

Black Families of Yalobusha County Oral History Project Underway

By Dr. B. Brian Foster

People don't listen to Mississippi enough. Some folks might find this a curious idea—why listen to a place that, as far as you can see, doesn't seem to offer much good—but it's what I believe. It's an idea that, I think, I have carried with me my whole life. It's an idea that has shaped these early years of my career, as a professor at the University of Mississippi. It is the reason I am so humbled and excited to step in as the next director of the Black Families of Yalobusha County Oral History Project. I want folks to listen to what Mississippi has been saying, and is saying, and will say because I think that is how we learn about who we are as a nation, and how we begin the work of becoming better, more honest, more humane.

I was born and raised in Shannon, a small town in northeast Mississippi. I graduated from Shannon High School in 2007; earned my B.A. from the University of Mississippi (UM) in 2011; and have been working as a professor at UM since 2016. My time in the state has taught me a lot. Some of the lessons seem universal. Work hard. Practice gratitude even for the small and simple things. Love and show up for family. Find faith in something bigger than yourself. Make sure your feet are planted on the ground, and make sure the grass where you stand is cut clean.

Some of the lessons that Mississippi has taught me, while they probably apply to other places too, seem like they are all and only ours: Friday night is for football and community; Saturday mornings for cleaning the house, and the blues; Sundays—all day—for church and dinner, but mostly church. Say "ma'am" after yes and "sir" after no. The best jelly and preserves are homemade. The best greens are the ones you grow yourself. I could go on.

But the reason I have committed my work to helping folks listen to Mississippi is rooted in another type of lesson, or rather an idea: that Mississippi—our state—is not an artifact that is "backwards" or "behind the times," but is actually a compass that can guide us through whatever is to come. I'll say the same thing again, but differently: if folks listen to Mississippi more, they can learn anything they might think they want to know about everything.

That idea is neither mine alone nor new.

It was what Sunflower County native Fannie Lou Ham-



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er was saying when she said, "Mississippi is not actually Mississippi's problem. Mississippi is America's problem."

It is what Meridian native Justin "Big K.R.I.T." Scott means when he raps, "You ain't sell out a show until you sell out one in Mississippi."

It is what the state's most mythologized writer, William Faulkner, meant when he wrote, "To understand the world, you must first understand a place like Mississippi."

Some folks not from Mississippi seem to believe the idea too—like Malcolm X when he said, "As far as I am concerned, Mississippi is anywhere South of the Canadian border."

Listen to Mississippi to learn about the world, so that we can tear down what's necessary and build something new in the wake. That's the idea that I have carried with me for so long, that continues to guide my career ambi-

tions, and that makes the Yalobusha County Oral History project—established by Water Valley native Dottie Chapman Reed and previously directed by UM historian Dr. Jessie Wilkerson—so important.

There is so much work to be done to make this nation a more humane place, to offer justice and fair opportunities to communities historically denied them the most, to imagine and work towards new possibilities for what we can be. There are so many policies to pass, so much organizing to continue, so much art to create, so many ideas to wrestle, so much love to share. Doing it all will be hard. Hard but not impossible. Not impossible because it has all been done before; and all we have to do to see is listen—to Mississippi.

If you want to know how to organize for more humane living conditions and civil rights, listen to Fannie Lou Hamer, Vera Pigeo, Aaron Henry, Anne Moody, Medgar Evers, James Meredith. They all Mississippi.

If you want to know art, listen to Big K.R.I.T., the blues, Jesmyn Ward or Heavy, Natasha Tretheway or gospel, or any other American music genre. They all Mississippi.

If you want to know wrestling ideas, listen to Margaret Walker Alexander, Eddie Glaude, Jr., Ida B. Wells. They all Mississippi.

If you want to know radical love, listen to Mamie Till or Kiese Laymon, or go sit at a high school football game on Friday night, or somebody's dinner table on Sunday after church.

If you want to know what was, what is, or what will be, listen to Mississippi. That's the idea.

