and me, buying us gifts, planning cookouts and Easter egg hunts for us, attending our ballgames and dance recitals. They were perfect in our young eyes.

You write about discovering in 2008 that your grandfather played a larger role in the school closures than you had known. What was it like to learn that?

It was upsetting and confusing. For a long time, it was very difficult for me to separate my affinity for him from the shame I felt for the stance he had taken on school integration. I struggled with wanting to be loyal to him and my grandmother yet needing to tell this story.

What was it like to learn about how your family's longtime housekeeper, Elsie Lancaster, was affected by the school closures?

It was heartbreaking. I was ashamed of my grandparents' failure to acknowledge what she went through. I was deeply saddened by the fact that she had to send her only child away to get an education and that Elsie never really got to be a mother to her daughter again. I felt so sorry for the pain the school closings caused both of them and for my family's role in that.

What is your relationship to Farmville now, having spent so much time there working on the book?

It definitely created some distance. I felt judged for the work I was doing by people I have known a long time, and that both frustrated and hurt me. On the flip side, I developed relationships with people I never knew growing up, many of whom are black, and those are profoundly meaningful for me.

What can be done to right the wrongs of the past in Prince Edward?

We can't make it right. Too much has been lost to recapture. The best way to honor those denied an education, and their families, is to create a more perfect community that gives everyone a fair chance at life. We can fund education and support the public school system in other ways. And we can acknowledge the hurt. The community has got to stop pretending that it never happened—that's where it's got to start.

You refer to the town's civil rights museum, Moton Museum, as the future of the town. What makes it so important?

The museum is trying to tell the full story of this town – not the black story, not the white story, but the whole community's story. It is giving residents a place to share their experiences in a setting where they will be accepted, not judged. It's a place where everyone can come together. It is filling a real void in the community and is more widely sharing this important history.

You write that you were worried about moving back to the South with a multiracial family after living on the West Coast and in New England. What has the experience been like for you?

My family and I are comfortable here. Sitting on my front porch in Richmond, Va., I see people of all types walking by. My girls go to a diverse school, sharing classrooms with black, Latino, Asian and multiracial students. Yet a few blocks from my house there is a monument to Robert E. Lee. The city is still segregated in many ways, like most of America.

Why didn't the school closings draw more attention?

Virginia didn't have the violence other places had. But the racism here was no less insidious. Virginia leaders were more sophisticated about it. Closing the schools may not have ended lives, but it profoundly changed them, quashing the hopes and dreams of generations of black residents.

How has writing SOMETHING MUST BE DONE ABOUT PRINCE EDWARD COUNTY changed your perception of race in this country?

It showed me how far we still have to go. It's still extraordinarily difficult to have conversations about race. We want to move on without the hard work, but true reconciliation is hard work. To a very large extent we haven't dealt with it. The wounds are still close to surface.