

Project Title: The Renaming of James Farmer Hall

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UMW

Interviewer: Sophia Hobbs (SH)

Narrator: Brianna "Breezy" Reaves (BR)

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HIST 428

SH: This is Sophia Hobbs and I am conducting an interview with Brianna Reaves for my Digital History project and the date is March 23, 2022. Thank you so much for letting me interview you today, Breezy. So, my first question for you today regarding the renaming of Farmer Hall is how did you end up on the Ad Hoc Naming Committee?

BR: So, I believe I was a sophomore. I believe it was...trying to think which semester was, if it was fall semester or spring semester. But, if I'm not mistaken, Dr. Devlin, who was the chair of the committee, or she played a crucial role in the renaming committee, in the creation of it, she reached out to myself and then to another student, to basically represent the student population, and administer the survey, or really just represent the student population in terms of names and thoughts around the renaming, in the importance of the renaming. I remember receiving an email - I really think it was fall - and then coming to the meeting, and being there and it was two students: myself and another student. And then, it was faculty. Faculty that I had never met, some faculty that I did, administration. Some administrators were a part of it, but actually decided to step back and was like, "We want to give the full voice to students and faculty in this

decision." And community members were also part of it. So, it actually felt like a true committee. Because it wasn't just majority faculty, less students, but it was a good balance between everyone. But yeah, I'd say that's how I came on to the committee.

SH: And what was your reaction to being invited to the committee?

BR: I'm not gonna lie, I felt very honored to. I know that when I was a freshman, the first...I had many issues with the institution. But the first thing was the naming of James Farmer and the lack of, or the naming of Trinkle Hall, being Trinkle Hall in front of a James Farmer bust. I think at that point in time, it undoubtedly set the scene for what Mary Washington was. It was this mix between folks who wanted to keep things the old way, the old way that was withheld or upheld white supremacy. And that wasn't diverse, it wasn't inclusive, versus like the new way, which is the future of UMW, which is a legacy of diversity and inclusion and equity, and all those things. So, when I first saw that, as a freshman, I was "Oh, yeah, this is terrible," and in many ways, I was like, "UMW is a hypocrite," because you have James Farmer who you say you support, Dr. James Farmer, in a bust. And then you have a center named after him, all these things that, quote unquote, honor him, but his bust is in front of the building named after a eugenics supporter. Right? And the reason we're not changing it is what exactly? Nobody can tell me. And so, I pushed. I pushed within the classroom, I brought it up. I didn't just complain about it, but I like was "Okay. How can we rename it?" I know I talked to other Black students, Black students who were outgoing, right, who are now UMW alumni, about just even like, "Are y'all okay with this?" They were like "We've always had an issue with the naming, but we couldn't do anything about it," or "We felt like we couldn't do anything about it. That was not the fight for us at that

point in time." So, when I was asked, I really think it was fall when I was asked, in fall, to serve on the committee. I feel honored because I was like, "Okay, dope. I know exactly what this is for. But I felt the process of it was just and I felt like it represented what UMW is becoming, and continue to be the future of UMW, right. Just the diversity of the committee, but also to pull not just any random student, but as a Black student leader on campus, who is involved, who you know has advocated around this, it was definitely an honor to be able to even participate in the process, right. Even if it wasn't named after Dr. James Farmer, the conversation, right, and in the community that came from that, and then even the legacy that is then created by renaming it was just something that I'm really honored to be a part of.

SH: Yeah. And beyond that community, how do you see the renaming of Trinkle Hall to Farmer Hall impacting the UMW community, specifically speaking on students?

BR: Yeah, so I think it, for UMW, allows UMW to truly walk out what they talk. The issue was, we're saying diversity and inclusion, but when I look around and see it, this hall is named after this person. This hall was named after this person that, you know, I'm looking around you're saying the campus is diverse and inclusive. You talk about the first Black male resident, Dean Rucker, you talk about Venus Jones, you talk about Dr. Farmer, but I don't see them on campus. Right? I don't see them in the buildings. I don't see them on murals. I don't see it. And so, for Trinkle to be renamed to James, you know, Dr. Farmer Hall or Farmer Hall? I think for the UMW community, and for students specifically, it let them know, like, "Oh, wow, y'all hear us, like y'all truly hear us." There's numerous surveys coming out, numerous surveys are coming out, students are on that committee, students can talk to individuals on that committee. I think it

lets students know that they're seen, I think it lets students know that they were heard, but then also that we weren't stopping here that, "Okay, if there's another building that y'all want to rename, let's let's pull it up and let's bring it before this Ad Hoc Committee." And then also around that time, because we're having that conversation, you then have buildings like Monroe cover up their murals which aren't reflective of the folks who go to UMW. And so then that sparks another conversation around, "Okay, well, are we going to have students create murals? Or are we going to do something else in which it is reflective of our values?" So I think, for the folks who were around then and got to notice the change in the name and all that and to celebrate it, I think it showed a lot. "Okay, my university actually hears me and sees me, and they care enough to act on it, and to commit to action regarding it."

