

Heather Jones
Wiscasset
LD 243

My name is Heather Jones. I'm a Wiscasset resident and former Wiscasset Selectman, and I am in favor of naming the Route 1 railroad crossing in our town in honor of James Weldon Johnson.

In the summer of 2020, I was staying at a campground in Brunswick. On a Saturday morning, someone came and knocked on my camper door. It was a police officer, and he wanted to know why I had been harassing the people in an adjacent campsite. Four young Black people from New York up here doing some camping, and this cop wanted to know why I was driving my truck through their campsite, doing donuts in the grass and such.

He wouldn't accept that I didn't have a clue what he was talking about. He was ready to throw cuffs on me and drag me out of that campground.

I said, "This happened last night?"

He said, "Yeah."

I said, "Where were you? It's ten o'clock in the morning. Where've you been?"

The next thing I said convinced him that it wasn't me who did it. I said, "If I'd been here last night when that was going on, I would have stopped it."

And that's what I'm doing here now. Still working to put a stop to that kind of thing in Maine.

I went over later that day and talked to those four young New Yorkers. I apologized for how they'd been treated, because someone did do that to them. Someone in a truck similar to mine.

It used to be dangerous for Black people to travel in this country. Not because of trains, but because of racist people. Still is, as I witnessed in that campground five years ago. James Weldon Johnson was traveling through Wiscasset in 1938 because part of his work was to do things that he, as an American, had a right to do. He expected liberty and freedom in America to be a real thing, and he worked to make that ideal a reality.

A few years ago, when I was serving on the Select Board, I had the privilege of building a memorial bench in his honor. It now sits on the town Common holding a plaque with his name and the words "Lift every voice." I made it out of white oak and purpleheart, two of the most resilient hardwoods I could get my hands on because I wanted the bench to last a long time, and it will, probably, about as long as those schooners did.

I'd like to see something more permanent. His name on the crossing would be great. Including him in our Museum in the Streets tour would be great.

He was one of the most important Americans of his time. He worked to get the federal government to pass anti-lynching legislation that finally got passed in 2022. He wrote a song that's sung before every Super Bowl. We recognize his birthday in Maine as a state holiday, and here we are today spreading awareness of his impact to new generations. Considering all he did to promote civil rights in this country, he might be one of the most important Americans in our time.

My policy as Selectman, when a similar proposition came up three years ago, was to treat this man as we would any American who contributed as much to the strength and wellbeing of our nation as he did. I ask that we do the same now, and bear the dignified and awesome responsibility to honor this man who rightfully deserves to be honored.