

**For Release: October 8, 2021**

**Clarksdale, MS**

**October 6, 2021**

### **Save Black Family-Owned Blues Hotel**

Please help us Save the most Historic Blues Hotel in America ...**The Riverside Hotel** located in Clarksdale, Mississippi.

**Our beloved Riverside Hotel is in trouble!** Covid-19 shut the hotel down in 2020, then a violent storm caused a tree to fall onto the hotel, causing extensive damage. With the hotel now closed and overheads and critical repairs outstanding; the Hotel's owners, sisters Zelena Ratliff and Sonya Gates, desperately need to raise operating funds to cover basic monthly expenses and pay for critical repairs, pending the hotel's planned re-opening in the Spring 2022.

The Riverside Hotel "was dreamed up, owned, and operated by our grandmother, an African American woman, Mrs. Z. L. Hill, living in Jim Crow-era Mississippi"; and since 1944 and up until the Pandemic in 2020, the Riverside Hotel had "provided safe lodging in the Delta for some of the most famous musicians in history as well as like-minded folk", and was the place "where Blues Gave Birth to Rock and Roll".

It was home to some, including the likes of Sonny Boy Williamson II, Ike Turner and Robert Nighthawk. Others, like Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, Sam Cooke, Jessie Mae Hemphill, and Duke Ellington made the Riverside Hotel their home away from home as they toured and crisscrossed the South. Rocket 88; considered to be the first Rock N Roll song ever, was written and rehearsed at The Riverside Hotel by Ike Turner and Jackie Brenston.

Prior to becoming the Riverside Hotel, the property operated as the GT Thomas Hospital for African Americans, where in 1937 the Empress of the Blues, Bessie Smith was brought, seriously injured in a car wreck while travelling between shows, and where she died of her injuries. Today, the room she passed in is preserved as a shrine in her honor, as a tribute to the most famous woman in Blues History.

Our Goal is to raise \$50,000 by establishing an EMERGENCY OPERATING FUND, to help sustain the hotel and prepare the hotel to re-open for business.

Earlier this month, the National Trust for Historic Preservation listed the Riverside Hotel as one of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places in 2021. Original owner, Mrs. Z.L. Hill's granddaughters, Sonya Gates and Zelena Ratliff, are working to ensure that their family's legacy and the legacy of blues history is preserved for generations to come.

### **What do we need \$50,000 for?**

Specifically, The Riverside needs \$4,000 per month for overhead costs: insurance, property taxes, utilities, phone, security monitoring, necessary upkeep and critical repairs. Plus, any expenditures that are necessary to prepare the Hotel to re-open.

And, once the Hotel is near an opening date:

- a) \$2,000 for necessary safety maintenance (Staff and supplies) to help the Riverside implement health protocols against Covid-19,
- b) \$2,500 to help prepare and maintain the property and its rooms for rent, including purchasing a washer and dryer set for the Hotel.

These Emergency Operating funds are desperately needed while we prepare a plan for extensive restoration and preservation including application for grants and while we await acceptance of our request for 501c3 non-profit status\*\*.

"African American businesses are so important, and its a way that we can continue on," says Sonya Gates, "in the news, they always talk about economic wealth and how African Americans aren't necessarily able to have that 'passed-down' economic wealth. It all starts with a small business like this, and we want to continue this work to pass it on and its legacy to our children."

For more information on The Riverside Hotel's rich legacy please visit our website: [www.riversideclarksdale.com](http://www.riversideclarksdale.com) or check out this recent article about the Ratliff Family and their family's fight to save, restore and preserve this valuable and irreplaceable landmark:

<https://www.veranda.com/travel/a36686590/riverside-hotel-clarksdale-mississippi/>

\*If The Riverside is UNABLE to open in 2022, our mission will still be to restore and preserve The Riverside; either as a Hotel (when re-opening safely is possible) OR to restore and re-open as a Museum/Historical Landmark for the preservation of Blues/Rock and Roll History, as an asset to the tourism of Clarksdale and the Mississippi Blues Trail and for the legacy of the Ratliff-Gates Family.

\*\*Sonya Gates and Zee Ratliff have applied for 501c3 status and are awaiting approval. For that reason, The Riverside is UNABLE AT THIS TIME to issue tax-deductible donation receipts. As soon as we are able; we will advise our donors/potential donors of our change in status. Thank you for your patience and consideration at this time.

**If at this time you can donate without expecting a receipt; we Thank You! If you can't donate at this time but can support our cause we are very grateful for this support, too. Here's how you can help:**

• Like/Comment/Share our support on Social Media:

<https://www.facebook.com/TheRiversideHotelClarksdale>

<https://www.instagram.com/theriversidehotelclarksdale/>

- Share our press release with your email contacts. Here is the link to our GoFundMe Press Release: <https://www.riversideclarksdale.com/new-page>
- When soliciting donations via email to The Riverside's GoFundMe, please remember to include a personal note to your contacts/friends/family about "why saving The Riverside Hotel matters" to you personally.
- Mail physical letters to your friends and families and include a note about "why Saving The Riverside Hotel matters" to you. A copy of the GoFundMe press release can be accessed here: <http://www.riversideclarksdale.com/> or contact us through our website to have a physical copy to be sent to you.
- Print and share copies of the wonderful article written by Lauren Wicks about Zee and Sonya and their family's story of The Riverside in the June 2021 issue of Veranda Magazine: <https://www.veranda.com/travel/a36686590/riverside-hotel-clarksdale-mississippi/>
- Start or Host a fundraiser in your community; an outdoor live or streamed music event; donate some Blues-related memorabilia or unique, creative items, to encourage donations, and/or ask your employer to match donations at your office or business. Share your ideas and successes with us and on your social media and don't forget to tag us: <https://www.facebook.com/TheRiversideHotelClarksdale>  
<https://www.instagram.com/theriversidehotelclarksdale/>

From The Riverside Hotel to you:

"Thank you for all you do to support us! And for helping us preserve an important piece of American History; Civil Rights History, Blues History and the place "where Blues gave birth to Rock and Roll". Let's not forget the amazing entrepreneurial spirit of an African American woman in Mississippi during the Jim Crow era who was instrumental in setting the course for safe passage of Black Travelers and Musicians; our Grandmother Mrs. Z.L. Hill. Today, we are one of few black businesses still remaining that were listed in the famed Green Book ...Please help us preserve this fragile property and let the amazing legacy of The Riverside Hotel live on..."

###

FOR MORE INFORMATION OR MEDIA INQUIRIES:

BRENDA WILLIAMS, MEDIA & PUBLIC RELATIONS

778-847-7121

brendawilliams2121@hotmail.com