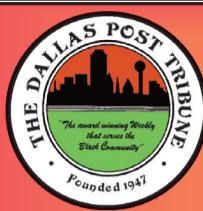


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VOLUME 78 NUMBER 15

SERVING THE BLACK COMMUNITY WITHOUT FEAR OR FAVOR SINCE 1947

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January 8 - 14, 2026

M.L.K. DAY



Photo Credit: The HUB

**Dallas ISD
names finalists
in annual
MLK Jr.
oratory
competition**

By The Hub

Dallas ISD students will once again take center stage in the annual MLK Jr. Oratory Competition, presented by Foley & Lardner LLP.

The competition, which celebrates the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., invites fourth- and fifth-grade

Continue MLK Page 2

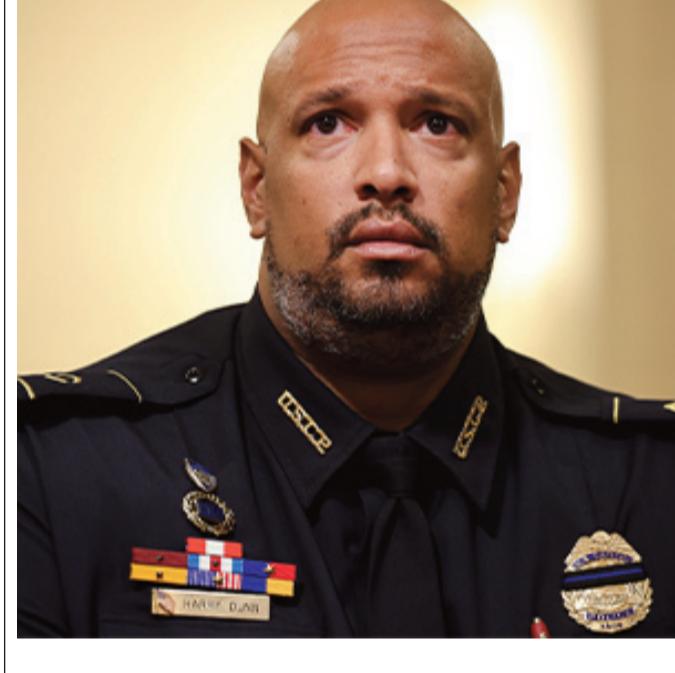


Photo Credit: NNPA Files

By Stacy M. Brown

On the fifth anniversary of January 6, a date now fixed in the American conscience, Capitol Police Officer Harry Dunn returned to the moment that altered his life and the nation's course. Appearing on "Let It Be Known," Dunn spoke about the unforgettable day that's shaped by time, pain, and resolve, revisiting what he has called the worst day of his life.

Dunn joined the United States Capitol Police in 2008 and has served as a Private First Class since 2011. His career placed him on duty for presidential inaugurations, joint sessions of Congress, State of the

Union addresses, and hundreds of peaceful protests. As a Crisis Intervention Officer on the USCP Crisis Negotiation Team, he was trained for hostage situations, barricades, and mental health emergencies. None of that training, he said, prepared him for January 6, 2021.

"I lived the worst day of my life on national TV," Dunn said.

Five years later, Dunn said something he had not always been able to say.

"I've healed from that trauma," he said, referring to his personal wounds from that day.

