

Bryan Stevenson

Bryan A. Stevenson (born November 14, 1959) is an American lawyer, social justice activist, founder/executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative, and a clinical professor at New York University School of Law. Based in Montgomery, Alabama, Stevenson has challenged bias against the poor and minorities in the criminal justice system, especially children. He has helped achieve United States Supreme Court decisions that prohibit sentencing children under 18 to death or to life imprisonment without parole.^[1] Stevenson has assisted in cases that have saved dozens of prisoners from the death penalty, advocated for poor people, and developed community-based reform litigation aimed at improving the administration of criminal justice.

He initiated the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, which honors the names of each of the over 4,000 African Americans lynched in the twelve states of the South from 1877 to 1950. He argues that the history of slavery and lynchings has influenced the subsequent high rate of death sentences in the South, where it has been disproportionately applied to minorities. A related museum, *The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration*, offers interpretations to show the connection between the post-Reconstruction period of lynchings to the high rate of executions and incarceration of people of color in the United States.

In November 2018, Stevenson received the Benjamin Franklin Award from the American Philosophical Society as a "Drum major for justice and mercy".^[2] This is the most prestigious award the society gives for distinguished public service.

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Early life and education

Bryan Stevenson



Stevenson at TED 2012

| Born | <div>Bryan A. Stevenson</div> November 14, 1959 <div>Milton, Delaware, United States</div> |
|---------------------------|--|
| Residence | Montgomery, Alabama, United States |
| Nationality | American |
| Education | Eastern University (B.A.) <div>Harvard Law School (J.D.)</div> Harvard Kennedy School (M.P.P.) |
| Occupation | Director of Equal Justice Initiative Professor at New York University School of Law |
| Known for | Founding Equal Justice Initiative |
| Notable work | <i>Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption</i> |
| Parents | Howard Stevenson, Sr. (father) <div>Alice Stevenson (mother)</div> |
| Website | bryanstevenson.com (http://bryanstevens |

Born in 1959, Stevenson grew up in Milton, Delaware, a small rural town located in Southern Delaware.^[3] His father Howard Carlton Stevenson, Sr., had grown up in Milton, and his mother Alice Gertrude (Golden) Stevenson,^[3] was born and grew up in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Her family had moved to the city from Virginia in the Great Migration of the early 20th century.^[4] Stevenson has two siblings: an older brother Howard, Jr. and a sister Christy.^[5] Both parents commuted to the northern part of the state for work: Howard, Sr. worked at a General Foods processing plant as a laboratory technician.^[3] His mother, Alice, was a bookkeeper at Dover Air Force Base and became an equal opportunity officer.^[3] She particularly emphasized the importance of education.^[4]

on.com/)

Stevenson's family attended the Prospect African Methodist Episcopal Church, where as a youth Stevenson played piano and sang in the choir.^[3] His later views were influenced by the strong faith of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, where churchgoers were celebrated for 'standing up after having fallen down.'^[3] These experiences informed his belief that "each person in our society is more than the worst thing they've ever done."^[3]

When Stevenson was sixteen, his maternal grandfather, Clarence L. Golden, was stabbed to death in his Philadelphia home during a robbery. The killers received life sentences, an outcome Stevenson thought fair. Stevenson said of the murder: "Because my grandfather was older, his murder seemed particularly cruel. But I came from a world where we valued redemption over revenge."^[5]

As a child, Stevenson dealt with segregation and its legacy. He spent his first classroom years at a "colored" elementary school.^[3] By the time he entered the second grade, his school was formally desegregated, but the old rules from segregation still applied. Black kids played separately from white kids, and at the doctor's or dentist's office, black kids and their parents continued to use the back door, while whites entered through the front.^[3] Pools and other community facilities were informally segregated.^[4] Stevenson's father, having grown up in the area, took the ingrained racism in stride, but their mother noted that this was not right.^[3] In an interview in 2017, Stevenson recalled how his mother protested the day the black children from town lined up at the back door of the polio vaccination station to receive their shots, waiting hours while the white children went in first.^[6]