SH: Mm hmm. So, a more broader question that I think speaks not just about Farmer Hall but Farmer Hall in the spectrum of all of UMW. How do you see Dr. Farmer's legacy affecting our UMW community?

BR: I said this at the official commemoration of the renaming, right, when I had a chance to speak, and I said, "UMW will miss an entire change," right? They'll miss a whole movement if they think that the Freedom Rides that Dr. Farmer did in 1942 was the only Freedom Rides, right? It would be ignorant and truly irresponsible to think that the legacy is not continuing today, because we see the legacy of Dr. Farmer within, I would say, I see it within my own life. I see it within other Black students who come on campus looking for a place of belonging, because I don't doubt, I have no doubt in my mind that he had to look for a place of belonging here, after being a major civil rights leader and then coming to teach in this capacity in early

2000s. Undoubtedly, right that he had to find a place of belonging. I think a lot of the Black student experience at UMW is reflective and very similar to Dr. James Farmer's experience at UMW, right. Maneuvering in predominately white spaces and not feeling like you're being taken seriously and not being valued. But then on the other end, I think, for the broader sense of UMW students aside from race, I think everybody, whether they know it or not, is impacted by Dr. Farmer's legacy. I think, in his coming here, even if we didn't appreciate him while he was here, whatever he did, right, his coming here in the first place, and then his teaching and his doing it well, and representing such a pivotal time in history. I think it made UMW stand out to the point where it forced us to get uncomfortable, and then it also forced us to be better. And so as a result, I think a lot of UMW students, at least the student leaders that I see outside of SGA, outside of NAACP, but even in clubs, have this spirit of "Okay," you know what I'm saying, "I'm willing to get a little uncomfortable." It may not be as uncomfortable to create the change we need to see. But it's either "I'm willing to be a little uncomfortable. I'm willing to make room. I'm willing to listen." And then if not, those three things, I think even without them knowing it, their ability to show up authentically, even white students, right? The ability to show up and just be like, "Oh, yeah, I'm gonna be the club president this, so I'm just gonna do this, or I'm not gonna do anything. I'm just gonna enjoy these weird traditions that UMW..." when the underwear run and jumping in the fountain. I think that unapologetic essence is what Dr. James Farmer represented in many ways, because he was unapologetic in his advocacy for civil rights and justice and change within our community and then within the greater world. And so even if folks do not find themselves, unfortunately, as champions to the social justice movement that we're living in today, I do think that they still are impacted by Dr. Farmer's legacy, whether they know it or not, because his impact was that big. And he set the scene for other Black history makers to pass

through UMW and to then make that foothold even bigger for more folks to come in, to push the status quo, but to make this institution better, and to hold it accountable to his values.

SH: Absolutely. Thank you so much, Breezy! Before you wrap up today, is there anything else that we haven't spoken on that you would like to bring up?

BR: I do wholeheartedly believe that Black students, Black student leaders who pass through UMW are the legacy of Dr. James Farmer. And I believe that's very unique for UMW. And I do believe that UMW should, in knowing this and knowing how much they honor and esteem Dr. Farmer, I think that they should prioritize the voices and the concerns and the needs of Black students, especially because they are continuing in his legacy, right? So, to a degree I consider them, Black UMW students who come through UMW, they're like, kind of a part of the tribe of Dr. James Farmer, right? Because of the standard that he set and what he stood for. And there's not one student on this campus, especially Black student leaders, who I've met who hasn't embodied something of Dr. James Farmer, who hasn't advocated for something that he's advocated for. And so, if we are to continue upholding the legacy of Dr. James Farmer, that comes with prioritizing and in paying a lot of attention to and putting a lot of resources behind the Black students who are continuing his legacy without getting paid, and for fun and many times at the sacrifice of their own mental health and academic success. So yeah, that's all.

SH: Thank you so much for letting me interview you today, Breezy! I really appreciate it.

BR: No problem at all.

SH: Thank you.