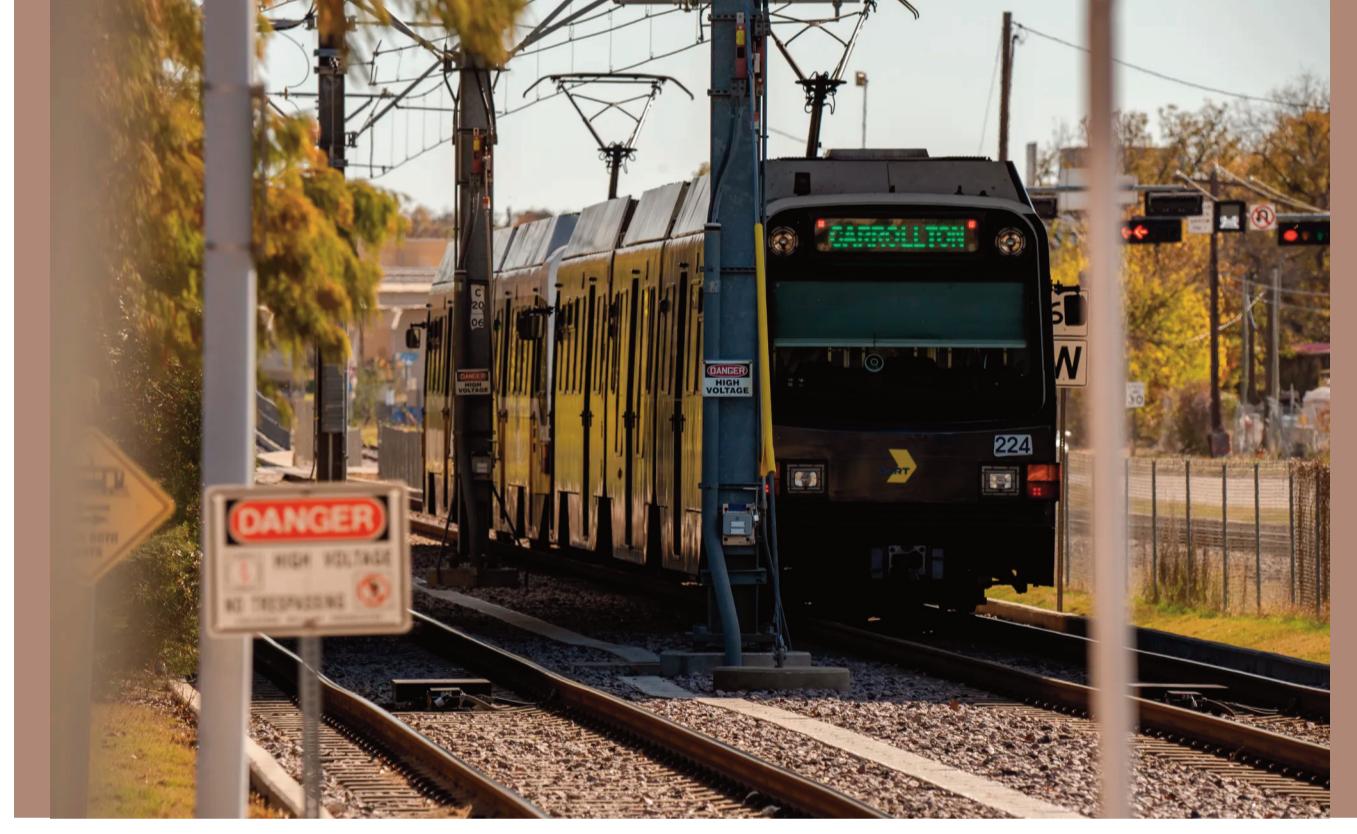
The healing, which he

made clear, did not mean forgetting. Dunn said it is possible to recover personally while remaining troubled by what continues to unfold in the country.

"As we look around at the things that are going on," he said, "it's hard to be okay with everything. If you're okay right now, I feel like you're kind of like a callous soul."

Dunn said he remains focused on what he can change and where his voice still matters. January 6, he noted, made him known to much of the world, but it did not define the limits of his

Continue Worst Page 3



Voters in four Dallas suburbs are expected to vote on whether their cities should leave DART, the state's largest public transit system. Photo Credit: Johnathan Johnson for The Texas Tribune

North Texas' largest public transit system may come undone in 2026

Joshua Fechter, The Texas Tribune

DALLAS — A suburban mutiny against North Texas' largest public transit agency threatens to upend how tens of thousands of Texans get around in the state's most populated urban area — at a time state transportation planners say the state needs more public transit.

A quartet of Dallas suburbs — Plano, Irving, Farmers Branch and High-

land Park — plan to vote in May on whether to leave Dallas Area Rapid Transit, or DART, following years of tensions between the suburbs and the North Texas region's transit agency. Suburban officials complain that for how much they shell out to fund buses and light rail, their residents hardly

Continue Transit Page 5

IN MEMORIAM: Media Icon and Pioneer Thomas H. Watkins, Jr. Daily Challenge Publisher, Is Remembered and Honored

Written by David Miller

Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn-raised Thomas Henry Watkins founder, owner, and publisher of the New York Daily Challenge, passed away on Friday, December 19, 2025.

"I am sad to hear of the passing of a legitimately acclaimed Black giant in the person of Tom Watkins," the Rev. Al. Sharpton Jr. told Our Time Press.

Dr. Ben Chavis, President and CEO of the National Newspaper Publishers Association (NNPA) and long-time friend, associate and col-

league of Mr. Watkins, told Our Time Press, "Thomas Watkins was an icon in the evolution of the Black press of America. He was the former chairman of the NNPA and was an outspoken leader who cherished the value of truth-telling for freedom, justice, and equality.

