

Ep: 31 | Redemption Story: How a Georgia county once called “the most racist county in America” is becoming one known for love | Durwood Snead | Forsyth Descendants Scholarship

| SHOW TRANSCRIPT

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Durwood Sneed: The county that Oprah Winfrey called the most racist in America in 1987. Our dream is that we would get known all over the world as the county of Love.

Stephanie Jacobs: Hello sweet friends. I'm Stephanie Jacobs, a storyteller and advocate for social justice and your host of the Love Light Stories podcast. A place where we uncover a deeper understanding of humanity through beautiful, redemptive stories that inspire inspire our hearts. If you long to see more love, empathy and true connection in our world and your own life, you're in the right place. After spending multiple years studying social justice issues, I've realized the power Story has in helping us to understand, empathize and transform our world views into something that's just that, views that are truly worldly. Here in this space, we'll embrace our humanity through raw and authentic stories told by real people themselves. We'll amplify their voices and learn to connect in more meaningful ways. Poverty, human trafficking, incarceration, race, immigration and more. We'll embrace difficult conversations, sometimes controversial topics, and light hearted stories too. If you wish to uncover the hope, love, empathy and connection we can find in our fellow humanity, this is a show for you. So, are you ready? Lovely. Let's jump in.

Durwood Sneed shares story of racial cleansing events of 1912 in Georgia

Foreign hello there lovely. Welcome back to the Lovelight Stories podcast where we create space for real, personal stories to be seen, heard and understood. If you haven't yet, be sure to rate the show, follow and share it with your family and friends. Today on the podcast, I'm, welcoming Derwood Sneed. Derwood is a co founder of the Forsyth Descendant Scholarship, a retired International Missions pastor from Northpoint Ministries, and a 35 year resident of Forsyth County, Georgia. In this episode, I'm sitting down with Durwood as he shares the story of the racial cleansing events of 1912 in Forsyth County, Georgia. Hear how he stumbled upon the deep rooted history of racism in the very county in which he lives, and how he and other Forsyth county residents are changing the narrative from being known as the most racist county in America to becoming one known for love. I met Durwood a few months ago through a mutual friend from Hope International, which is an incredible organization by the way. They invited me on a private tour with Durwood visiting places of the key events we'll be discussing in this interview around Forsyth County, Georgia. I myself am a, seven year resident of Forsyth county and I didn't know about these events before meeting Derwood. It was such an eye opening and humbling experience and the more I got to understand the story, the more I realized we had to share it with you on the podcast. As you'll come to see, Forsyth county has a dark, racist past, and county residents are now working to make it a place of redemptive love. This story will certainly capture your attention and stir your heart. Let's jump in. Derwood, thank you for joining me on the Lovelight Stories podcast today. Welcome.

Derwood Sneed: Thank you so much.

We're going to talk about the expulsion of black people in Forsyth county

Devini.

Stephanie Jacobs: Yes. So we actually got introduced by a mutual friend, someone who works for Hope International, which I thought was very interesting. She used to live up in this area where we both live. She was visiting and she said, stephanie, do you want to come along? Derwood is going to be giving me a tour of some events that happened in Forsyth county, and that's what we're going to be talking about today. I'd like to just jump right into that. We're going to be talking about the expulsion of black people in Forsyth county, which, interestingly enough, is so close to home. It is in our backyard where we both live.

You moved to Forsyth County, Georgia, in 1989 with three children

So could you just start by sharing your story of moving to Cumming, Georgia, in Forsyth and how you uncovered Oscarville?

Derwood Sneed: I moved to Forsyth County, Georgia in 1989. We were already living in the Atlanta area, but when we moved here, we had three children and then we had two more. And we were kind of bursting at the seams in our house. And we began looking around for houses and we found all these cool houses that had huge bathrooms and huge foyers and I needed square footage and bedrooms because I had five children. And so finally we decided that we probably are going to need to build our house because I'm not sure we can find it. So we get looking for land and we found this lot in Forsyth County, Georgia, that met all of our criteria. It was five acres, was on a creek, was in a cool area. And Forsyth County, Georgia, was pretty rural at that point with mostly farms here. And the people around us all had the same thing, all hit five acres. So it was this cool community. This was 1988 when we actually purchased land. And the previous year, Forsyth County, Georgia, had been in the news a lot because there had been a couple of marches here in town where black people were marching and white people with them basically protesting that there were almost no black people in this county. And then Oprah Winfrey came to town in 1987 and this was her first roadshow. And she called Forsyth County, Georgia, the most racist county in America in 1987. So the next year I'm looking at this lot and thinking about buying land. And I talked to a guy who was Head of the chamber of commerce. And I said, look, are we moving to the wrong place? Is this like a racist county? And he says, oh, no. When those marches happened, there were a lot of outsiders that were causing the problems. We want black people to move here. Everything's fine. So we went ahead and bought land here, built a house, moved here in 1989. And the main reason I moved here was, obviously we needed a bigger house. But the other reason was I kind of wanted to get my kids in an area that wasn't just upwardly mobile professionals, but it was more for diversity, which is kind of an interesting thing.

Stephanie Jacobs: Yeah, it is.

