

## **An Empowering Heritage: Education, Freedom, Democracy**

### **Introduction**

**Greetings:** Our theme today—An Empowering Heritage—takes me to two personal points of reference. First of all, in 1966 I began my academic career at the University of California Santa Cruz. Secondly, one year later in 1967 I launched a research career in the rural communities of the coasts of South Carolina and Georgia, among the people often called Gullahs or Geechees. Even though I have served as a faculty member and administrator in a number of different academic institutions I have always maintained deep involvement in low-wealth communities—seeking to always link my professional life, my research and scholarship with service to the dispossessed through education.

Therefore when I think of “agents and architects of democracy” I not only think of teachers and scholars who have provided educational opportunity in academic institutions. I also think of creative educators and community leaders who developed unique strategies to teach grassroots people seeking freedom and democracy through education. Their messages from the grassroots provide profound insights and understandings for those seeking to expand democracy through higher education.

### **An Empowering Heritage: Citizenship Education Schools**

The Citizenship Education Schools began January 1957 in a rural community on Johns Island, SC. They started with a single class in basic literacy to prepare residents of isolated rural communities with the skills they needed to register and vote—as well as cope with the daily exigencies of life in the South. It was a modest beginning that reflected the democratic yearnings of people systematically denied the fundamental right to vote. The significance of this humble beginning was that in less than five years the effort was repeated in grassroots communities of African Americans throughout the eleven Southern states and continued to grow. By 1962 there were almost 200 Citizenship Education Schools in existence. With the collaboration of five major Civil Rights organizations these schools educated and eventually voter registered approximately 700,000 African Americans. For most of them it was their first exercise in democracy and one major civil rights leader claimed that the Citizenship Education Schools were the foundation on which the entire civil rights movement was built. [Septima Clark, 1986, Ready From Within, pp. 60-70]

In this effort the “agents and architects of democracy” were courageous leaders who worked through community-based organizations. That first Citizenship Education School on Johns Island, SC was established by 4 persons: Septima Clark of Charleston, SC; Esau Jenkins of Johns Island, SC; Myles Horton of Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, TN; and Bernice Robinson of Charleston, SC. All of them were leaders, but of the four only Septima Clark had the requisite educational skills to teach a class in literacy. Bernice Robinson was a beautician;

Esau Jenkins a truck farmer and entrepreneur; and Myles Horton a community organizer. It was the extraordinary combination of their skills in sensitive listening and responsiveness that led to a pedagogy which reached adult learners where traditional approaches had repeatedly failed. Their “curriculum” emerged from the expressed desires and needs of the people. As Septima Clark and Bernice Robinson responded to the wishes of the people they simultaneously taught them lessons of civic engagement and democracy. [Septima Clark, 1962, Echo In My Soul, pp. 131-155]

In 1967, ten years after the first Citizenship Education School on Johns Island I had the opportunity to spend several weeks among island residents interviewing them about their experience and its meaning to them. In long sessions on porches and in rural homes we talked at length about their personal feelings before and after the Citizenship Education Schools. In a larger context it was before and after registration and voting. I stayed overnight several times in the home of a gentleman who was in his early 30s and recently married when he met Esau Jenkins, Septima Clark and Bernice Robinson. He had no literacy skills before their meeting. Now he was proud of his voting certificate as well as his new role as a leader in his church. An elderly woman told me about her childhood experience of accompanying her father to the polling station to vote in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century—and the long years of discomfort she felt when she could not vote. She kept her voting certificate in her Bible.

The people expressed the view that democracy was a process of improving the community through registration and voting. I concluded that in fact for them democracy was much more than a process of governance or an act of voting. Given the social and personal challenges as well as the long history they had to overcome, democracy was a “state of mind”. Democracy was a sense of identity and internal peace that elevated them in their own hearts and minds. The people not only participated in democracy, they cherished it, sang about it, and rejoiced in it. Democracy was a “state of mind” and sense of identity.