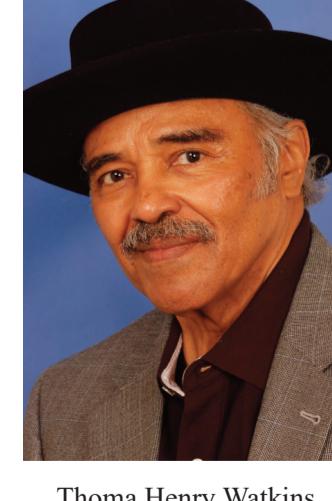
Our responsibility today is to keep the legacy of Thomas Watkins alive and impactful."

Succumbing to health challenges, Tommy Watkins, a key figure in the Brooklyn community for

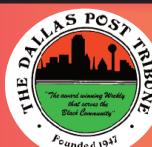
decades, was the smooth, charismatic, cowboy hat-wearing, community-centered businessman, that many around the state can point to receiving his helping hand — both in political advancement, education and sports, small business and community achievement.

Legendary broadcaster Imhotep Gary Byrd Press told Our Time, "I offer my heartfelt condolences to Tom Watkins' family and extended family, and I am

Continue Watkins Page 5



Thomas Henry Watkins, Jr. Publisher, New York Daily Challenge. Photo Credit: NNPA Files



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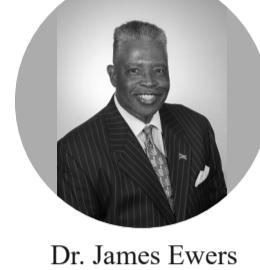
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Dr. James Ewers

Christmas is over, and we celebrated the birth of Jesus. Knowing that He was the reason for the season gave us much-needed joy. We understand that we are living in challenging times.

All of us have different gifts, and we use them in different ways. Some are using them right now, while others are still in the formative stages. We are at various chronological ages when we discover that we have them.

It brings up the question of how we know that we have them. I believe it's through repetition and liking something that we do. I don't think it's necessarily something we think we're good at, as others must make that determination.

For example, if you're a good artisan, your customers will tell you. If you're a good landscaper, your clients will tell others about you. Finally, if you're a

good teacher, your students will let you know. That's how it goes. Others will give you your flowers. You don't have to "self-flower".

Everyone wants to be at the top and not the bottom. We want to gain the respect and admiration of others. Will that ever change? No, it won't.

Depending upon what you do, the lights are brighter and the attention greater. Missteps and mistakes are magnified. Being a high-profile person in the public square isn't for everyone. You may want the fame, but can you handle the shame? Let the good times roll, but sometimes those bad times roll, too.

Being an elected public official automatically places you in the public eye. We voters, give them the go-ahead when we cast our ballots for them. You see, our votes matter.

There is a built-in assumption that legislators are going to act in our best interests. Exactly what does that mean? In my opinion, it means they will pass laws that will provide us with an acceptable standard of living. Further, we will be able to afford things that we

need, not necessarily things we want. Is that asking too much?

The year 2026 has ushered in difficult times on several fronts. Some would say it is difficult times 2.0.

First and foremost, in my opinion, there is the trust factor that we have with our elected officials. Reports from various polling sources say that as few as 17% of Americans trust their politicians. This number has been low for the past several years. Both major political parties are mired in a drought of trust.

The Partnership for Public Service says that since the new administration took office in January 2025 that 47% of us do not trust the Federal Government. New policies equal new problems, resulting in no trust. That's an equation that isn't hard to follow.

This lack of trust is playing out in ways that harm and hurt us. The divide among politicians has reached a boiling point, and the American people are in the pot.

How do state and federal elected officials regain the trust of the voters? First, they must become much

better listeners to what voters are telling them. We are saying prices are too high and the tariffs are hurting us. Thus far, they are not listening.

The GOP and the Democrats must regain their basic identity and return to their long-held philosophies. They have gone astray and are almost unrecognizable.

The art of diplomacy hasn't been a character trait of these congressional sessions. The word compromise has been lost in their deliberations. It's all or nothing.

There are two variables that may tilt the political scales. First, there will be midterm elections in November. Reports say that at least 10 GOP House representatives will be running for the position of governor. We will see how these two factors affect the balance of power in Congress.

So, for now, fasten your seatbelts and hold tight. This year, 2026, will be interesting and full of surprises. We can only hope that upcoming legislation will benefit the American people.

EDITORIAL PAGE

We Are Wide Awake And Not Dreaming In This Economic Nightmare

By James B. Ewers Jr., Ed.

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Continued MLK Page 1

students to showcase their writing and public speaking skills through original speeches inspired by King's teachings.