Derwood Sneed: Because these were mostly country farm people that lived in Forsyth County. We were like the 10% that were newbies that were coming in. Everybody else had been here generations and generations in the past. So we move here. My son's baseball coach smoked and chewed in the dugout. I mean, it was. But they were just. There were neat people. And as I started hearing, though, about the racial thing, because I didn't even realize how few black people there were here. But the census the following year, 1990, said there were 14 black people in Forsyth county in 1990. So when I moved here, there were no more than 14 black people here.

Stephanie Jacobs: Wow.

Derwood Sneed: some people I would hear talk about that and say, I'm kind of glad because we don't have the problems of crime that they have in downtown Atlanta, and that other people like us would kind of lament the fact that there almost no black people using. Well, yeah, but that's not healthy. This. To be like this all white community.

Stephanie Jacobs: Yeah.

Derwood Sneed: Over time, the county started changing, and I knew nothing about why there were no black people here until five years ago. And five years ago, I have a little boat that's up near lake Lanier, this huge lake in our county that is partially in our county and partially in another. And I was driving to pick up my boat in the boatyard, and I saw a sign that said Oscarville way. I thought to myself, you know, there must have been a town here named Oscar ville at some point. And so I googled it that night, and as I did, I uncovered this incredible story of what happened in 1912. Here's what happened. So there were a series of racial incidents that occurred that caused unrest in the county. At the time, there were about 12,000 people in Forsyth county, and about 1100 of them were black. The black people lived all over the county, just like white people did. Very much a farming community. But on a Thursday, there was a lady named Ellen Grice, that claimed she had been raped by a black man and he had an accomplice. That was on Thursday. On Saturday, a black pastor in the county stood up in the Cumming City center and began saying, everybody knows Ellen Grice's reputation. Are you going to believe her story on this? And this black pastor got beaten within an inch of his life for saying that. That was on Saturday. On Sunday, an 18 year old white girl named May Crow went missing. She was walking for her aunt's house back to her home in this little town of Oscar Ville. They found her the next morning, unconscious, beaten, raped, and she never recovered from her injury. She died about two weeks later. And that day that they found her, which was a Monday. So all this happened between Thursday and Monday. That day, on Monday, they arrested several black people that lived on her street, which there were only a couple of families, we think black people, Owner's Creek. But they arrested several black people in the street for the crime. And the night they arrested them, a mob broke into the jail, pulled one man out named Rob Edwards, beat him to death, shot into his body, and strung him up on a telephone pole in downtown Cumming. The other prisoners were all moved downtown to Atlanta to protect them, to what was called the Atlanta Tower, which was the prison in downtown Atlanta. They were then tried, and out of that, two boys were convicted of this crime of rape, assault and murder. Ernest Knox and Oscar Daniel. They were 16 and 17 years old, black boys. I have a picture of them where they're barefooted. When they were actually escorted to the courthouse to be tried, then they were publicly hung for the crime, which actually was illegal at the time to, publicly hang anywhere. Hangings were supposed to be private. But the worst tragedy after all of this was that night riders began going around to every black home in Forsyth county, shooting into their homes, dynamiting some homes and telling them, if you don't leave immediately, we will kill you and we will burn your house. Literally within 60 days, every black person left Forsyth County, Georgia, and no black people lived here for almost 80 years. An incredible story.

Stephanie Jacobs: Yes. Hard to believe that something like that actually happened and, to hear about it even in your own county, Right. Your own backyard, you said you had lived here for, what was it, 25 years before you figured out that it had happened.

Derwood Sneed: Right. Almost 30 years. And I didn't even know.

Stephanie Jacobs: Right, right. And for me, I grew up in Minnesota and we learned about all this, our, racial history of our country. Right. In school. And to actually find out 10 years I've lived here for 10 years now, and I just learned about this. It's just always felt like it was something that had happened and it was so far away. But now living here and learning about this is so eye opening and just is so sad as well. But it feels almost surreal. Like, how could that have actually happened? I remember, too, watching the video of Oprah coming to Forsyth county in 1987, and I watched that a few years ago, and I actually didn't realize how much depth to the story there was. Again, like, just learning about this and connecting it back is very interesting, too.

Some of the families that were expelled from Forsyth County are still alive today

I'd like you to share a couple stories of some of the families that were expelled from Forsyth county and just kind of give us some depth into that to understand better, if you will.

Derwood Sneed: Absolutely. And we're discovering more and more of these, and I'll tell you why in a few minutes. But I've met now probably people from 20 or 30 families that were expelled from this county, and none of those people are alive today that were part of that expulsion. But some of their grandchildren are alive. And some of the stories have been buried and have just recently begun coming out as people start talking within their own families about it. But there was one man who was a pastor, and he had to leave the county immediately. They had to cross the Chattahoochee river, which was the closest way to get out to go to the next county, which was hall county, or, the town of Gainesville. And as he left, he got separated from his wife and he got separated from some of his children, and he never found his wife.

Stephanie Jacobs: Oh, my gosh. Wow.

Derwood Sneed: And he never found one of his children.

Stephanie Jacobs: Oh.

Derwood Sneed: The assumption was they drowned in the Chattahoochee river as they left because there were bad people on the bridge. There was one bridge that went over the river. This was long before Lake Lanier was built, because Lake Lanier was built in the 1950s. But in 1912, there was the Chattahoochee river that ran right on the edge of Forsyth County. That was the border for part of the county. Hearing that story, and then the fact that this man, when he gets to Gainesville, he has two or three other children that survive were with him. He has to start over. And in his grief, he realizes, I've still got these other children to raise and I've got to do something. And he knew how to raise chickens, so he bought some chickens, began raising them, developed a poultry business, started another church, ended up getting remarried to a black woman. Together they started a school for black kids.

