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Erika Alexander, Whitney Dow on the Pursuit for Reparations in 'The Big Payback'

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The movement to provide reparations to Black American descendants of slaves is gaining momentum in the U.S. and Evanston, Illinois, a small Chicago suburb of about 74,000 residents, is one of the communities at the center of the conversation. Now a new documentary keys in on how the town became the first in the nation to fund a years-long reparations effort.

Filmmaker Whitney Dow and actress Erika Alexander co-directed 'The Big Payback' which focuses on the efforts of Robin Rue Simmons, a founder of the non-profit FirstRepair and former Evanston alderman. The film premiered ahead of Juneteenth — a federal holiday observing the end of slavery in the United States — on one of the film industry's most illustrious stages: the 2022 Tribeca Film Festival in New York.

With Evanston's groundbreaking move in becoming the first U.S. city to begin distributing reparations to its Black residents this year, the film's debut under a national spotlight is fitting. The program in Evanston could help shape the framework for a federal program, according to Dow. He noted that local and state governments have to lead the charge if there is to be real movement on the issue of reparations.



(L-R) Ben Amon, Erika Alexander, Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee, Joy Ann Reid, Alderwoman Robin Rue Simmons, Xan Parker, Whitney Dow, and guest attend "The Big Payback" Premiere during the 2022 Tribeca Festival at Village East Cinema on June 11, 2022, in New York City. (Photo by John Lamparski/Getty Images for Tribeca Festival)

"Let's be honest, the federal government follows, it doesn't lead. It codifies things that are already in place," he told Cheddar. "There's a big local reparations movement, and what that allows is, it allows individual communities to actually come to terms with the concept in their own way. That is going to make it possible to imagine what it looks like on a national level."

The documentary also highlights Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee (D-Texas, 18th District) as she continues the more than 30-year fight to establish a federal commission to study and create a reparations plan for Black Americans through H.R.40. While there is still a long way to go on the federal level, Jackson Lee recently pushed for a vote, saying in February that the House of Representatives finally had enough support to pass the legislation, though it is unclear whether or not it would pass in the Senate.

What's clear from the film is how both women persevere through obstacles as they inch closer toward the ultimate goal of achieving a path toward reparations.

In Evanston, Simmons worked to earmark up to \$10 million over the course of 10 years from a sales tax on legal marijuana purchases — even before a concrete plan was established. The city council later approved a plan that will use those earmarked funds to provide \$25,000 homeowner loans to Black Evanston residents. However, there is a caveat. Current residents must be relatives of people who were discriminated against between 1919 and 1969. This was a time when Evanston's growing Black population experienced housing discrimination through redlining and city zoning ordinances. After a decade, those loans would be completely forgiven for residents still living in their homes

Who Gets What and How Much?

However, the concept of reparations, especially on the federal level, can be vast and complex. Since former Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich., 13th District) first introduced H.R. 40 in 1989, one of the issues that has muddied up the process is figuring out which Black Americans would be eligible for payment. Quantifying an amount owed to descendants of slaves has also been a thorn in the side of reparations progress. Alexander and Dow explore the topic in their film.

"This idea of who gets it is the big question. Is this for descendants of African slaves because, I think everyone agrees, a multi-generational descendant of African slaves has a different experience in America than someone who has immigrated from Africa in 1990. There's more immigrants from Africa since 1990 to now than came over in the entire slave trade. So how do you navigate that," Dow said.



A person walks a dog past a street sign reading "Welcome to Evanston" in the predominantly Black 5th Ward in Evanston, Ill., Tuesday, May 4, 2021. The Chicago suburb is preparing to pay reparations in the form of housing grants to Black residents who experienced housing discrimination. (AP Photo/Shafkat Anwar)

For Alexander, who admittedly is no expert on reparations, it was important to not only showcase two Black women in positions of power but also a look at how the government can be held accountable for its part in the slave-trade. She told Cheddar that in learning more for the film about reparations and the policies blatantly targeting Black Americans over the years, she was surprised how extensive and long-reaching slavery's impact was and continues to be today.

"What I am is a witness to watching other people do it. We're inside of a movement so what we're doing is documenting that movement," she told Cheddar. "We're asking the U.S. government to redress it and so that stands not in proxy, it is the thing that oppressed. It is this systemic thing."

Taking Charge

While the U.S. government is no stranger to the idea of reparations, as it has granted some funds to Native Americans and Japanese Americans interned during WWII and even made a great effort to aid Jewish survivors and descendants of the Holocaust in receiving compensation from nations where it took place. Still, Black Americans have not seen federally-sanctioned redress for racial discrimination.



Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee (D-TX) speaks at a press conference on H.R. 40 legislation on Capitol Hill on November 16, 2021, in Washington, DC. (Photo by Anna Moneymaker/Getty Images)

A report from the Brookings Institution found that a solid plan around reparation could help narrow the staggering wealth gap between Black and white Americans, but not everyone agrees that it's the right course of action. A 2019 AP-NORC poll found that while 75 percent of Black respondents supported federal reparations for the descendants of slaves, only 15 percent of white respondents agreed.

"It's not a question of accusing someone and saying this is your responsibility, but I think that we all have this desire to be part of a community, an equitable community, and if you believe that, I think you should look at your fellow Americans and recognize that your success — our success — as white people is absolutely connected to systems of discrimination of the past. And it's not an attack on you, it's actually something that I think will free you to feel better about living in the world," Dow said.

The co-directing duo looks to continue the conversation on reparations at Harlem's Apollo Theater on Juneteenth, Sunday, June 19, 2022, with a free viewing of 'The Big Payback'. Alexander said that the fight for reparations is a never-ending battle and by bringing this film to the public, she's doing her part in running the race.

"There is no end to this. You just have to keep going. This is your leg of the race. It's a relay race. Harriet Tubman tossed it to other people, John Brown tossed it," she said. "We take our mandate, you run as far as you can and do the best you can."

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