Each year, students craft and perform three- to five-minute speeches based on a selected prompt.

This year's topic asks competitors to reflect on King's continued relevance. The prompt is: "As a student of Dr. King's life, what message of hope do you think he would have for the world today?"

reversal of policies on vaccines. Once again, Trump used the oldest page in the playbook: Have a national crisis, i.e., the invasion of Venezuela and the capture of its President and First Lady; the transporting of them to the United States, where they were indicted and charged with drug trafficking, and the announcement by President Trump that America would take over control and governing of Venezuela. These plays successfully replaced all discussions that were on the table before Saturday night's invasion.

Once again, the only

The competition includes virtual or in-school qualifying rounds, followed by semifinals and finals. At each level, students are evaluated on delivery, stage presence, decorum, content interpretation, and memorization. Finalists are judged by panels of distinguished community and business leaders.

The final round of the 2026 MLK Jr. Oratory Competition will take place from 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. on Friday, Jan. 16, 2026, at the AT&T Performing Arts Center.

domestic policy-related items coming from the White House are: (1) more ICE agents for Minnesota (with its Democratic Governor), and cuts to Child Care dollars in Democratic states.

We, the American people, must redirect conversations and priorities to the domestic issues of food, shelter, healthcare and survival. Here in California, we have a new Congressional District to which we need to elect Democrats so that we can regain control of the House of Representatives and put an end to the Republican

do-nothing attitude against Trump's trampling on the Constitution. Let's keep our eyes on our issues and not be distracted by global plans. We must survive and live beyond Donald Trump, and fight his immigration tactics wherever possible.

Meanwhile, we have issues of ongoing police brutality right here in San Diego. There are no apologies or statements from the police chief. He should be reminded that silence gives consent. How many more large settlements of civil cases against the police do we really need?

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RELIGIOUS/NEWS

Some Exhortations to Christians In the Midst of Perilous Times

I Peter 5:14



Rev. Johnny Calvin Smith

The word peril is defined by Webster dictionary as follows: "exposure to the risk of being injured, destroyed or lost: danger." As believers in Jesus Christ, we are not exempt from the dangers and troubles of this dismal and decadent world. Jesus Christ has instructed us that we will encounter persecution or suffering when He said: "These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace, In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." The Apostle Paul admonished us to expect persecution as a result of living for Christ, for II Timothy 3:12 says: "Yea and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution."

Having dealt with the Elder's Role of Leadership during perilous times (I Peter 5:1-4), Peter exhorts believers serving in this perverse age to: I. Be Submissive and Humble in our Walk - I Peter 5:5-7; II. Be Vigilant and Steadfast in the Faith - I Peter 5:8-11.

I. Be Submissive and Humble in our Walk - I Peter 5:5-7

In verse 5, Peter admonishes the young men to be submissive to those who are older. Church leaders were usually older members. The younger members were to place themselves willingly under the authority of those who had been given the responsibility of leadership. Submission is a very important characteristic of a true believer. It is necessary because it is a part of obeying God's established order.

God has established lines of authority in

society, in the home, and in the church. Peter admonished both the young and old to clothe yourselves with humility.

Peter recalled how the Lord girded Himself with a towel and taught His self-seeking disciples an invaluable lesson in humility. Christ taught His disciples that humility is the prerequisite for service, and service is a practice of humility (St. John 13:4-15). Peter quoted from Proverbs 3:34 to stress that God resists or opposes the arrogant, but grants grace to the humble. In verses 6-7, Peter commanded these believers to humble themselves under the mighty Hand of God as they suffered persecution for Christ's sake. As they humble themselves, they were to be encouraged that the same mighty Hand that allowed the suffering would one day lift them up!

As Peter further encouraged them, he quoted from Psalm 55:22 "Cast your cares on the Lord and He will sustain you." In a time of extreme trouble and distress, we can take all of our troubles, distress and anxieties and cast them on Christ! (v. 7). Christ will sustain us during our times of anxiety and distress because He cares for us! The word "sustain" means to support or bring relief to. Christ sustains because He cares as He states: "Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart and ye shall find rest unto your souls" (Matthew 11:28-29).

Having observed that as believers we should "Be Submissive and Humble in our

Walk" - I Peter 5:5-7, let us now observe "Be Vigilant and Steadfast in the Faith" - I Peter 5:8-11.

II. Be Vigilant and Steadfast in the Faith - I Peter 5:8-11

Having admonished the believers to 'Be Submissive and Humble' in their walk in verses 5-7, Peter admonishes the believers in view of perilous times to "Be Vigilant and Steadfast in the Faith" (vv. 8-11).