Stephanie Jacobs: Wow.

Derwood Sneed: They just did all these productive things. And it's just amazing to think about, out of his grief, being so productive and so resilient and not giving up, you know, through all that.

Stephanie Jacobs: Right.

Derwood Sneed: And there was another family, the Bagley family, that had to leave. They actually went to south to what was then the area of Buckhead, which is just north of downtown Atlanta, and they got some money for their land. They were landowners here. They owned 60 acres of land in Forsyth county, and they received some money for it. It was still a fire sale price, so not very much. And when they got to the area of Buckhead, they found this one little area there, and they began buying some property and getting other black people in the area to buy property there, too. And they built their own little community, and they called it Bagley park because this one gentleman named Bagley, who had left Forsyth county and his descendants kind of became the mayor of coordinating this whole little area. Many of them work for white families that lived in that area that were wealthy as housekeepers, landscapers, all kinds of other jobs. They established a church for black people right down the street from that little community. But the white community would not allow them to have public water and sewer, and so they had outhouses. So eventually, the white people that lived on the hill above them began complaining of the stench, especially in the summertime. And they finally decided, we need to get this community out of here, because it's bringing down the whole area. It smells bad and everything. So they got expelled again. So this Bagley family, who had already been expelled in 1912 from Forsyth county in the 1940s, got expelled again from Buckhead and had to move another time. And still resilient and still restarting their lives and doing all this in the midst of racial turmoil in Atlanta. I'm just so incredibly inspired by hearing these stories of adversity, of people who didn't give up. And they decided, okay, we can either just give up and die, or we can deal with the cards that we've been played and still build a life. As you'll hear, there's some really cool people that we've met that are now young people that are going to college, getting jobs, that are all coming out of these families that come from the resilience and the grit. These families that suffered so much and yet persevered through that to achieve something significant.

Stephanie Jacobs: Right. I love that you highlighted that perseverance and the hard work and the grit.

The Forsyth descendant scholarship honors descendants of those expelled in 1912

Let's jump into that and what's being done now. And one of the things is the Forsyth descendant scholarship that you and others have established. And some other things are happening in communities in Forsyth County. So just share with us what's happening now because it's pretty inspiring.

Derwood Sneed: Okay. Yeah. After I learned about this story, I'm in this little group called the Forsyth County Ministerial Association. I'm a retired pastor, and it's a bunch of pastors and leaders of non profit ministries. So I came to them, along with a another fellow pastor of mine. We came to this group and we presented the story to all these pastors and we said, do you guys know this story? And none of them did. And so we helped them all jump in and learn more about it. And then we said, you know, we feel like we, as a group of pastors, need to do something to, number one, acknowledge what happened in 1912. And number two, something to be helpful to the next generation of these families that have been so severely persecuted, expelled, and economically impacted. So through a long bunch of discussions, we decided to begin a college scholarship for descendants of these families that were expelled in 1912. We began that in 2022. So we just completed our third year of scholarships last year. We've now awarded scholarships to 20 different recipients. We've had five of them that have graduated from college because some of them were receiving these scholarships in years other than their freshman year. But they can receive up to $10,000 per year for up to four years, their entire undergraduate time. It has been so exciting just to see that grow. But the families that have received these scholarships have all said the scholarship is really important and it's so helpful. But what's really even more important is the acknowledgement.

Stephanie Jacobs: Yeah.

Derwood Sneed: Because this has really never been acknowledged, what happened to our family. And we are so grateful that you have honored us just by acknowledging what happened. And what we began learning is that one of the reasons why black people were reluctant to come back to the county was because of the pain and the loss that occurred in 1912. And it's fascinating that even one family lost land and the older grandfather in the family would never buy land because he said, I bought it once and I lost it and I'll never buy it. I don't want that to ever happen again. So he just continued to rent because he didn't want that to happen again.

Stephanie Jacobs: Wow.

Derwood Sneed: It's interesting how experiences can shape a lot of things around our lives. So a lot of these black families that came down, their family, you do not go to Forsyth County, Georgia, because this terrible thing happened there. And it's A terrible place. And even though the county has changed so much, and as you mentioned, there's so many good things that are happening here now.

Stephanie Jacobs: Right.

Derwood Sneed: There's still the stigma and the brand that's on this county from what happened in the past. What we've learned is, and just as we've even talked with county leaders and really have talked with a lot of the African American community, is that when a traumatic event like this happens, and even though all the people are dead now that were either perpetrators of this or victims either way, even though they're all gone, that this is almost like a PTSD thing that goes on in families.

Stephanie Jacobs: Yeah, the trauma.