### **Architects of Democracy: Historically Black Colleges and Universities**

When it comes to institutions that have served as agents and architects of democracy the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have played definitive roles—roles that are little understood and seldom appreciated by contemporary America. Indeed the quest for democracy has been the heart and soul of the mission, goals and educational aspirations of HBCUs for well over a century. From their inception the Historically Black Colleges and Universities have exemplified the African-American quest for democracy and modeled democracy for the entire nation. They expanded the concept of democracy far beyond traditional formulations. In their unique history and contributions these colleges also reflect democracy as a state of mind, democracy as a sense of identity, and democracy as a quest for liberation and freedom.

The two centuries of enslavement of Blacks in America officially ended in 1865. Five years later, by 1870, there were 95 advanced schools and colleges for Black students in 18 states plus the District of Columbia. [Henry N. Drewry and Humphrey Doermann, Stand and Prosper: Private Black Colleges and Their Students, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

p. 47] This rapid growth of educational institutions among a people with very limited resources and academic skills reflects the close link between Black education and the yearning for democracy, and democracy as a “state of mind” as well as a sense of identity. Commenting on the post-slavery period Drewry and Doermann write:

Education was hardly imposed upon freed black Americans by northern “do-gooders.” The evidence suggests that freedmen generally viewed education as crucial to their freedom and progress, and vital to their sense of who they were. In making it illegal to teach slaves to read and write, southerners communicated a powerful sense of the value both and so inadvertently fostered a deep-seated belief that education was related to freedom, higher social status, wealth, and power. [Op cit, p. 39]

They also quote the anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker who in speaking of the same period wrote that newly freed blacks “looked to education as the great indispensable foundation of democracy.” [Loc cit]

There are more than 120 Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the United States. These institutions have shaped democracy in America in three principal ways: 1) they have educated untold numbers of African Americans and students from other racial and social groups. Many of these students came from modest social backgrounds, some with excellent preparation but could not enroll in other colleges. Other students came with very limited preparation to academic environments that motivated them to excel; 2) they have developed outstanding leaders who have transformed the social environment in America making it a more equitable and just society; 3) they maintain and uphold a social and cultural aesthetic deeply rooted in the history and experience of African Americans and continues the quest for democracy.

### **Educating and uplifting students**

We get a glimpse of the significance of HBCUs when we consider three statistical summaries of their impact.

The 100+ Black Colleges represent about three percent of all colleges and universities, but they enroll sixteen percent of all African American students in 4-year degree granting institutions.

Thirty percent of African Americans receiving 4-year degrees graduate from the HBCUs.

Four of the top ten producers of successful African American medical school applicants are HBCUs and these four produce twenty percent more African American applicants to medical school than the other 16 institutions combined.

[NAFEO: National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education:  
<http://www.nafeo.org/community/index.php> accessed 1/30/2010]

Every year one-third of Black students awarded 4 year degrees study in collegiate environments that have been established to counter the lack of democracy in their recent past—and the emphasis on democracy permeates the atmosphere of every institution.

We see this in the actions of four young men on February 1, 1960, sitting down at a lunch counter in Greensboro, NC and sparking protests of youth—Black and White—across the nation. Within two months similar protests occurred in 54 cities in nine states. These young men had spent many hours on their campus—an HBCU land-grant university—talking about their lack of democracy and ultimately took direct action to change their world. In doing so they also changed America. One of them said he tried to follow the advice of his parents and grandparents who told him: ***“Believe in the Bill of Rights and the Constitution; get a good education; respect your elders and do good deeds.”***

<http://www.tolerance.org/blog/spirit-greensboro> accessed 2/2/2010]

<http://diverseeducation.com/cache/print.php?articleId=13494> accessed 2/4/2010

The colleges became launching stations for democracy seeking protests that resulted in major social changes in the 1960s. These same colleges also became refuges and oases for students from the North as well as the South, White as well as Black, who took the lessons they learned in their classrooms, the inspiration they received from their professors, into Southern communities where they registered voters, and struggled against racial segregation. Many were imprisoned—some died.

One of the most significant Civil Rights organizations—the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee—was founded as a result.

