

Oldest Living Survivor of Tulsa Race Massacre, 109, to Speak at SIUE

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter
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EDWARDSVILLE - Viola "Mother" Fletcher, the oldest living survivor of the Tulsa Race Massacre, will speak at SIUE on Tuesday, March 19, 2024.

Fletcher, 109, recently published her memoir "Don't Bury My Story: The Oldest Living Survivor of the Tulsa Race Massacre In Her Own Words." She will participate in a

panel discussion with her grandson and co-author Ike Howard, Jana “J.P.” Haynes, and moderator Mocha Ochoa. Haynes and a few cast members from “Selma The Musical: The Untold Stories” will also perform excerpts from the show.

“If it wasn’t for Viola actually sitting down and writing this down, this would have been,” said Simone Williams, who helped organize the event. “They have the recorded history about this event, but not a lot of firsthand accounts of the people who are still here...This is a person who’s still speaking up. Justice has no timeline. You may think this person should go sit down, but this is just an example of why you don’t ever give up on anything.”

Williams, Diversity and Engagement Librarian at SIUE, worked with several departments to bring Fletcher to campus. She explained that this is an extension of both Black History Month and Women’s History Month programming.

After the panel discussion and performances, Fletcher will be signing books and taking photographs. She will also meet with students earlier in the day. Williams noted that Fletcher’s commitment to sharing her story is admirable, especially because so many Black women’s stories are dismissed or forgotten.

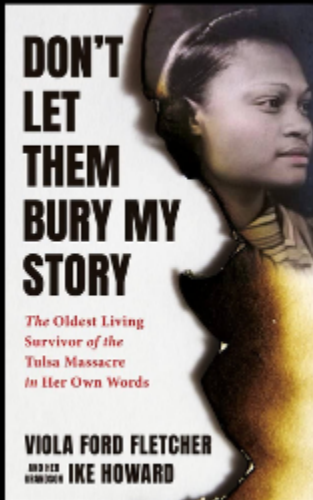
“If you talk to a lot of Black women, it’s not abnormal, but we need to start recording people’s stories before they’re not here,” Williams said. “And that’s why the name of the book is ‘Don’t Bury My Story.’ She does not want what happened to her to be forgotten, because it happens so easily with Black history especially.”

This is also personal to Williams, who shared that she recently lost her grandmother. Like her grandmother, Fletcher only had a grade school education; Williams hopes the students in attendance will remember not to take their education for granted. She also hopes that Fletcher’s story will encourage more young people to listen to the older folks in their lives and communities.

“I want more elders’ stories to get out before it’s too late because I’ve been here before. People have a lot of life, they have a lot of experience, they have just a lot to offer,” she explained. “And I think now some people dismiss older people, and I hate that that’s happening. This is a way to connect young people especially. Go talk to your elders. They have a wealth of knowledge. They have a lot of experience that you can be dismissing or just not listening to.”

The event starts at 6:30 p.m. at Dunham Hall. The book signing will follow the presentation at 8:30 p.m. The event is free and open to the public, and Williams encourages community members and students to attend.

“The contributions from Black women just become invisible in history. Even women who had ordinary lives were extraordinary in so many ways,” she added. “I just want people to take something away from this. Don’t go home and just sit down...This woman is 109 years old. She’s still out here. She’s still active. She’s still keeping up the good fight. We all can do it. There’s no excuses.”



Viola Ford Fletcher

March 19th, 6:30PM

Dunham Hall

Viola "Mother" Fletcher, the oldest living survivor of the Tulsa Race Massacre shares her story in her memoir, 'Don't Let Them Bury My Story: The Oldest Living Survivor of the Tulsa Race Massacre in Her Own Words.'

With support from the College of Arts and Sciences Arts and Issues, the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Anti-racism, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, and the Department of Theater and Dance, Lovejoy Library presents "Don't Let Them Bury My Story": An Evening with Viola Ford Fletcher, the Oldest Living Survivor of the Tulsa Race Massacre. This event will feature Mother Fletcher, her grandson and co-author, Ike Howard, and Jana "J.P." Haynes. This historical conversation about how we learn from the horrors of our past to shine light on a pathway to a more humane, just future will be moderated by Mocha Ochoa. Following this conversation, J.P. Haynes and fellow cast members from the upcoming Broadway production *Selma: The Musical: The Untold Stories* will perform a few excerpts from the show.

There will be a book signing beginning at 8:30 PM directly after the conversation and performance.