Derwood Sneed: Sometimes people don't even want to talk about it because it's too painful. And so one of the things that possible recipients and applicants need to do for the scholarship is to write a essay on the journey of their family after expulsion. And we've encouraged them, saying, you don't have to share any more than you want to share, but we want you to have the discussion in your family and we want you to write about it. And so many families have thanked us so much for that because they said it's opened up the Pandora's box in our family to talk about this. And these young people are so inspired when they hear some of these stories of their great great grandparents or their great grandparents, of the resilience of the perseverance and realizing these terrible things that happened to them. And some of these college students are saying, my life is a piece of cake. And maybe even the discrimination that I've experienced or some of the racial epithets that, have been thrown at me are a piece of cake compared to what my great grandparents went through. And, ah, if they could do that, I can do this, too. And I want to honor their memory by that. And, we just love that when these ancestors are inspirational to the people coming after them. But we also love the fact that a lot of these kids in their, you know, between 18 and 24, now know so much about their ancestors and their bravery and their perseverance and their grit and all those things. And we just love the fact that these families are now being brought together around a lot of these stories. But to continue, to answer your question about the county, a lot of cool things have happened here. In addition to the scholarship, there's now a remembrance marker in downtown Cumming, which is the city or the county seat for the county for Sight, to commemorate the lynching of Rob Edwards. The Remembrance Society, which is part of the museum in Montgomery, Alabama has a jar of dirt from Cumming to commemorate Rob Edwards lynching. And there's also a jar of dirt that's at the Forsyth County Historical Society here. For that, there's been a really neat renovation of a cemetery that was a black cemetery next to a black church that was destroyed in 1912. It now has all the graves identified in it, not the names, but where all the bodies are buried. They did sonar probes to figure that out. It's clean. Their crosses over each grave, they're all marked. And it's really almost a holy hallowed place. And we're trying to let more and more people in the community know about it because it's a cool place just to go and just sit for a while to realize everyone buried here are black people that were living in this county before 1912.

Stephanie Jacobs: Right, right.

Derwood Sneed: And you'd imagine what their life might have been like before that. But there's no one buried there after 1912. And so it's almost like a stoppage of time, A, time capsule to go back to this hallowed place.

Stephanie Jacobs: Right.

Derwood Sneed: We are having so many discussions about diversity in the county. And the thing we love about the scholarship is it's continuing. It's not just a one time event. It keeps the story alive for us to keep talking about it. The Atlanta History center has now picked up on the story and their main exhibit in their entry hall is the Forsyth County Story. Now it will be there for one year. They have a podcast they just released to kind of telling some things about this story.

Stephanie Jacobs: Yes. And I just listened to that.

Derwood Sneed: So a lot of neat things and momentum have been happening around all of this. But as we think about life going forward and thinking about where this county is now, it's a much more diverse county. We now have a majority minority school system. So 47% of the school system is white, but 53% is minority. We have a lot of South Asian people, We have a lot of Hispanic people. The black population is still only about 5% or just under 5% of the county. But the number of black people here now is more than the entire population of the county was in 1912.

Stephanie Jacobs: Wow, that's great.

Derwood Sneed: Yeah. And so as this diversity thing happens, we just having more and more discussions. There's a number of events going on. This next month in Black History Month in the county. During the library, the school system is having a longest table event. So there's just lots of different events and things occurring. And I feel like that it now has become something mainstream to Talk about where just four years ago, when we started this, there were a number of people that were concerned about even bringing up the past. They're m saying, why do we want to drag up things from the past that are painful? But we had to remind some of those people that for the families that were affected by this and for black people in general, this was a traumatic event. And in their mind, there was still a brand on this county as being a racist county. And the thing that we tried to help people understand is the way that you deal with that is you acknowledge it. You acknowledge what happened, you shine the light on it, and then you demonstrate that that's not who we are now.

As we begin bringing that story out, I think more people have been getting on board

But you can't say that, only you have to demonstrate it by what you do.

Stephanie Jacobs: Yeah.

Derwood Sneed: And as we begin bringing that story out, I think more and more people have been getting on board with a. That makes sense. And then especially as they reach out and talk to some black friends, say, hey, just. Just have this discussion with some black friends and see what they say. And they will all say, this was just a traumatic thing for us. And you're right, almost every black person maybe in America kind of knows the story where we white people don't.

Stephanie Jacobs: Right.

Derwood Sneed: Because it wasn't a traumatic event for us. Right. It was just something that's kind of in the deep past history.

Stephanie Jacobs: Right. And to bring it out into the light and have those discussions, really, you're creating space for that reconciliation to happen. And I've heard you say before, this isn't reparations, it's just a start. We're doing something to help out of love. And I think that's really beautiful because, I mean, if you're saying four years ago, even this conversation around what you're doing with your scholarship, it's taken that time. I mean, look how much progress has been made in four years. And to see what's happening in the county, to bring this to light and tell the story and say, hey, this happened. We're not proud of it, but that's not who we are anymore.

Derwood Sneed: Right.

Stephanie Jacobs: And I think that's just a really, really beautiful story.