Stevenson attended Cape Henlopen High School and graduated in 1977. He played on the soccer and baseball teams.^[3] He also served as president of the student body and won American Legion public speaking contests.^[3] His brother, Howard, takes some credit for helping hone Stevenson's rhetorical skills: "We argued the way brothers argue, but these were serious arguments, inspired I guess by our mother and the circumstances of our family growing up."^[3] Stevenson earned straight A's and won a scholarship to Eastern University in St. Davids, Pennsylvania.^[5] On campus, he directed the campus gospel choir.^[3] Stevenson graduated in 1981.^[5]

Stevenson received a full scholarship to attend Harvard Law School. During law school, as part of a class on race and poverty litigation with Elizabeth Bartholet, he worked for Stephen Bright's Southern Center for Human Rights. It represents death-row inmates throughout the South.^[5] During this work, Stevenson found his career calling.^[5] While at Harvard, he also earned a Master's in Public Policy at the John F. Kennedy School of Government.

Career

Southern Center for Human Rights

After graduating from Harvard in 1985, Stevenson moved to Atlanta, Georgia, and joined the Southern Center for Human Rights full-time.^[5] The center divided work by region and Stevenson was assigned to Alabama. In 1989 he was appointed to run the Alabama operation, a resource center and death-penalty defense organization that was funded by Congress.^[4] He had a center in Montgomery, the state capital.

Equal Justice Initiative

When the United States Congress eliminated funding for death-penalty defense for lower income people after Republicans gained control in the 1994 mid-term elections, Stevenson converted the center and founded the non-profit Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) in Montgomery. In 1995 he was awarded a MacArthur grant and put all the money toward supporting the center.^[7] He guaranteed a defense of anyone in Alabama sentenced to the death penalty, as it was the only state that did not provide legal assistance to people on death row.^[8] It also has the highest per capita rate of death penalty sentencing.



Bryan Stevenson at the LBJ Presidential Library in 2019

Bryan Stevenson has been particularly concerned about overly harsh sentencing of persons convicted of crimes committed as children, under the age of 18.^[1]

The US Supreme Court ruled in *Roper v. Simmons* (2005) that the death penalty was unconstitutional for persons convicted of crimes committed under the age of 18. Stevenson worked to have the court's thinking about appropriate punishment broadened to related cases applying to children convicted under the age of 17.

EJI mounted a litigation campaign to gain review of cases in which convicted children were sentenced to life-without-parole, including in cases without homicide. In *Miller v. Alabama* (2012), the US Supreme Court ruled in a landmark decision that mandatory sentences of life-without-parole for children 17 and under were unconstitutional; their decision has affected statutes in 29 states. In 2016, the court ruled in *Montgomery v. Louisiana* that this decision had to be applied retroactively, potentially affecting the sentences of 2300 people nationwide who had been sentenced to life while still children.^[9]

By August 2016, EJI has saved 125 men from the death penalty. In addition, it has represented poor people, defended people on appeal and overturned wrongful convictions, and worked to alleviate bias in the criminal justice system.^[4]

Acknowledging slavery

The EJI offices are near the landing at the Alabama River where slaves were unloaded in the domestic slave trade; an equal distance away is Court Square, "one of the largest slave-auction sites in the country."^[10] Stevenson has noted that in downtown Montgomery, there were "dozens" of historic markers and numerous monuments related to Confederate history, but nothing acknowledging the history of slavery, on which the wealth of the South was based and for which it fought the Civil War.^[10] He proposed to the state and provided documentation to recognize three slavery sites with historic markers; the Alabama Department of Archives and History told him that it did not want to "sponsor the markers given the potential for controversy."^[10] Stevenson worked with an African-American history group to gain sponsorship for this project; they gained state approval for the three markers in 2013, and these have been installed in Montgomery.

Memorial for Peace and Justice

Stevenson acquired six acres of former public housing land in Montgomery for the development of a new project, the "National Memorial for Peace and Justice", to commemorate the nearly 4,000 persons who were lynched in the South from 1877 to 1950. Many lynchings were conducted openly in front of mobs and crowds in county courthouse squares. Stevenson argues this history of extrajudicial lynchings by white mobs is closely associated with the subsequent high rate of death sentences imposed in Alabama and other southern states, and to their disproportionate application to minority people. He further argues that this history influences the bias against minorities as expressed in disproportionately high mass incarceration rates for them across the country.^[4] The memorial opened in April 2018.^[11]

