Black College Activism and Disciplinary Suspensions/Expulsions, 1960-1962: An Interview with Rosemari Mealy

The following interview with Rosemari Mealy, JD, PhD (City College of New York, CUNY, Center for Worker Education) about her book *Activism and Disciplinary Suspensions/Expulsions at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs): A Phenomenological Study in the Black Student Sit-in Movement, 1966-1962* (Edwin Mellen Press, 2014) was established January 20, 2014 by *JPAS* senior editor Itibari M. Zulu and completed April 12, 2014 by Rosemari Mealy (Aventura, Florida).

IMZ: First, can you tell us a few things about yourself, and how it directed you to conducting this study?

RM: To begin, I would like to thank you for this opportunity to share some insights into the publication of my book for readers of *The Journal of Pan African Studies* (JPAS). I grew up in the southern part of the United States so I was always keenly aware of the disparities that existed between Black folks and White folks. By that I mean the economic disparities that defined the barriers of separation along the lines of segregation and Jim Crow laws, both of which were validated by institutionalized as well as personal racism. Therefore, growing up in those environs even at a very early age I rebelled against that system by going into the White Only toilets out of the eye-sight of white folks, refusing to call them Miss or Mister and when I was called nigger, I fought back as a child using language that if my parents heard would surely have been cause for a verbal lashing. On the other hand, I have to say my father inspired me to be a fighter because he was also a rebel and a risk taken as a member of the NAACP during the 50's and 60's in our backwoods country town. I remember him discussing the importance of fighting for Black people having the right to vote, driving people to the polling places and challenging the segregated and unequal education system. For my family viewed education as basic to the pathway of freedom and both of them did all they could to ensure that we completed our formal schooling. My strong family ties gave me a sense of who I was as a Black women growing up in racist America, which obviously played an important role in my own life's journey as a revolutionary activist.

When I chose law school after several other careers, this demanding journey was embarked upon with the goal of securing another set of skills to use in our continuum quest for justice. In law school as I mentioned in the book, I had a professor who was expelled from Southern University for participating in the Black Student Sit-in Movement. I was intrigued by his experience. When the opportunity afforded, I started researching the case, which led me to several others. Other than analyzing cases just for their legal implications, I was deeply interested in knowing who those individuals were beyond the pages of case-law books, court dockets, and newspaper articles. These were individuals whose names had not made the headlines at the time of their suspensions and expulsions, nor were they mentioned in much of the Civil Rights history. I wanted to know what motivated these young Black men and women to take such a risk, and what happened to those individuals in their lived experiences once their higher education was interrupted.

Were they still alive? How could they be found? These were intriguing questions, and would remain so because the opportunity after law school never presented an opening to explore the answers to those questions. I reluctantly shelved this desire to investigate further into the recesses of my mind until what appeared to be an auspicious and most opportune moment when the idea was resurrected in what eventually became my dissertation topic.

IMZ: How did you go about selecting the six participants, and why is their story important in history?

RM: There were actually nine participants selected to participate in the study. Three were in the pilot study and the remaining six individuals became a part of the actual study. As a research project I used the protocol of selecting the six participants in the main study from a pool of 15 individuals who responded to the announcement that was posted on the Veterans of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) listserv and by word-of-mouth communication and snowballing. I then contacted those individuals who most closely matched the criteria. The potential participants were provided with a detailed explanation of the project. The candidates who agreed to participate were affirmed. After consent letters were sent out to nine individuals, seven confirmed to participate in the study. The remaining two potential participants never responded to being invited to participate.

IMZ: In your study you found that all six participants were influenced and motivated to participate in the sit-in movement because of the impact and effect of the values transmitted by their families throughout their lives, and because of the recurring recollection of childhood incidents where they had either been the victims of or were witness to the violence of White supremacists.

This phenomenon is interesting, because these days the family doesn't seem to have the same influence, and of course today, acts of violence by White supremacists upon Black folk is limited. Did any of your participants have any suggestions for rekindling student activism today, and if so, what were their ideas?

RM: You pose several questions. First, let me say that I might not agree with your assessment that "acts of violence by White supremacists upon Black folk is limited."

To me violence extends beyond physical violence or hate crimes. For example, I believe that violence is also perpetuated when White supremacists and Ku Klux Klan fliers are distributed in predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods as in Florida, or when the internet is used by White supremacist as a format for creating hate which then incite and direct individuals to go out and commit violent crimes against Black people as we see with the recurring of such acts against Black students on some of the college campuses in this country. According to the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights (2014):

> Despite the election of our nation's first African-American president, African Americans remain by far the most frequent victims of hate crimes. Of the 7,624 hate crime incidents reported nationwide in 2007, the most recent year for which data is available, 34 percent (2,659) were perpetrated against African Americans, a number and percentage of incidents that has changed little over the past 10 years. According to the FBI's HCSA report, more than twice as many hate crimes were reported against African Americans as against any other group" (p.1).