Derwood Sneed: Some people have even asked, they said, I remember I was in a meeting one day and one guy asked me, so are you doing this because you feel guilt? I said, no, I don't feel guilt because I wasn't here then. But I feel deeply ashamed of what white people did in this county, in this geography, in the space. And I feel great compassion for the people that had to leave because I remember as my wife And I were reading about this. We actually wept as we imagine being some of these people that didn't do anything wrong, right? They were just living here in their homes, right? Working, and then suddenly they have to leave in shame. And as we did that, we. We really kind of wept as we thought about that, how sad that was and how terrible it would be if you imagine it being us, that someone just came to us and began shooting in our home and said, you have to leave immediately. Well, we didn't do anything. We don't care. You have to leave now, and we'll kill you if you don't. And I mean, just the awfulness of all of that is just terrible. So as I feel that shame and compassion, I feel like that that's kind of the motivation for us. And also love. You mentioned the love thing a few minutes ago. And you're right. This for a lot of our white friends, we tell them, this is not part of anything else. It's not part of any other movement. This is just simply an act of love that was started by some followers of Jesus. And now we're just inviting the whole community to be involved. And then to our black friends, we told them, look, we know this is not enough. This is not justice. This is not reparations. This is not making anything right. It's not a reckoning, but it's something. And we feel like it's better to do something than to do nothing. And just as you mentioned, it's a start, right? And through that start, hopefully, people's hearts start to soften and discussions start to happen. And I've traveled to 72 countries around the world as I. I was a missions pastor for almost 18 years, and I've been to places like Rwanda, Bosnia, and other places where there was genocide. And almost the exact same thing happened. There was one group that was threatened by another group, and through that, they dehumanize the other group, and then they're capable of almost anything against that group, when all it would have taken was a discussion in the beginning when the threat occurred, rather than reacting to the threat. You know, what if in Forsyth county, when all that stuff goes on, the mob starts going. What if some white leaders met with some black leaders privately and they said, hey, here's what we're seeing. Here's what's thinking. Tell us what's going on from your perspective. And that discussion could have occurred, and then leaders could have come out and calmed a white mob and said, wait a minute, we're overreacting. If these guys that are being tried for the crime. If they're guilty, okay, they're guilty. But why are you trying everybody else in this county without a trial?

Stephanie Jacobs: Right?

Derwood Sneed: You're just trying them in your hearts and you're kind of going through that. And here are these leaders. We trust these guys, right? These are people that we work with. You know, we live alongside each other. And I've seen that in other places around the world, too, if there was just a discussion. So one of the things we're encouraging people now to do, if there's somebody that you feel like is either your enemy or they've offended you, or you feel like they're a threat, have coffee with them, have lunch with them, maybe invite them to your house if you're not comfortable inviting hm, your house yet, at least meet at a restaurant, talk about each other's family, get to know who they are. And I've never met anybody in the world, no matter how far apart I thought we were, where I could not sit down over a meal or a cup of coffee or a cup of tea and talk about each other's family. And we couldn't be friends. I really feel like that 99% of what everybody in the world wants is the exact same thing.

Stephanie Jacobs: Right.

Derwood Sneed: We want to live in peace, want to be able to earn an income for our family, to support our family, want our children to have a better life than we did. Yes, everybody. It's a universal thing, I think, that God's been in all of us, and yet so often we're dwelling on the differences. Right. And dwelling on the threats and all those things without having a conversation. So I feel like I'm preaching, but I feel so passionate about this. We just need to have more conversations and talk to people that are different than we are.

Stephanie Jacobs: Exactly. And that's exactly what you're doing through your scholarship, too, and creating that space for these conversations to take place and even within their families, but also across the county. When you were talking about reading about what happened, which, by the way, there's a book by Patrick Phillips called Blood at the Root, you shared it with me, Derwood, and I started reading it. And I, haven't gotten too far into it yet, but it's something that I feel really compelled to read and would encourage others as well.

Derwood Sneed: He grew up here in the county, Patrick Phillips did. He's now a professor at Stanford University, and he did 10 years of research and writing this book and trying to identify the events that occurred and present them Right.

Stephanie Jacobs: And as a resident of Forsyth county and really just of the United States, right where we had a lot of racial history take place. I really feel like there's a responsibility to understand what happened here. But as you were talking about, you reading through that story for the first time and thinking about if that were my family, and all of a sudden Knight Riders came through, started burning my house and telling me I had to leave. To just walk away from literally everything you own and everything you've worked for, just that in itself is hard to fathom, I guess, and so traumatic. But then also I've heard you talk about too, the emotional and psychological impact that this has had on those families and then the future generations of those families through the loss and the shame that has taken place. And I think that's part of what you're stirring up to some degree in allowing these current generations to figure out the story and write and share about that, for the scholarship to be able to reconcile some of that within their family too, just is really beautiful on a lot of levels.

Forsyth county events actually happened after emancipation in 1912

I wanted to get into talking about getting up and leaving everything you own and really that generational wealth that has been lost. Right. The opportunity cost of having land and it being taken from you. In my mind, as I was thinking through this, it's really a story that has a long standing impact that helps us better understand this racial discussion on more of a macro lens through this micro story, if you will. If we can come to understand what happened here in Forsythe county and how you can really see that impacting future generations, you can begin to understand the greater narrative of our country and what happened in our country in the past with the enslavement. And then we had the emancipation proclamation in 1863. These Forsyth county events actually happened after that, after the emancipation in 1912. And it's taken us so many years to move forward where we are today. Yet there's so much to be done still. And that's why what you're doing is so wonderful to help us move forward these conversations.

Derwood Sneed: You know, it's interesting too, just as you mentioned, that to think about 1912 was 49 years after the Emancipation Proclamation. Now I've been married for 51 years. It's crazy to think about. It wasn't that long, right. You know, after slaves were emancipated and now they're kicked out of this county. I've got the slave records for this county there. At one point, I think it was 1860. I think there were 900 slaves in Forsyth county, something like that.

Stephanie Jacobs: Wow.