Believers need to exercise self-control and be alert because the adversary, the devil, is persistently seeking an opportunity for an attack. As believers, we need to be sober-minded and alert because Satan is a malicious and dangerous enemy! Satan is called an "adversary" which means "one who accuses us". The word "devil" means a "slanderer." Satan accuses us before God (Job Chapters 1, 2; Revelation 12:10), and uses the lips of unsaved people to falsely accuse us (I Peter 2:12, 3:16). Satan comes either as a serpent to deceive (Genesis Chapter 3) or as a lion to devour. He is a liar and a murderer (St. John 8:44).

In verse 9, Peter encouraged the believers to stand firmly in the faith against the wiles of the devil acknowledging that there are other suffering believers in the world.

We are to resist the devil. The word resist means to withstand. The word resist is a term of defense rather than attack. As believers, we can stand firm against Satan only if we depend wholly on Christ and the Word. God's purpose will be worked out through a unified body. In verse 10, Peter

encouraged these believers to endure suffering in such a way that the grace of God would be made manifest in their lives. In a beautiful benediction, Peter committed them to the God of all grace. Believers of the Lord Jesus Christ can be comforted in knowing that the suffering that they encounter will last only a little while, while their glory in Christ, to which they were called, will be eternal.

Yes, the hardships of this earthly life are short in comparison with the Lord's eternal blessings. After enduring the ravages of severe trials, God will make us perfect, establish, strengthen and settle us. Peter concludes verse 11 with this closing: "To Him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen."

Brothers and sisters, in the midst of the various trials we encounter in life, our God is able to sustain us, for Jude 24, 25 says: "Now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His Glory with exceeding joy, To the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen."

In verse 12, Peter wrote to encourage believers to endure persecution so that the grace of God might be evident to the unbelieving world. After sending a general salutation to the church in Babylon (v. 13), the church was to greet one another with a kiss of charity with the knowledge that peace is available to those in Christ.

May God Bless!

Continued **Worst** Page 1

their roles in the attack. Dunn said he was not surprised, adding that Trump had promised those pardons openly.

"I knew it was coming," Dunn said. "So, I had time to prepare."

Preparation meant action. Dunn said he worked as a surrogate for former Vice

President Kamala Harris during the Harris-Walz campaign, trying to stop Trump's return to office. When that effort failed, he said the pain was not sudden. It was familiar.

"The wounds were already there," Dunn said. "I just had time to brace for it."

Dunn rejected calls to move on from January 6, saying the record remains unsettled.

"History bends toward distortion when accountability is denied," he said. "A

hundred years from now, somebody is going to read about January 6 and read that

he was elected again and ask, "How could that happen?"

He said Americans do not need explanation to understand what occurred inside and around the Capitol.

"You don't need a talking head," Dunn said. "Just press play. Put it on mute. Watch."

Dunn recalled how rioters

filmed themselves, how juries later watched those same videos in court, and how the attackers felt emboldened. He said they told officers repeatedly that the president had sent them.

"They were telling us,

Continue **Worst** Page 4

~ THE GRAMMYS ~

(Solution will appear in January 15 edition)

ACROSS

- Inundated
- Word before humbug
- Jim Carrey's 1994 disguise
- Rough, as in voice
- Kimono sash
- Misrepresent
- Do like ivy
- Go for the bronze?
- Poem of lament
- *Grammy nominee Bad Bunny's first language
- *KPop Demon Hunters' nominated song
- Sought at crime scene
- Lord's worker
- Rob Manfred's org.
- Jab, in speech
- *.com Arena
- Rowboat engine, pl.
- gum, ingredient
- Cowboy's cry of joy
- Big attraction
- Spring holiday honoree
- Live bait
- Daytime moth
- Puerto follower
- Finger move
- Colonnade
- Invitation letters
- "Zip it!"
- Trash bag brand
- Polar helper
- *Lady Gaga's nominated album
- *Tyler of CHROMAKOPIA, with The
- Prejudiced one
- Busy one
- Do penance
- Approves
- Make a mistake
- Sans- font
- "I, Claudius" role
- Jack and Jill did this
- Changes to a manuscript

