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Bending the Arc Toward Justice: 50 Years of Black Student Activism at USF

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50th Anniversary Celebration / BSU
Nov 9th, 2018

Bending the Arc Toward Justice: 50 Years of Black Student Activism at USF

What a great honor to open this incredible celebration! I was asked that my remarks include what it was like at the beginning and in the early years when the BSU began. Let me give it a try!

Just days after the murder of Martin Luther King Jr on April 4, 1968; a small group of Black students crowded into a small conference room in Phelan Hall – stunned, angry and feeling hopeless – and needing to be together. We dedicated ourselves to form the BSU and make a difference at USF.

Just two brief digression -

1) **Because of the leadership of African American students** on 5/9/17 that same building was renamed after an icon at USF - an amazing and gentle giant of a man – Burl Toler He was a USF trustee when I had the honor of being invited on the Board – he mentored & encouraged me.

2) You can see a picture of one of those students gathered in that room – **Priscilla Scotlan**.....right behind the counter at USF's Priscilla Scotlan Career Services Center.

In those early years of the BSU formation - we as students were a family and we looked after one another. And I feel I am here representing that family of students. We understood the importance of connecting with the community; and 2 Western Addition leaders (Thomatra Scott and Zee Butler) took us under their wing & joined us in facing off with the university.

It is hard to put into words what it was like to be a student with the backdrop of the entire Civil Rights Movement and Social Activism instigated by young people things like:

- the birth of **Black Studies & BSU's** at SFSU and Oakland's Merritt Community College
- student activism surging all across the country
- **impact & influence** of so many individuals & organizations & events

Martin Luther King Jr, John Lewis & the Freedom Riders, Willie Brown, Ella Baker, Rosa Parks, Black Panthers (Oakland), Malcom X, NAACP, Diane Nash & SNCC, Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), CORE, demonstrations against the Viet Nam war - student shootings at Kent State & Jackson State and I could go on & on!

And **there we were young students** 18-20 right smack in the middle of this lightening rod – at a Jesuit university professing social justice – so we decided to help educate the USF community on what that meant.

Our plight, dreams, concerns, demands were very similar to 2015 BSU demands

A few examples development of an Ethnic Studies Program, increase in Black students, faculty, staff & administrators, renaming of the Memorial Gym to Bill Russell (we got a room), programs supporting the access & retention of students of color (called minority students in those days) etc, etc, etc

So, what were we about as students?

- got involved in **student government** (access/influence of student funds)
- hosted annual **Halloween Carnival** for children of Western Addition
- ran **study halls & enrollment** advising for ourselves
- hosted an **annual week of events** during **Black History Month**
- held annual **Thanksgiving Food drive** for needy families
- conducted **tutoring at Sacred Heart - neighborhood elementary school**
- accepted an invitation to visit **Theology classes** to describe what it was like being a Black student at USF
- worked with Admissions Office to actually visit local high schools **to recruit Black students**
- a few more activities in **Dr Marshall's book Street Soldiers**

and yes through it all experienced some negative **backlash and ridicule**.

We brought icons to campus ... Bill Russell, Muhammad Ali, Angela Davis, Dick Gregory, Curtis Mayfield, and Eldridge Cleaver.

We worked under the tutelage of **Dr Njisane** (African History professor) to develop an Ethnic Studies program, which had to meet the **standards acceptable to the VP of Academic Affairs** – Rev Edmond Smyth. Courses were developed in Black, Chicano, Asian American, and Native American Studies.

As a student worker I actually **typed those first course outlines**, we hoped for a degree major but it started as an area of concentration.

We eventually saw a response to our **pleas for Black faculty**. Some of the first to come

Patricia Hill/English, Robert Thornton/Biology,
Mona Scott/Sociology, Elizabeth Parker/History, Lenneal Henderson/Political Science.

Primary USF administrators & faculty that supported our BSU efforts were Dean Lloyd Luckmann, faculty in the **Sociology Dept**: Ralph Lane, Jack Curtis, Rev Paul Belcher and Mike Howe. This same group was instrumental in USF being a part of a consortium of local universities that brought a comprehensive services program that supported the recruitment, retention and success of minority students - **Educational Services Center for Minority Students (ESCMS)**.

We were **first generation** college students and **knew we stood on the shoulders** of the sacrifices and commitment of the generation before us. We worked hard to embody the spirit **Sankofa**. A mythical bird that flies forward while looking backward. That is, we should reach **back and gather the best of what our past has to teach us**, so that we can achieve our full potential as we move forward. Whatever we have lost, forgotten, forgone, or been stripped of can be reclaimed, revived, preserved, and perpetuated. The egg it carries in its mouth symbolizes the future and is also interpreted as reaching back to bring someone else along with you.

So don't ever underestimate the power **and** responsibility of students.

Remember that wherever life takes us – we **can** make a difference.

Sometimes **merely being present** in the room or at the table can make that difference.

My hope for the current & future BSU's - is they have a great journey

making sure **USF** continues to become a more **diverse, inclusive & just** University!

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Odienne Riley". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, prominent "O" at the beginning.