Derwood Sneed: They've Got those census records that show all that. We don't know their names that were here. But it's amazing to think about it. It was only 49 years later that all those people were expelled. So they were freed 49 years before. We think there were some others that moved here, some other families, but we feel like probably a lot of the families that were here right after emancipation had been slaves. Those families were still here.

Stephanie Jacobs: Right.

Derwood Sneed: A lot of the names are the same between the black families and the white families, which indicates that because most black families were named, with the last name of the white family that owned them. That's really kind of a fascinating thing for me to think about, too, how soon it was after that. And on one hand, they got emancipated. They were still in the county for 49 years. 49 years later, they had to all leave. And so the history that black people had in this county went back pretty long.

Stephanie Jacobs: Yes, exactly.

Derwood Sneed: I mean, we don't know when they all came here, but most certainly, most of these families were here way before the Civil War and were all enslaved. That's just kind of a fascinating thing to really think about. And as I think about right now, 50 years is just. I mean, you're young. Seems like a long time to you, but really, it's not that long.

Stephanie Jacobs: Right, right.

Derwood Sneed: To realize the rapid changes that were occurring in this country during that time period. I mean, literally, it was six years before or seven years before 1906, that there were the Atlanta race riots and what they call the massacre in Atlanta, where there was an actual shootout in Atlanta. White people and black people shooting each other. And people from both sides died. But a lot more black people died than white people. And most of that actually started from what I could read, as a result of white business people being upset that white people were going to black businesses and giving them their business. The white business people got upset about it because we're losing business, these black businesses. So there was this riot that occurred, and my understanding is, through that there was a line of demarcation through Atlanta that kind of codified segregation. After that. Oh, saying, you black people don't come over here, we white people won't go over there, and that way we can have peace. You do your business with your people, we do our business with our people. But it's so interesting how, economics so often is a part of the story.

Stephanie Jacobs: Yes.

Derwood Sneed: You mentioned the whole loss thing. You're right. And so there were, best we can tell, about 58 landowners that were black in Forsyth county in 1912. There's one guy named Elliot Jespin that wrote a book called, I think it was called beyond the Troubled Waters. And he actually did a lot of research to try to figure out what happened with all that land. And he found some transactions that occurred, but he found that many of those black landowners simply could not come back and pay their taxes. So as a result, their land went to tax auction, and then someone else paid the taxes and then own, that land. It's hard to realize exactly what all that is worth now. But, I mean, one, the kellogg family owned 200 acres. The Strickland family, which later were the Bagleys, they owned 60 acres. And then there were others that own, small amounts of land. But all that land is worth a lot of money now. Now, we don't know all those black families would have kept it in their family or they might have sold it or whatever that's there. But there was certainly huge loss there. But in addition, think about the 1100 black people that lived in the county that were just doing menial jobs, that if they had stayed, they would have participated in the rapid economic growth of this county, which this county is in, I think, top 20 counties in America now in income per person.

Stephanie Jacobs: Right. It's one of the wealthiest. Yes.

Derwood Sneed: Yeah. We have the best school system in the state now. And black people, in fact, that have moved back here have told us they're so glad they did because it's such a great place for them to get their kids educated and to raise their families. But you think about the disruption in all these black families that lived here then, and if they simply had all stayed, they would have all participated, you know, this rapid growth that occurred overall here in the county, and they missed out on that. We've stayed away from reparations because we say reparations is a government responsibility, that they need to figure that out. But at the same time, there's no question about the fact that there was huge loss. And then we go back to slavery. You're right. The, implications for our country are such that that was crazy to think about. Whoever had the crazy idea of bringing all these black people all together? I think I saw the numbers of 335,000, roughly.

Stephanie Jacobs: Wow.

Derwood Sneed: Africans that were brought here to the United States during the time of slavery. I mean, other black people have moved here, but that was certainly the genesis of our black population that's still here today of 40 some million people or whatever that number is today. And then to realize that it would have Been. I mean, this is crazy. Would have been so much cheaper to pay them than to have the Civil War.

Stephanie Jacobs: That's true, yeah.

Derwood Sneed: I mean, the Civil War, every life lost in the Civil War was American. All m this death, all this destruction was money. But in many ways, it almost seems like the Civil War was a reckoning. Abraham Lincoln said this in his second inaugural address. It's actually in the Lincoln Memorial. You read it? I'm paraphrasing.

Slavery has been around since even before the Roman Empire

But he said, you know, we're now engaged in this huge conflict in our country, and who knows, but that the Almighty may be reaping a, reckoning in our country on the backs of all the black people, the Africans that we've enslaved and we've treated so badly. And we'll never know obviously, how all of that works. And yet it is just, I think we need to think about all this stuff, though, and learn from it. And taking shortcuts, like forcing somebody into labor because it's cheaper. Right now it's just a bad deal all the way around. Right. I mean, it's awful just to think about that. And slavery's been around since even before the Roman Empire, so it's been around for almost forever. And it's one of these evils that's been in the world for so long.

Stephanie Jacobs: Yes.

Derwood Sneed: But as we've seen that and how bad it is in so many other places, incredible that we adopted that, especially in a country that was based on freedom and liberty.

Stephanie Jacobs: Yeah. Ironic, right?

Derwood Sneed: For all, right.

Stephanie Jacobs: Yes.