Second, I have not done any research in this area but I am certain that family, whether extended or community continue to play a supportive role by coming together to support victims of hate crimes and violence. For example we see more national responses to violence against Black people as a result of the technology of the media. I recall the national response in 1998 when James Byrd Jr., was lynched by dragging in Jasper Texas by White supremacist. Family and community in my opinion must still play an important role in supporting victims of hate crimes. In addition, today there are more social services available for hate-crimes victims than were during the most virulent days of White supremacist violence. That being said I believe that victims of hate crimes today still suffer extreme emotional and behavioral responses in addition to finding strategies for coping which usually is found in family support, but victims of hate violence like their earlier counterparts in my study, I doubt suffer from low self-esteem as opposed to those who are victims of other forms of violence.

IMZ: Did any of your participants have any suggestions for rekindling student activism today, and if so, what were their ideas?

RM: Almost all of the participants are educators and they acknowledged that students today should be supported on college campuses in their struggles against racism, the organizing efforts by students against tuition hikes, and one specifically said more support should be given to those student activist who are demanding that Black and Africana Studies programs should not be underfunded or dismantled at those respective institutions.

IMZ: According to your study, the six former students you interviewed had their education interrupted and were separated from their family and community, yet you argue that they were also resilient in pursuing other alternatives to meet their educational goals at great emotional, physical, and financial sacrifice. First, how were they separated from family and community, and second, can you give our readers examples of how they meet their educational goals, although they did it under great emotional, physical, and financial sacrifice?

RM: The students who were expelled were all student leaders in addition to being very involved in numerous campus activities. Most were on academic scholarships and if they were living on campus, the college was just a short commute or distance from family, church and community. When the students were notified of their expulsions, those who were on scholarship had them taken away. They were stripped of all honors and banned from the campuses. When news reached of the expulsions and dismissals, many northern, predominately White private liberal arts colleges and universities presented the students' an opportunity to complete their studies. Some were offered full scholarships or reduced tuitions. The expulsions and dismissals resulted in all six teen-agers being forced to disconnect from their familiar family and community roots where they relocated throughout the United States to new surroundings, different cultures and unfamiliar environments. In the following examples, I have highlighted some of the spirit and resilience of endurance, which I observed among the participants. One of the expelled institutions refused to forward legible transcripts, which meant that the student had to repeat some courses, which resulted in a delay of her graduation. In another instance one student ended up at an all-White northern college and felt so alienated that he joined the military. This detour delayed him from getting a college degree, which he eventually did some years later. The one honor law student expelled was forced into the military because his family could not afford to support him financially. When he was discharged from the Army, although somewhat older, he pursued his legal studies and eventually graduated from one of the HSBC's prestigious law schools.

IMZ: It seems that wide-spread knowledge of the birth of the Southern Black student sit-in movement that involved thousands of students attending many of the South's land-grant and private HBCUs which became the major vehicle for students en masse to demonstrate their opposition to the South's deep-seated, racist Jim Crow laws is unknown. Is this the case, and if so, why do you think it is?

RM: The historiography of the Civil Rights Movement is plentiful and rich including much written about the student sit-in movement. However, I believe that we also need to know more about what happened to those students on a more personal and individual level and what impact did their involvement have upon their lives in totality thru adulthood. Also, as Dr. William (Bill) Sales writes in the book's Forward, "When we tell the story of young Black women and men of teenage and college years and some even younger who challenged and prevailed over the state-sanctioned structures of racial oppression then we reveal to contemporary generations the latent power to change their lives and their society for the better that resides in their collective selves.

IMZ: Has there been any response from the five Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) that expelled the students you interviewed, and have there been any apologies or acts of reparations for those subject to the disciplinary suspensions or expulsions?

RM: I have not heard from any of the five Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) that expelled the students that I interviewed. However, before the book was published, I do make it a point to note that several of those institutions that expelled or dismissed students for their participating in the Black Student Sit-in Movement have done the right thing by recognizing those who are now elders and who sacrificed so much during one of the most racially turbulent periods of United States history in the struggle to defeat racism and for civil and human rights: The HBCUs include Alabama State University, Montgomery, Alabama; Albany State University, Albany, Georgia; Florida A&M University, Tallahassee, Florida; and Southern University, Baton Rouge in Louisiana.

And as a footnote, I would really love to hear from someone at Kentucky State College who expelled students from that college, including Mr. Owen Carter who was one of the participants in this study.

IMZ: What was the most shocking finding in your study, and why do you think it is significant?

RM: I did not find anything really shocking from the study. All of the research questions were answered which affirmed that I had done the right thing by these wonderful Black women and men who entrusted their stories to me.

IMZ: What recommendations do you have for future research on this topic?

RM: I sincerely hope that this study which stretches just a two year span, that stretched more than fifteen more-years, that introduces the stories of just six individuals (out of thousands), into the discourse on civil rights and social movement analysis, will hopefully stimulate young scholars to emulate what I just started before the whole generation of participants die out. Social justice also demands that as much as possible society must recapture these stories.

Reference

Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (2014). Hate crimes against African American. Retrieved April 10, 2014 from http://www.civilrights.org/publications/hatecrimes/african-americans.html