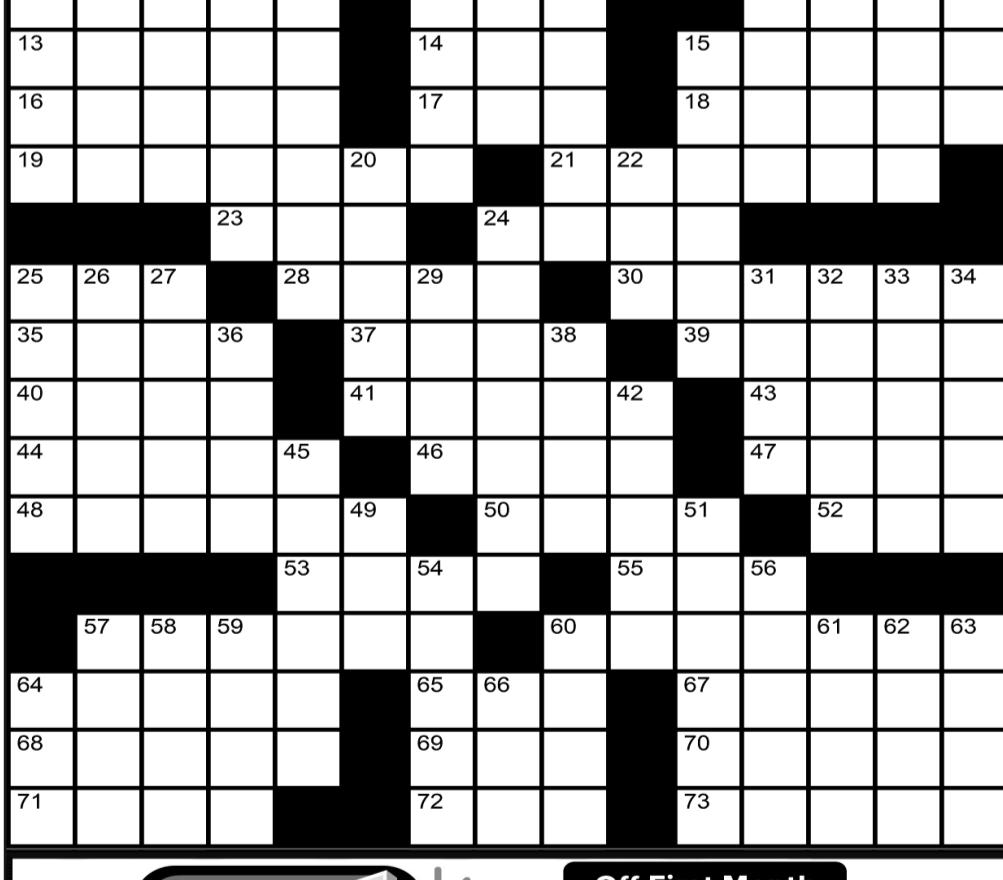
DOWN

- Parentheses, e.g.
- "Star Trek" speed
- Away from port
- Not be frugal
- What TikTokers are often doing
- This and that
- Legal grp.
- Door holder
- Mix together
- Away from wind
- Leo or Libra, e.g.
- *Wonder's "Songs in the ____ of Life," Album of Year (1977)
- Where bats are?
- Eurasian goat-like antelope
- Middle-earth dweller
- Pelican or albatross, e.g.
- Person in an ad
- One of Florida Keys
- Health food pioneer of liquid aminos fame
- *Nominated "Drop Dead Years" comedian Bill ____
- Swerves
- Sound units
- Synagogue scroll
- Zing or pizzazz
- *Justin Bieber's nominated song
- Fabled fliers
- Red one, send somebody over!
- Unalienable ones are in the Declaration of Independence
- Draft pick
- Give satisfaction
- Spot for prehistoric fly
- Doomed
- *MCA, Ad-Rock and ____ D, Grammy-winning Beastie Boys
- Culture-growing turf
- Walk-the-dog toy
- What concerning and discernable have in common
- *Nine-time Grammy-nominated Amos
- Fonzie's comeback: "Sit ____"
- Whistle blowers
- * ____ Iver of SABLE, FABLE fame
- Historical period

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3	4	5	1	2	7	9	8	6
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4	8	6	2	9	5	1	7	3
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2621	\$1,000,000 Blitz Overall Odds are 1 in 3.74	\$20	1/21/26	7/20/26
2639	Double Sided Dollars Overall Odds are 1 in 4.35	\$5	2/18/26	8/17/26
2582	\$250,000 50X Cashword Overall Odds are 1 in 3.56	\$10	2/18/26	8/17/26
2515	Loteria Supreme Overall Odds are 1 in 3.23	\$100	2/18/26	8/17/26

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Continued **Worst** Page 3

'The president said we could,'" Dunn said.

He addressed comparisons often drawn between January 6 and Black Lives Matter protests. Dunn said Black Lives Matter demonstrators came to the Capitol, protested, shouted, and left.

