

# THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

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WASHINGTON DC

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February 13, 2015

I write to give my strongest endorsement to Reconstruction Inc.'s program of bringing together professional historians with a cohort of African American ex-offenders and at-risk youth to discuss the histories of American slavery and race. I was both the recruiter of the historian presenters and one of the presenters myself. Thus, I have had the pleasure of witnessing the transformative power of this project first-hand. I can say without equivocation that these meetings have been a force for positive change along several different fronts.

First and foremost, the cohort has received some refreshment for the intellectual thirst of its members. These men, young and old, are generally thoughtful, outspoken, quite insightful and eloquent, and eager to learn, which are all the qualities one could ask for in an academic group. Yet the life circumstances of the cohort members have rarely enabled them to indulge their intellectual talents or satisfy their curiosity. This program is a step in that direction. The cohort members see it as another contribution toward their goal of leading thoughtful, purposeful lives.

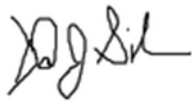
These discussions have also produced a positive effect with the cohort by enhancing their appreciation of what constitutes systematic and situational racism; how racism evolved in America; and how American race slavery began, spread, and endured, even in the face of resistance from multiple quarters. This material is complicated by any measure, but it is absolutely essential toward grasping both the American past and present. Consider the substance of program's first talk. It focused on the passage of laws in the seventeenth century colonies that defined heritable slavery through the female line; drove wedges between African slaves and European indentured servants; introduced language that replaced earlier religious-based identities with new racial ones based on complexion; and defined gender roles along racial lines as well as biological sex. Whereas in the mid seventeenth century, colonial Virginians were often in doubt about the legitimacy of these laws, by the mid eighteenth century they no longer subjected these laws to question. In other words, race had become second nature, or hegemonic. Such lessons empower people in modern times to grasp the invented nature of our assumed racial identities and to challenge with greater persuasion inequalities that persist along racial lines designed during the colonial era. This lesson also shows that American slavery was not an unthinking decision, or one in which passive Africans simply fell victim to technologically and organizationally superior Europeans. Rather, slavery was a deliberate, constant struggle over both physical and ideological domination.

These discussions have generated a new level of understanding between the participant historians and the cohort. Many historians desperately want to reach an audience beyond the academy and the university-educated, believing that a deeper understanding of the past is accompanied by a more sophisticated grasp of our own world and what we might do to improve it. The Reconstruction, Inc. program has been rare in allowing a group of historians to follow this principle, while also revealing just how far academic institutions have to go to make good on their claims to serve the general public. By the same token, the program has challenged the belief

by some members of the cohort in an effort (one might say, a conspiracy) to hide their history from them. They have been introduced to a cross-section of historians eager to share and debate what they know and to start a conversation about what to do with that knowledge to improve modern lives.

Honest, rigorous history is often cruel. It shatters myths, hobbles pride, and makes easy dichotomies of absolute right and wrong, us and them, difficult to maintain. This kind of history has an essential part to play if we are going to continue to try to create a more human society. Everyone has a role, including the poor, the incarcerated, and the returning citizen. The historical program of Reconstruction, Inc. is showing how that vision is possible.

Sincerely,



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