He also worked to create a related museum, *The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration*, which opened in April.^[12] Exhibits in the former slave warehouse include materials on lynching, racial segregation, and mass incarceration since the late 20th century. Stevenson articulates how the treatment of people of color under the criminal justice system is related to the history of slavery and later treatment of minorities in the South.^[13]

Author

Stevenson wrote the critically acclaimed memoir *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, published in 2014 by Spiegel & Grau.^[14] It was selected by *Time* magazine as one of the "10 Best Books of Nonfiction" for 2014, and was among the *New York Times* "100 Notable Books" for the year. It won the 2015 Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Nonfiction^[15] and the 2015 Dayton Literary Peace Prize for Nonfiction.^[16] A film based on the book, called *Just Mercy* and starring Michael B. Jordan as Stevenson, was premiered on September 6, 2019 at the Toronto International Film Festival and is scheduled to be released widely in January 2020.^[17]

Speaker

Stevenson conducts an active public speaking schedule, in large part for fundraising for the work of EJI. His speech at TED2012 in Long Beach, California brought him a wide audience on the Internet.^[18] Following his presentation, attendees at the conference contributed more than \$1 million to fund a campaign run by Stevenson to end the practice of placing convicted children to serve sentences in adult jails and prisons.^[19] His talk is available at "We need to talk about an injustice" (http://www.ted.com/talks/bryan_stevenson_we_need_to_talk_about_an_injustice?language=en) on the TED website; by August 2019, it had been viewed more than 5.8 million times.

Stevenson has been a commencement speaker and received numerous honorary degrees, including from the following institutions: University of Delaware, 2016, honorary Doctor of Laws degree;^{[20][21]} Williams College, 2016, honorary doctorate;^[22] Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine, 2011, Doctor of Humane Letters, Honoris Causa;^[23] College of the Holy Cross, 2015;^[24] Wesleyan University, 2016, honorary degree;^[25] University of Mississippi, 2017s fall convocation;^[26] Northeastern University, fall 2017 convocation.^[27]

In June 2017, Stevenson delivered the 93rd Ware Lecture at the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association in New Orleans, Louisiana, joining the ranks of previous lecturers including Martin Luther King, Jr. and Kurt Vonnegut.^[28]

Stevenson is featured in episode 45 of the podcast *Criminal* by Radiotopia from PRX. Host Phoebe Judge talked with Stevenson about his experiences during his 30 years spent working to get people off of death row, and about his take on the deserving of mercy.^[29]

Awards

- 1991 National Medal of Liberty
- 1995 MacArthur Fellow
- 2000 Olof Palme Prize
- 2009 Gruber Prize for Justice
- 2011 Four Freedoms Award
- 2012 Smithsonian Magazine American Ingenuity Award in Social Progress^[30]
- 2014 Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction and Nonfiction
- 2015 Dayton Literary Peace Prize for Nonfiction (http://daytonliterarypeaceprize.org/2015-nonfiction_winner.htm)
- 2017 The Stowe Prize for Writing to Advance Social Justice
- 2018 The Benjamin Franklin Award for distinguished public service from the American Philosophical Society^[2]

Publications

By Bryan Stevenson:

- "Confronting Mass Imprisonment and Restoring Fairness to Collateral Review of Criminal Cases," 41 *Harv. C.R.-C.L. L. Rev.* 339 (2006)^[31]

- "The Ultimate Authority on the Ultimate Punishment: The Requisite Role of the Jury in Capital Sentencing," 54 *Ala. L. Rev.* 1091 (2003)^[32]
- "The Politics of Fear and Death: Successive Problems in Capital Federal Habeas Corpus Cases," 77 *N.Y.U. L. Rev.* 699 (2002)^[33]
- "Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption (2014)^[34] ISBN 978-0-8129-9452-0

By EJI:


- "Cruel and Unusual: Sentencing 13-and 14-Year Old Children to Die in Prison" (2007)^[35]

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External links

- Bryan Stevenson (https://www.ted.com/speakers/bryan_stevenson) at TED 
- Appearances (<https://www.c-span.org/person/?bryanstevenson>) on C-SPAN
- The Ezra Klein Show (podcast) (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/best-of-bryan-stevenson/id1081584611?i=1000426561151&mt=2>)

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