"They didn't storm the Capitol," he said. "Every single person went home that night. I can't say the same thing about January 6."

Dunn spoke of officers who died and of others who later took their own lives. He said attempts to equate the events ignore those losses.

The conversation turned to the present, with Dunn saying January 6 laid groundwork for what he sees now, from threats against other nations to the erosion of democratic norms. He said Americans were warned in advance.

"He told us what he was going to do," Dunn said. "And when he did it, people acted surprised."

The cost, he said, remains deeply personal. Dunn described election night as feeling like a knife through his heart, saying it was difficult to accept that many voters returned to power a man he holds responsible for one of the darkest days in U.S. history.

Dunn said he continues to receive hateful messages and death threats, including in recent weeks. He said he takes precautions, leans on his community, and keeps showing up.

"That means I'm doing something right," he said.

Dunn also discussed his New York Times bestselling memoir, "Standing My Ground: A Capitol Police Officer's Fight for Accountability and Good Trouble After January 6th," which he said was part of his healing.

"Where does it end?" Dunn said. "The story is still being written. You can add to it, but you can't take away from it."

JOB POSTING



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Quinn Minute

Rodent health

By Rix Quinn

Say, do you have rats at home? I'm talking about critters with fuzzy ears and whiskers who slither around the house after dark, pick up crumbs, and eat from the dog's bowl.

If they live with you, this information can provide them with a higher quality of life.

See, rat researchers discovered that if you put older ones on a low-calorie diet for four weeks, it may keep them from aging. Therefore, if you want mice to live longer,

reduce their intake.

Please follow these steps to ensure elderly mouse health:

1 First, summon the rats. Simply yell out, "Dang, I just spilled my cornflakes...and I can't see a thing since we blew that fuse."

2 Next, determine if your mice are pubescent, middle-aged, or old. Show them a standard trap. The old and middle-aged will flee. Younger ones will laugh at the dated technology.

3 OK, so now you've found the grown-ups. Which ones are older? Darn it, you just can't tell! Here's why.

4 Mice -- and their larger cousins, rats -- live on the lowest rungs of the food chain. Hawks, crows, and owls serve them at cookouts. Foxes, dogs, and cats dip them in hot sauce. So.

5 Hardly any of them reach old age. Therefore, any mice you find -- and switch to a low-fat diet -- should be able to infest your groceries for months

to come.

6 As you know, rat research led to discoveries that helped humankind. You save a mouse today, and it may save you tomorrow! But on the other hand.

7 Do you really want mice living with you? I don't...but my dog might enjoy them.

You can read more of Rix Quinn's ideas on memoir and biography writing by going to this link: <https://rixquinn.stack.com>.

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BEYONCÉ ENTERS BILLIONAIRE RANKS FEW BLACK AMERICANS HAVE REACHED

By Stacy M. Brown



Beyoncé and Jay Z
Photo Credit: NNPA Files

Beyoncé Knowles-Carter has joined the small and closely watched group of Black American billionaires, a milestone that places her alongside a handful of individuals who built vast wealth in a country where Black ownership has long been restricted, delayed, or denied.

According to Forbes, Beyoncé is now worth at least \$1 billion, making her one of only a few musicians to reach that level and one of the rare Black women in the United States to do so through entertainment, business control, and ownership. She joins her husband, Jay-Z, who became hip hop's first billionaire in 2019, as well as a short list that includes Rihanna, Oprah Winfrey, Michael Jordan, and a limited number of others whose fortunes stand out precisely because they remain so uncommon.

Black billionaires remain an exception in America. Forbes has re-

ported that fewer than 20 Black individuals worldwide have reached billionaire status, despite Black Americans playing an essential role in building the nation's economy. The gap between contribution and compensation continues to be shaped by segregation, discriminatory lending, exclusion from ownership, and financial systems that consistently placed barriers in front of Black ambition.

Beyoncé's rise into this space did not arrive through novelty or chance. It came through structure. Over time, she moved beyond performing within the industry to controlling it. Her company, Parkwood Entertainment, became the center of her creative and financial decisions, allowing her to retain ownership of her music, manage her tours, and oversee production. That control proved decisive.

In 2023, her "Renaissance" tour traveled to 39 cities and included 56 shows, drawing more than 2.7 million people and generating more than \$500 million in revenue. The scale was historic, but the economics mattered just as much. Producing and managing the tour largely in-house allowed Beyoncé to capture profits that artists once surrendered to labels, promoters, and intermediaries. The concerts were visible. The ownership was quiet.

