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An Act of Courage: Fighting Voter Suppression

NOVEMBER 4, 2016

NO COMMENTS



By Keith Griffith

GOULD, Ark. — The last time there was a presidential election in this cotton-farming town of 818, William El-Amin, the former local police chief, noticed something unusual.

El-Amin grew up in Little Rock, where he worked as a probation and parole officer before joining the Gould Police Department in 2011. Like 90 percent of the town's population, he's African-American.

After Gould's polls closed in the 2012 presidential election, he escorted the sheriff's deputy transporting Gould's ballot box to the courthouse in Star City. At some point on the journey, the deputy driving in front of him pulled over. El-Amin also pulled over but stayed in his cruiser, and nobody exited the deputy's vehicle for several minutes. Finally, both cars pulled back on the road and resumed the trip to the courthouse.

When they got there, the seal on the ballot box had been broken.

Elections in the United States are regulated by the states and implemented at the local level, one county at a time. In recent weeks, Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump began leveling broad claims, thus far unsubstantiated, that the Nov. 8 election will be "rigged" against him through systematic voter fraud at the polls.

But for community activists and voting rights supporters nationwide, the concern is not a massive conspiracy orchestrated in Beltway backrooms. The real threat to the democratic process, they say, lies in polling places with little outside oversight —places like Gould.

Soon after moving to Gould, El-Amin joined the Gould Citizens Advisory Council (GCAC), which focuses on voter engagement and local government accountability. There, he heard other stories of election irregularities: voter intimidation, misleading instructions from poll workers, changes to polling locations with little notice.

The GCAC has faced intense backlash. In 2011, Gould's City Council tried to ban the advisory group from holding meetings within city limits, passing an ordinance accusing the group of "causing confusion and discourse among the citizens."

The ordinance, an extraordinary violation of the constitutional right to assembly and free speech, was quickly overturned. But the attempt speaks to the animosity toward civic engagement that still simmers in rural communities such as Gould.

For voting rights activists, the upcoming election carries particular concerns. Three years after a U.S. Supreme Court ruling struck down a key provision of the Voting Rights Act, this presidential election will be the first since 1964 without widespread protection of federal election observers.

Gould's grocery stores, shops and bank are shuttered now. The local schools, which in practice never integrated, shut down in 2006. Nearly all of the town's white residents have moved away.

Allegations of voter suppression in Arkansas extend to the state government as well. In 2015, a judge struck down a controversial voter identification law as unconstitutional. In July 2016, the Arkansas secretary of state circulated a flawed list that purged nearly 8,000 people from the voter registration rolls, ostensibly because they were still serving out a penalty on felony convictions. The list in fact included almost 4,000 who had never been convicted of a felony, and others whose voting rights had been restored. State officials blamed a database mix-up.

El-Amin believes the resurgence of racially motivated voter suppression tactics is driven in part by backlash to the 2008 election of President Barack Obama.

"You had more African Americans and Hispanics voting than ever before," he said. "Their solution to the problem was voter suppression."

In 2013, the GCAC and other local groups brought a proposal to push election reform legislation to the Citizens First Congress (CFC), a multi-issue coalition of about 50 Arkansas organizations coordinated by the Arkansas Public Policy Panel.

CFC helped draft language for two bills that passed in the state Legislature later that year: one doubling the number of statewide election monitors to four and another requiring that all poll workers in the state complete mandatory training. [Previously, only one official at each polling place had to have election training.]

It was a major victory for the civic group from Gould. Now, they hope to build on that success.

El-Amin moved on in 2015 to become the police chief of Eudora, another Arkansas cotton Delta town. He hopes to organize a local citizens group there similar to Gould's.

The upcoming election will be El-Amin's first in Eudora. "I'm hoping everything is ran smoothly, but if not..." he said, trailing off. "I have a bad taste in my mouth about what I might see going on."

Keith Griffith, a freelance journalist in New York City, writes for Equal Voice News, which is published by Marguerite Casey Foundation.

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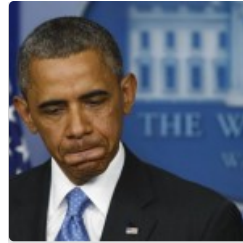
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Volume XXV, Number 312

November 24-30, 2016

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Dozens answered the call for Shelton's Bear Creek Cemetery

By Rob Ferguson
NDG Editor



Last week the North Dallas Gazette carried a story "A call for action to honor the quiet heroism of Shelton's Bear Creek Cemetery" throughout the pages of its regular issue part of Ashlee Anderson's regular feature on the range of Third Region's forgotten heroes. The fact, a cemetery that predates the end of the Civil War and was awarded a historical marker by the Texas Historical Commission, Shelton's Bear Creek was an obvious way to support donors for the better stories from the past.

On Saturday, Nov. 19 many volunteers answered the call for help to cleanup Shelton's Bear Creek, showing up early on a cool Sunday morning. One volunteer drove down from Lakewood to lead a helping hand. Together the volunteers, young and old alike, cleared brush, pulled weeds, cleaned out existing graves and graves, cleaned the graves and graves, cleaned the graves and graves. The volunteers and their families, who had over 10 volunteers on Saturday, who cleaned a ton of dirt from this sacred ground in a

Afterward, the group a meeting

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By Johnnie Martinez
NDG Contributor

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