The impact of their actions is still felt today. Some of those activists now serve in Congress as well as state legislatures. Some of them lead social organizations, and many serve in professional positions that have made a huge impact on American democracy. [See: John Dittmer, ***The Good Doctors: The Medical Committee for Human Rights and the Struggle for Social Justice in Health Care***, New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009]

### **Leadership and the HBCUs: Incubators of Change**

Literally thousands of Americans from urban and rural communities learned the lessons of democracy in HBCUs. Many of them were profoundly influenced by some of America’s greatest minds who served as faculty and administrators in these colleges. The students listened daily to the entreaties of faculty and weekly they sat in chapels and auditoriums where they were inspired by presidents who provided self-esteem, guidance, vision and motivation.

Among them were women like Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955) whose life spanned the century from slavery to freedom. I have interviewed contemporaries who spoke of her extraordinary ability to provide hope and inspiration to them during their college years. Three

brief citations of the wisdom of President Bethune illustrate the messages students constantly heard from her:

1. ***If we accept and acquiesce in the face of discrimination, we accept the responsibility ourselves. We should, therefore, protest openly everything ... that smacks of discrimination or slander.***
2. ***Invest in the human soul. Who knows, it might be a diamond in the rough.***
3. ***There is a place in God's sun for the youth "farthest down" who has the vision, the determination, and the courage to reach it.***

Another great leader in the world of HBCUs was Benjamin E. Mays (1894-1984) who inspired thousands of young men (including Martin Luther King, Jr.) with his wisdom. Mays is remembered by many for his passionate evocations toward higher and higher heights. Here are just three of his many calls to exceed the limits of one's origins:

1. ***Every man and woman is born into the world to do something unique and something distinctive and if he or she does not do it, it will never be done.***
2. ***It must be borne in mind that the tragedy of life does not lie in not reaching your goal. The tragedy of life lies in having no goal to reach.***
3. ***Not failure, but low aim is sin.***

It is almost impossible to describe the impact of the leadership and vision Black students regularly encountered in their college days. It should be of no surprise that some of the most outstanding people in American life were transformed in these incubators and emerged to enrich the democracy struggle.

### **The social and cultural aesthetic**

The historically black colleges and universities have become the nation's most important preserver of the aesthetics of the historical experiences of African Americans. While students were learning new subjects under the guidance of inspiring leaders, they were also nurtured by constant reminders of the foundations of their cultural dynamics.

The aesthetics were particularly strong in the many spirituals, work songs and gospel music that built on their roots while lifting their eyes toward wider goals. This music strengthened student resolve every day. Songs composed and sung in slavery helped them understand they were not constrained or limited by their origins. Students often participated in musical groups that cherished these songs of hope and freedom. These songs embellished and enhanced their hopes and self-esteem.

A classic example is the traditional spiritual "I've been 'buked and scorned" which covers centuries of existence and hope in three lines:

- *I've been buked and I've been scorned*
- *There is trouble all over this world*
- *A'int gonna lay my 'ligion down*

When students heard the inspiring words of a Mary McLeod Bethune or a Benjamin E. Mays, followed by the strong harmonies of a choir singing about their experience, the quest for democracy was irresistible.

### **Conclusion: Black Education and American Democracy: Roots and Branches**

I conclude this session with a personal memory. It was my privilege to serve as President of a Black college in the Deep South during the 1980s. The college played a significant role during the 1960s as a haven for students and community leaders seeking to break the grip of slavery and its aftermath. It was a proud tradition that motivated us all.

I found the total environment of the college a transcendent and transformational force that could be sensed but not measured. During the antebellum era what was now a college had been a cotton plantation with many slaves working its fields.

Looking out the windows of my office and watching students moving about I was constantly reminded that not too many years before those students were slaves and the occupants of the house were owners. The urgency to push students to their highest heights was compelling. Students who entered the building for classes were reminded that earlier generations of their families entered the same building as chattel—without hope for education, freedom or democracy. The urgency to learn and excel was compelling.

I was constantly reminded that democracy can never be taken for granted and the quest for democracy must never end. I realized that democracy is more than a pattern of governance, democracy is more than an act of voting, democracy is more than a seat of power. Democracy is a state of mind, it penetrates the heart and soul, and it is the essence of our being. Education is “the great indispensable foundation of democracy.” The quest must never end.