That approach mirrors the path taken by other Black billionaires whose wealth came from insisting on possession rather than permission. Jay-Z expanded

from music into business by retaining equity and investing early. Oprah Winfrey built a media empire by controlling her platform. Rihanna transformed global fame into ownership stakes that surpassed album sales. Michael Jordan turned athletic dominance into long-term equity. In each case, the turning point was not applause, but control.

Beyoncé's wealth also arrives during a period when conversations about Black economic power are growing sharper. Black households continue to hold a fraction of the wealth of white households, and Black entrepreneurs remain more likely to be denied loans or charged higher interest rates. Against that reality, the visibility of Black billionaires carries weight, even as it highlights how rare such outcomes remain.

There is no suggestion that one fortune corrects generations of imbalance. But there is meaning in documentation. Beyoncé's entry into the billionaire class records what happens when talent is paired with ownership in a system that rarely allows both. It shows what becomes possible when the work, the image, and the profits remain under the same roof.

Beyoncé has spoken sparingly about wealth, choosing instead to talk about control and protection. "No amount of money is worth my peace," she said.

Continued Transit Page 5

Guqueena Baker, 33, doesn't own a car and has never learned to drive. Baker said she moved to Dallas from New York in August for the lower cost-of-living. She takes the bus from North Dallas to work at a hair salon in Plano.

If bus service in Plano went away, Baker said she would have to find a salon closer to her, but she worried it wouldn't be as lucrative as the Plano salon. Buying a car and taking driving lessons aren't expenses she can afford, she said.

"There are people who travel to do the job that you don't want to do," Baker said. "I'm a hairstylist. You don't want to wake up and have to do your hair every day. I have to get to work."

It's not clear how many riders would be affected if all four cities withdrew from DART, but it would undoubtedly deal a serious blow to the transit agency's

finances.

Like many major U.S. transit agencies, DART's ridership hasn't rebounded to pre-pandemic levels. Nationally, transit ridership remains below where it stood prior to the pandemic, which transportation experts have attributed to a number of factors such as the rise of remote work and service cuts to transit agencies.

DART gave 46.4 million rides to passengers from January to October, according to the latest Federal Transit Administration data, a 20% dip from the same period in 2019. Comprehensive, publicly available data showing what ridership looks like in each member city is hard to come by. Ridership in Dallas, which accounts for about three-quarters of the sys-

tem's total ridership, remains below where it was just before the pandemic hit, according to a DART presentation to a Dallas City Council meeting in December. DART gave 565,662 rides in Plano in the first quarter of this year, a 6% drop from the same quarter in 2020, according to figures provided by Plano. DART officials did not respond to a request for ridership data broken down by city.

Between them, the four suburbs account for about a third of the transit agency's sales tax revenue. DART officials haven't said just how much of a financial blow they'd see or what impact it'd have on service levels.

But in the past, officials have said threats to their revenue would eventually result in fewer buses and trains — kick-starting a death spiral for transit service in the region.

"There are a number of people who access their jobs and a variety of services and education who rely on DART to get to those destinations," DART CEO Nadine Lee said at an October news conference. "I would hate for any of our riders to lose that access as a result of the actions of their city councils."

The elections come at an awkward time. The month following the vote, nearly 4 million visitors are expected to descend upon the Dallas-Fort Worth region for the 2026 FIFA World Cup — snarling the region's already gnarly traffic congestion. If those cities pull out of DART, visitors who stay in those cities may have a harder time getting around, transit officials and transportation planners have said.

The number of people living in the Dallas-Fort Worth region is expected to balloon from 8.3 million to 12 million by 2050. That means more people will need access to public transit, not fewer, transit planners and advocates said, and the region already is grappling with how to improve mobility as it grows. Even the Texas Department of Transportation, the state agency in charge of building the state's massive freeways, says Texans need more ways to get around if the state's going to continue to grow.

The four suburbs wouldn't be the first to leave DART. Coppell and Flower Mound withdrew from the transit agency in the late 1980s.

Though suburban officials have pointed to surveys showing low resident satisfaction with DART, voters may not be keen on the idea of pulling out of the agency. Voters in Plano, Irving and Farmers Branch have rejected past measures to withdraw from DART at the ballot box. More than half of voters in Plano and Farmers Branch said they oppose withdrawing from DART, according to a November poll conducted by Republican consultant Ross Hunt.

It's possible the decision to leave DART never makes it to voters. Plano and Irving have laid out terms in negotiations with DART that would theoretically allow them to remain in the system, albeit at a lower cost and with fewer services. If DART meets those terms, city officials say, they won't hold the election.

This article first appeared on The Texas Tribune.

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