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Richmond attorneys clean vandalized plaque honoring civil-rights pioneer

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Jackie Stone (right) and a colleague clean the plaque honoring Oliver Hill Sr. after it was vandalized. Courtesy photo/Sam Tarry Jr.

For Richmond attorney Jackie Stone, seeing the historical marker on Main Street honoring Oliver Hill Sr. serves as a reminder not just of the late civil rights attorney's legal legacy, but of the path he helped blaze for African Americans in the legal community.

So when the marker was vandalized with crude language during last weekend's protests, Stone decided to act.

"The thought of walking by there and seeing those words on his sign, as members of the community we have to do what we can," Stone said Friday afternoon. "Just in our small way of going to clean the sign off, we wanted to take responsibility for correcting that problem.

"The more people are willing to do their part to address what we see around us, what ills we're confronting, that's how we're going to take it to the next level."

On Tuesday, Stone, Sam Tarry Jr. and Tracy Walker, all partners at McGuireWoods, grabbed some cleaning supplies provided by their building at Gateway Plaza – and using a healthy dose of “elbow grease,” she said – scrubbed the obscenity that had been spray-painted on the marker out of sight.

“He was such a very special man,” said Stone, a graduate of the University of Virginia and Harvard Law School.

“To be able to do what we could do to honor and preserve his legacy, that’s something that meant a lot to me.”

In February, Richmond unveiled a pair of historical markers honoring two of the city’s most important and accomplished civil rights attorneys – Hill and Spottswood Robinson – along Main Street.

Hill, who was born in Richmond in 1907, practiced law for nearly 60 years before retiring in 1998. The following year, President Bill Clinton awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom. He died in 2007, at the age of 100.

He and Robinson both worked on the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case that helped lead to the desegregation of schools nationwide.

At some point during last weekend’s civil rights protests, spurred by the death of George Floyd while in the custody of Minneapolis police, Hill’s marker and the buildings along that block were vandalized. Robinson’s marker did not appear to be defaced.

Had Stone and Tarry not stepped in to clean the marker, it’s unclear when it would have been done.

The Virginia Department of Transportation is responsible only for the maintenance of historical markers along roads it oversees, said Julie Langan, director of the state Department of Historic Resources. Markers in the city,

where Richmond is responsible for its own streets, are a “gray area,” and funding for their upkeep can be hard to come by.

In the latest proposed budget, Langan said, \$200,000 is earmarked for repairs like what the Hill marker needed, but that money is on hold due to the financial impact of COVID- 19.

That makes Stone’s efforts even more significant, said Langan, describing her as a “good Samaritan.”

“It’s on case-by-case basis that we try to find a solution,” Langan said Friday. “That’s kind of where we are unfortunately. It’s a problem still waiting for a solution.”

Stone’s affinity for Hill and his life’s work isn’t purely historical. Hill was a colleague of her father, former Williamsburg attorney and judge William Stone, thought to be the first black judge in the commonwealth in modern times.

She knew Hill as she grew up in Williamsburg, and the relationship continued when she began practicing law in Richmond in 1984.

Stone said she believes Hill would be encouraged to see his work for equal rights continue.

“I think Mr. Hill would realize that his hard work and his tireless efforts, they had an impact then and continue to have an impact,” she said. “He helped get us pointed in the right direction. We owe so much to him and his colleagues.”

Hill’s son, a psychology professor at Virginia State University, agreed, especially when he looks at the diversity of those who turned out to march and protest last weekend.

“The whole community is involved,” Oliver Hill Jr. told the Richmond Times-Dispatch this month. “When you look at the protesters, there’s such diversity. ... I think those kind of moments are turning points in history.”

mbarber@timesdispatch.com @RTD_MikeBarber