Derwood Sneed: But really not for all yet. And as we even see some of the writings of our founding leaders, like Thomas Jefferson, even, you know, they talk about, yeah, we know we need to fix that, but not yet. Thomas Jefferson owned slaves himself. And even at his death, my understanding was that the slaveholder, all the slave holdings that he has, are the only thing that kept his estate out of bankruptcy because he had spent so lavishly with all of his interests and everything in architecture and things like that. And so he wouldn't free his slaves even at his death, because that was the one thing that he had to leave. But anyway, these kind of compromises are things that we just need to be thinking about and they're just not worth it. And it's an awful thing to think about taking advantage of someone else just so that I can enrich myself.

Stephanie Jacobs: Yeah. And it's very short sighted because really when you think about your purpose of your life on earth is to look towards heaven and one day that is the ultimate destination and to take shortcuts on this earth, by harming and hurting and enslaving other people, certainly maybe gives you a comfortable life on earth, but it doesn't lead to, what God has for you in heaven. So.

Derwood Sneed: Right. Even joy here.

Stephanie Jacobs: Yes, yes. Right. When I say comfortable, I say like, like transactionally. But it definitely wouldn't be the way to live on earth either.

Jordan: Forsyth County could become known as the county of love

I just keep coming back to this concept, and I, think it hits me so strongly because there's been this narrative around this racial conversation in the last four or five years nationally, right around. We need to understand the past, to be able to understand why there still is this racial divide in a lot of ways. And we've made so much progress, but why we have so to go. And I think it really does begin by understanding these stories. You can see through this story how, again, the actual wealth, intangibility of land and everything that was lost leads forward into these generations. You think about your parents or your grandparents and passing on wealth or whatever it might be, that really does affect you. That's why I think what you're doing with the scholarship, while it's not reparations at all, but you're trying to acknowledge and m. Help them getting through school and stuff that way, is a tangible thing that shows we care. We care about you and we care about what happened. I just thank you so much for opening up these conversations, of course, in this county, but just nationally, too, and globally, like you're saying, slavery and all these similar things continue to happen around the world. And this evil that's taking place. And so really, as we look at what the narrative of today is, it's really. I've heard you say it's a redemption story. Right. The most racist county in America can become one known for love.

Derwood Sneed: That's our dream. That, like you mentioned, the county that Oprah Winfrey called the most racist in America in 1987. Our dream is that we would get known all over the world as the county of Love. And then that. That would be such an inspiration of people thinking if that could happen in Forsyth County, Georgia, it literally can happen anywhere.

Stephanie Jacobs: Yes.

Derwood Sneed: And so we have all kinds of ideas around that. But the thing that is so cool to me is I feel like that the leaders of our county are united around that as a vision now. And love just seems to be a driving factor. And, I mean, how do you turn that down?

Stephanie Jacobs: Right?

Derwood Sneed: You present them to someone who's the head of the county or the Hill County Commission or whatever. Of course we want that, but I mean, it's Interesting to have that as a guiding light is how do we show love? I see it talked about so much more, and, I mean, we're just one little part of this whole thing, what we're doing with the scholarship. But I love the fact that we're just having that conversation more and more, and people are talking about love. What does that look like? Like, we just had a policeman die that had actually saved a lot of lives back in 2014 when that was an attack in our corporate courthouse, and he just died the other day. And people are just talking about how this man loved so many people and his family's being surrounded by love. As we even think about all the newer ethnic groups that have been moving into our county over the last few years and how they've grown so much, there's lots of discussion about how do we show love to them and what does that look like when you've got someone from a different culture that might not feel as comfortable reaching out their hand first because they're the new people, and somebody who's already here needs to be the first one to reach out their hand and welcome them. Like, one of the things that we're thinking about the future. This is kind of dreaming a little bit. Is maybe a memorial or a marker at some point that could have a depiction of the past. And, maybe it's an archway that talks about 1912 and the awful stuff that happened then. But on the other side, there are people of different ethnic groups with their hands out, welcoming people into the county. I love that there could be some South Asian people there or a little Native American girl or an African American girl, all with their hands out. You're welcome here. This is a place of love. We would love to have more and more depictions like that just to remind people and our, I know that in the Bible, right after Joshua was leading the people of Israel over the Jordan river, and they were instructed to have one person from each of their tribes go back and get a rock out of the Jordan river and to build a little altar. And then they said, well, so why are we doing this? He said, we're doing it so your children will come and see this and your grandchildren will see it and say, what is this? Oh, let us tell you the story.

Stephanie Jacobs: Yes, yes.

Derwood Sneed: Of how, this river parted. We came over the river safely, and then it went back. And see, I would love to have something like that where kids and grandkids. I mean, your child at some point could go and say, hey, mom and dad, what is this? Oh, let's tell you the story of what happened here. There's some bad things that happen in this place, but that's not who we are now. And it's a redemption story that God changes everything and makes awful things beautiful. That's what our hope is for this county. I feel like we've made so much progress towards that, but we know progress never stops and love never ends. And truth is the best thing for everybody because truth gets everything out of the table. People see it and through, that they acknowledge it. And then we can deal with the future in a way that's hopefully better when that truth reveals something evil from the past.

Stephanie Jacobs: Right, right. Shining the light on it. Yes. I love that this story in general and what you're working towards as a county or people in the county. Right. Working towards this place of redemption and conversation and all of that. It really is just such a perfect type of story, even for this show. Because what we try to do here is understand people's stories and learn from that and come and find the love and the light and really, in a lot of ways creating this county of love and the redemption story that exists or is starting to form. Right. Is such a beautiful depiction of that.

