

Shirley Sherrod: Wronged Role Model Discusses Restoring Her Reputation

The “Martin Luther King Awards Dinner” Interview

by

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Shirley Sherrod is best known as the African-American government official fired in 2010 by the Obama administration for allegedly making racist remarks about a white farmer. However, a right-wing blogger had edited a video of her remarks to create that false impression.

Shortly after being dismissed as the Georgia USDA State Director of Rural Development she was cleared by the administration, and President Obama apologized to her. Nevertheless, she decided to not return, opting instead to write her autobiography, “*The Courage to Hope: How I Stood Up to the Politics of Fear.*” Ms. Sherrod earned a master’s degree in community development from Antioch University in Yellow Springs, Ohio. When Shirley was 17, her father was killed by a white man in Georgia but no charges were ever lodged. A cross was burned in their yard shortly thereafter. The death of her father fostered her lifelong commitment to fight for the civil rights of poor and minority farmers.

She is currently a leader of the Southwest Georgia Project, an organization she helped start years ago. The organization works primarily with female farmers, trying to get more women involved in agriculture, and also marketing vegetables to local school systems. In 2011, under the leadership of Shirley and her husband, Charles, New Communities, an agricultural cooperative modeled after the Israeli Kibbutz concept, bought a large farm in Georgia. They are establishing an agricultural training center there, as well as a program bringing local blacks and whites together in partnership to promote racial healing.

Here, in a January 12, 2014 interview with Kam Williams and others, Ms. Sherrod talks about the tarnishing and restoration of her reputation, and also about delivering the keynote speech at the 26th Annual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Awards Dinner in Glen Burnie, Maryland on Friday, January 17, 2014. Ms. Sherrod has been mentioned in three previous issues of *JPAS* (vol.5, no.1; vol.5, no.7; vol.6, no.6).

Kam Williams (KW): Hi Ms. Sherrod. I'm honored to have this opportunity to speak with you.

Shirley Sherrod (SS): Thank you, Kam.

KW: You're delivering the keynote speech at the annual dinner in honor of the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King. What did Dr. King mean to you?

SS: Well, Dr. King has long been my hero. I didn't get to work with him much, but my husband did in the early years. Dr. King gave his life, really, to the struggle for everyone. And he believed in non-violence. That's what I've tried to do in terms of my life and my work, following the teachings of God.

KW: In your biography, you talk about how your father was murdered by a white man when you were 17. How did that tragedy shape you?

SS: I grew up on a farm and, prior to my father's murder, I wanted to get away from the farm, and away from South Georgia where the Jim Crow laws absolutely controlled anything and everything we did. So, my goal was to leave once I completed high school. But on the night of my father's murder, I made a commitment that I would not leave the South, that I would stay and devote my life to working for change. So, my father's murder has shaped the course of my life even up to this very day.

KW: How did you avoid becoming embittered, especially after the grand jury failed to indict the perpetrator who was never brought to justice?

SS: Given the way the system was, what could I do as I one person, other than devote my life to fighting to make it different? If I had allowed myself to be filled with hate, I probably wouldn't even be alive, because that hate could've killed me. That hate would've blinded me to my contributions in terms of how I could make a difference. You can't think straight when you're consumed by hate and focused on destroying someone else. Instead, I was bent on trying to destroy a system that was not fair to all of us, and I continue to do that.

KW: *Harriet Pakula-Teweles* asks: What's it like to come out of a "political lynching" and live to tell about it?

SS: I can tell you that while I was in that situation, especially the first few days, you're thinking that everyone in the country is believing something about you that is not true: that you're a racist and that you refused to help a white farmer. It was a very bad place to be for someone like me who has devoted her life to working for change and for fairness for everyone. It was one thing for me to try to defend myself, and quite another to then have a white farmer step forward to say what I'd done for him. Oh my goodness! It makes you know that when you've done the right thing, you just don't have to worry or even think about how you tell the story, because the truth will ultimately come out.

KW: Why do you think that that conservative blogger decided to edit your NAACP talk about tolerance to make you look like a racist?

SS: I kept wondering, "Who is this person and why did he choose me?" because I had never heard of him. I don't have answer for that. He never apologized to me. I never had a conversation with him. I guess I was just a nobody to him, a nothing, somebody he thought he could literally destroy while trying to get at the NAACP.

KW: *Reverend Florine Thompson* asks: How did your personal theology inform your response to being fired from your position?

SS: You have to approach people with the truth and with love, and with what's right. I was determined to get the truth out because I knew that the truth would set me free.

KW: *Reverend Thompson* also asks: Where do you find fulfillment and purpose in your life?

SS: I love helping other people. When I made that commitment to stay in the South, to work for change, it meant devoting my life to working for and helping others. I feel good when I know that I've saved someone's farm, or helped a family to get a home or access to credit. Or when I can get young people to see that there's more to life than just trying to make the biggest dollar for yourself.

KW: *Leon Marquis* asks: Why didn't you sue President Obama for firing you?

SS: That's a good question that I really don't have an answer for.

KW: *Attorney Bernadette Beekman* says: What happened to you was so awful, I don't know how you stood up to it, but I like the fact that you filed a lawsuit. She says: Aside from telling your personal story as well as how the right-wing media had a frenzy taking your remarks out of context, what did you hope to accomplish by writing your autobiography?