As the incoming director of the Yalobusha County Oral History Project, my mission and vision are simple—listen to the people who have made Mississippi what it is. In the coming months, if and as the state builds an effective response to the Covid-19 pandemic, our oral history team will return to communities in Yalobusha County for the next round of oral history interviews. As of now, that oral history team includes me, Dottie Reed, and eight current and former University of Mississippi students: Brittany Brown, Michelle Bright, Keon Burns, Jaimee' Mitchell, Rhondalyn Peairs, Jasmine Stansberry, and Jasmine Williams. We look forward to continuing this work, or, to say the same thing in a different way: we look forward to listening.

Just One Part Of The Love Story

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and happy to have accomplished this goal. This moment sums up how our Mother tackles all things in life. She knows what needs to be done and she gets it done. She makes it work no matter how challenging or inconvenient. These are some of the many qualities that we love and respect about her. These are also qualities that helped us on our journey to become a doctor and an attorney. We relied on these qualities throughout medical and law school and continue to rely daily on them while practicing medicine and law.

Mother has been married to our father, Joe W. Carr, for 53 years. We were born three years later. Our Mother always tells us that our Dad wanted kids, but she was not really sold on the idea of kids. Nevertheless, she says that when we were born, she fell in love with us the moment she laid eyes on us. Needless to say, the feeling was mutual. She is our loudest cheerleader, our wisest counsel, our chief consoler, our captive listener, our problem-solver, our most loving critic, and our hidden comic relief.

In addition to providing daily care for our grandmother over the last several years, she has been the family organizer. She insists that family reunions remain a top priority because she understands the importance of reconnecting with and supporting family members as well as passing our family's traditions to younger generations. In addition to serving as the organizer of family events, she also serves her community by spearheading many fundraising events to raise scholarship funds for youth in the community.

She was one of the founders of the Dowsing/Walton and the Hazel Martin Hawkins Scholarships and a member of the Community Involvement Group that sponsored the E. C. Davidson Scholarship. All of these scholarships support community youth to continue their education. She also assists with administering the James Brown Save Our Sons Scholarship and organizes

the Walton/Dowsing Annual Scholarship banquet where youth are recognized and presented scholarships.

Above all, our Mother's spiritual life is extremely important to her. She holds multiple positions at Miles Memorial Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, her home church for more than 40 years. She serves as a trustee, missionary president, and secretary. She also holds positions at the district and regional levels of the C.M.E. Church.

Our Mother has always been our role model because of her unwavering dedication to her family, church, friends and community. She believes and taught us that service is a requirement no matter where you find yourself in life. She is always striving to learn and better herself. She holds her values and morals strong letting her faith in the Lord guide her life as opposed to any person, thing, or circumstance. If you have had the pleasure to know her or even heard of her, she is known to be spirited, strong willed and opinionated. She fully recognizes that at 73 years of age, she is a work in progress and would not have it any other way. Our Mother is truly a phenomenal woman.

Final Thoughts From Dottie:

Nick, or Rubye, has been a great resource for me all my life, for the column and now for this oral history project. I have called her numerous times over the years, especially when she was in the school system with questions or help with this or that. I was fascinated when she told me that in the 1967 school year while she was a senior in high school, John Herod, then principal at Davidson High, asked her to take over Edith Wilson's business classes. She must have done an impressive job because in 1968 she had finished high school and he hired her as the school secretary.

After the twins were born, she was promoted from secretary to bookkeeper and then to the chief financial officer. She secured her required certifications from Northwest Junior College in Senatobia and the University of Mississippi. When she retired in 2002, she went back part-time for two years to work with the new business manager. Ruby has traveled extensively to Mexico, Paris, Italy, Aruba, St. Martin, Hawaii and the Dominican Republic.

Amid this devastating coronavirus pandemic impacting the black and brown communities, especially in the south more than any other, the last verse of "For My People", written by Alabama writer and historian, Margaret Walker in 1942, comes to mind:

*Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born.
Let a bloody peace be written in the sky.
Let a second generation full of courage issue forth;
let a people loving freedom come to growth.
Let a beauty full of healing and a strength of final
clenching be the pulsing in our spirits and our blood.
Let the martial songs be written, let the dirges disappear.
Let a race of men now rise and take control.*

Note: Mrs. Annie Kelly Montgomery was featured in the March 19, 2020 article of the Outstanding Black Women column and posted at www.blackwomenofyalobusha.com.



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