Everything that Forsights Scholarship does is based on private donations

So I want to thank you, Derwood, for just taking the time to join me today on this podcast and sharing the story of Forsyth county and leading, the charge in a lot of ways to move this county forward and be a beacon of light and hope and love for the rest of the world, really. So thank you for being here. Before we go, I want to just ask, how can listeners learn more about this?

Derwood Sneed: We have a website that is www.forsightscholarship.org and it has the background history, it has the information on how people apply for the scholarship, but it also has a donate button. Everything that we do is based on private donations. All of us that work on this are volunteers, so no one gets paid. All the money goes to scholarships and just a few administrative costs just to make all that happen. That's it. Just www.forsightscholarship.org.

Stephanie Jacobs: Thank you for that. And, you mentioned the Atlanta History center too, the exhibit that's out. And they also have a five part podcast series that digs into this as well. I listen to it. It's really great. I can link that. I'll also link the book by Patrick Phillips, Blood at the Root. And then there was a few other things that I personally listened to that I will link for listeners who want to dig into this more, because it was really Great. Be the Bridge podcast did an episode with you, which I'll link for our listeners. And thank you so much. This was a wonderful conversation. Derwood, I absolutely love this and it's even extra special to learn about this just because it's in our own backyard and a lot of our listeners too are local. So for those who want to go out and even see these, the dedication plaque, incoming or the church cemetery and things like that, I mean, it's all right here, so makes it very tangible and real. So thank you for sharing this story and bringing it to light. Wow. What a story, right?

The Forsyth Descendants Scholarship honors African-American descendants of 1912

There's so much to say here. But first I want to thank Derwood for having the curiosity to help uncover this story, courage to shine light on it, and compassion to do something about it. As a resident of Forsyth county myself, this story is deeply moving for me and also stirs up a bit of shame in the fact I wasn't even aware of it sooner. Yet I. I do believe it's because the story was swept under the rug until now. Thanks to Durwood and the other volunteers helping to share this history through the Forsyth Descendants Scholarship. What did this story stir inside of you? As we discussed in this interview, I hope you were able to better understand racism and its effects on a macro level in our country through this micro level lens. Today's descendants are still affected by Forsyth County's racist past and understanding this can help us begin to understand how similar events have affected our entire country throughout history. I, like how Durwood explained that the Forsyth Descendants Scholarship isn't reparations for what was done, but rather doing something out of love. We can't repair what was done, but we can shine a light on it and acknowledge the hurt. If you listen to the five part podcast series through the Atlanta History center, you'll hear from the actual descendants who've received a scholarship and hear what it means to them. You'll hear inspiring accounts of their gratitude in the chance to honor their ancestors and the perseverance and resilience they have to succeed in their own life by honoring and remembering their ancestors. It really is beautiful. I love how Durwood shared that a place known for hatred can now become one known for love. Their vision is to become one of the most open, reconciled and welcoming counties in the nation. It's beautiful, isn't it? Now there's quite a few ways you can learn more and get involved. First, you can still see the Oscarville Way sign that sparked Erwin's initial search. You can see where May Crow was buried the Methodist Episcopal Church Cemetery where a lot of black residents were buried at the time, the dedication plaque where Rob Outdoors was lynched, and more. These are all places Derwood took us on our tour around the community. As Durwood mentioned. You can go to forsythscholarship.org to check out more about the history of Forsyth county, learn more about the Forsyth Descendant Scholarship and donate too. Check out the Atlanta History center to experience the current exhibit of the Forsyth county expulsion events and listen in to their five part podcast series digging deeper into the story. You can also listen to Durwood share more about this story on the Be the Bridge Podcast with Latasha Morrison and you can watch a video produced by Stay Tuned, which is an NBC News brand to see clips of real events that took place in 1912. Lastly, you can grab a copy of Blood at the A Racial Cleansing in America by Patrick Phillips. It's Rated as the 100 Notable Books by the New York Times Book Review and it is a great book. I am currently reading it. I am very interested being a Forsyth county resident, of course, and if you have interest in learning more about this, I would highly recommend it. So all of these things are linked in the show notes for you. I just had to point them out and that's all for today's episode.

Send us your heartmail so we can feature it on upcoming episodes

Lovelies did this episode touch your heart? If you love today's story and have a relatable experience to share encouraging words for our guests or just want to share a comment, go to the Show Notes for this episode and send us what we like to call heartmail for a chance to have your note feed featured on an upcoming episode. If there's a large response to any particular story, we might just bring that guest back on the show to dive into your comments or even have them join us as a guest in the Lovelight Stories Facebook community. It's as easy as sending us a voice message or written note, both easily accessible in today's Show Notes, Simply go to stephaniemjacobsm.com and click on the Stories tab. So give it a try. Send us your heartmail. I just can't wait to hear what's on your heart. And hey, thank you so much for listening to this podcast and leaning into today's story. And don't forget, you can subscribe to the show wherever you listen to your podcast so you don't ever miss an episode. And a great way you can support these conversations is to rate the show and leave a review. And if you have a friend who would like these stories, share it with them too. All of these things are the best way you can support this podcast. So thank you. And until next time, lovelies, keep radiating that love and light to everyone you meet.