SS: I had been telling that story about my transformation and the white farmer for 24 years. And people often suggested that I write a book about it. But I never had the time to until all of this happened to me. Suddenly I was out of a job and being encouraged to write my story by so many people that I just went ahead and did it.

KW: *Bernadette* also asks: Would you encourage young people to go into farming today if they do not have enough independent financial resources?

SS: The traditional farm, the peanuts, the cotton, the corn, is probably not the thing to do, because you're up against big farmers who can afford all the equipment to grow those kinds of crops. But we need healthy food. We're being encouraged to eat more vegetables. Our school systems are being encouraged to buy locally. So, we need farmers who can produce that food. We were recently helping a school plant broccoli and cabbage in a garden, and this 8 year-old boy said, "I don't eat food from the Earth, because it has nature on it." When we asked him where he got his food, he said, "From the grocery store." When we tried to explain where that food came from, he put his hands over his ears, shouting "Stop! Stop! That's gross." Our children need to learn how to produce food. That's where we came from.

KW: *Bernadette* asks: What do you think of the locavore movement where eco-conscious people concerned about sustainability only eat locally-grown food?

SS: We have landowners, small growers. We have people who are holding onto land that was acquired by their families after slavery. They need to produce some of the food we eat, so they can pay the taxes and hold onto the property. Taxes keep going up. We, and by we I mean black people, are rapidly becoming a landless people. Our ancestors, coming out of slavery, acquired more than 15 million acres of land. Today, we're probably down to less than 2 million acres.

KW: Did you know J.L. Chestnut, the late civil rights attorney? I know that he sued the government on behalf of Black farmers in the South?

SS: Yes I did. He was such a great person. There was never a dull moment around him. And when you got Chestnut and Dr. Lowery [former SCLC President Joseph Lowery] together, oh my goodness! [Chuckles]

KW: How do you feel about GMOs being shipped to Africa and elsewhere in the Third World?

SS: I have a problem with that. I don't think we yet know the full brunt of genetically-modified seeds.

KW: Children's book author Irene Smalls asks: How do you feel about the Obama administration today?

SS: I've remained a supporter of the Obama administration, even at the height of my ordeal. There's a lot that he could do differently, but so much of what he's tried to do has been blocked by the Republican officeholders. I think that he could have been a much better President with more support. So, I'm still supportive of him.

KW: *Irene* is also wondering whether you have any advice for individuals in government service?

SS: If you're in it for the money, then you'll do what you have to do to survive. But if you're in it to do the right thing, then it might mean that you won't get to stay there, but at least you can say, "I did what was right while I was there."

KW: *Irene* then asks: What do you want the world to know about Shirley Sherrod?

SS: That Shirley Sherrod is someone who is committed to helping others. I love people, and I love doing things that make a difference.

KW: Editor/Legist *Patricia Turnier* asks: Was it a cathartic experience for you to write your autobiography?

SS: Yes, it's just amazing to look back over your life and the work that you've done. It's really something!

KW: *Patricia* also asks: What was the most important lesson you learned from the experience related to the doctored videotape?

SS: The support that I received from people all over the country was really heartwarming.

KW: *Patricia* says: Many women in powerful positions all over the world still face employment discrimination. What advice do you have for them and how can they continue to break the glass ceilings?

SS: That's a difficult one. [Chuckles] You can't give up. Sometimes you get knocked down, but you have to get back up, fighting. You have to think about the others who come behind you as well. And you have to think of the example that you set for others.

KW: *Larry Greenberg* asks: How do you feel about the cultivation of hemp, as a former official with the Department of Agriculture?

SS: Well, where it's legal, I guess it's a great crop to grow.

KW: *Irene* asks: What's up next for you?

SS: I talk about it in the last chapter of my book which deals with hope and a piece of property that's been acquired which was a former plantation. We have a racial healing project to teach young people farming and our history so we don't end up reliving it.

KW: The bookworm *Troy Johnson* question: What was the last book you read?

SS: I have to think... I read quite a few... "*My Black Family, My White Privilege*" is the most recent one I read. And before that, Michelle Alexander's book, "*The New Jim Crow*."

KW: What is your favorite dish to cook?

SS: Gosh! Let's see. I have two. Sweet potato soufflé and macaroni and cheese.

KW: The *Ling-Ju Yen* question: What is your earliest childhood memory?

SS: Learning to drive a tractor on the farm. I was probably five years-old. My parents kept having children, trying to have a son. They had five daughters in a row. We were his girls, but we each had a boy's nickname. Mine was Bill. My mother was finally pregnant with my brother when my father was murdered.

KW: When you look in the mirror, what do you see?

SS: Well, I see someone who's aging now, and someone who kept a commitment made many, many years ago, and who today is trying to be an example for young women.

KW: If you could have one wish instantly granted, what would that be for?

SS: One wish? I wish that somehow, some way we could learn to live together in this country.

KW: The *Tavis Smiley* question: How do you want to be remembered?

SS: As someone who was dedicated to others and to making a difference.

KW: Thanks again for the time, Shirley, and I wish I could be there for your keynote speech at the Martin Luther King dinner.

SS: Thanks, Kam.