

Project Title: The Renaming of James Farmer Hall

Principal Investigator: Dr. Jeffrey McClurken, Professor of History and American Studies,

UMW

Interviewer: Sophia Hobbs (SH)

Narrator: Christopher Williams (CW)

March 22, 2022, 12:06 p.m.

HIST 428

SH: This is Sophia Hobbs and it is March 22, 2022, and I'm here at Mary Washington with Mr. Chris Williams and I will be conducting an interview with him for my Digital History project on the renaming of Farmer Hall. So, thank you so much, Mr. Williams, for letting me interview you today. I really appreciate it.

CW: Sure thing!

SH: So, the first question that I have for you is, was the naming of a building after Dr. Farmer something that had been pushed for in the past?

CW: I think so. I've been here four years now and one of the things that outside of the Multicultural Center being named his honor, there's a placard on the back wall of Monroe 116 where it used to be his lecture hall. And then there's also the bust that presides now in front of now Farmer Hall. There was a push to get an academic building made his honor. The building that holds his name now, carries his name now, is the building where James Farmer Scholars

used to convene. When we came off the buses from Spotsylvania, Westmoreland, Caroline, and Fredericksburg every couple of weekends during the school year. We used to meet in Room 204. Then it was Trinkle 204. But now is Farmer 204. But anyway, there was a push. Then there was the survey that went around the campus for people to select names to, you know, "Who should the building be named after? Dean Rucker was one of those names and then Dr. Farmer, and also Venus Jones, I think was also on that list. So, I voted for Dr. Farmer, obviously. One, I have a personal relationship with him. Then, two, I work in the Multicultural Center. But yes, there was a push to get a academic building named in his honor, because he was here for thirteen years.

SH: Yeah. Yeah. And can you tell me more just about your personal relationship with Dr. Farmer?

CW: Sure. The first time I met him was actually because my mom was jogging on our road, on Guinea Station Road, and she just happened to bump into a young woman who was standing at the mailbox. And they just struck up a conversation. And then the young woman actually was Tami Gonzalez, who was one of Dr. Farmer's daughters. So, once my mom learned that she told her, "Well, my son is a James Farmer Scholar and he lives five minutes from here. Will we be able to coordinate a meeting between the both of them?" And so also at that time, Ms. Brenda Sloan was one of the librarians here at Mary Washington College - that was the name then. And she was one of his main caretakers.

SH: Okay.

CW: So, my mom and Ms. Sloan were close because they were doing a lot of community organizing events here in the city of Fredericksburg together. Between the two of them, they coordinated a time for me to be able to meet Dr. Farmer, so I met him in 1996, I was fifteen. That was the summer leading into my junior year of high school when I met him. And it was just really awesome to be in the presence of one of the Big Four of the Civil Rights Movement. It doesn't get any better than that. I've been privileged to have the opportunity to be around a lot of those fine folks from the Movement through the years, but Dr. Farmer was the first.

SH: Yeah.

CW: So, you know, there would be times where I would go over there to spend some time with him, walk alongside him at his property. Be downstairs where he had his setup, where he had his bed and access to the restroom and things like that. And just sit and talk with him about his days in the Civil Rights Movement. Some of the things he thought that people - young people - today should be doing. I was there at his house for his seventy-seventh birthday party.

SH: Yeah.

CW: I read— my mom and I read his birthday cards to him. One of the images that I sent to you is from his party.

SH: Oh, wow.

CW: That was one of the images. So, then there's been other times where he was here at the college at the time, and we held a celebration in his honor in 1997. And it was here in the...then it was called the ballroom. But now it's not the ballroom any longer. It was in Woodard.

SH: Okay. Gotcha.

CW: Yeah. Where the Eagle's Nest and all that is, it was upstairs.

SH: Oh, okay. Yeah.

CW: It was third floor. We had an event there with him, honoring him. I think I was on the program that day. And then I was privileged enough to be one of three scholars that went to the White House to witness him getting his Presidential Medal of Freedom Award.

SH: Wow.

CW: In January of '98. I was a senior in high school then.

SH: Yeah, that's amazing.

CW: Yeah.

SH: So, just building off of just talking about James Farmer, like how you knew Dr. Farmer, and just the relationship you had with him, and his impact on UMW, why do you think this renaming of Trinkle to Farmer Hall was so important for UMW?

CW: Well, I think it marks a shift in the direction that the university is taking. I think underneath the leadership of President Paino, he's trying to make a more inclusive campus atmosphere for everyone. And this is one of the first steps and taking that to the next level. And having Dr. Farmer's name on an academic building where he spent thirteen years means a great deal to people who knew him.

SH: Yeah.

CW: And, I think, it also opens up the possibility to expand on his legacy. Because the university, I think, over the past handful of years I've been here has done a really good job of trying to kind of pinpoint who Dr. Farmer was and what he stood for. We had the thirtieth anniversary of the Multicultural Center 2019. 2020, the university was going to start the 2020 Farmer Legacy Initiative, which was in commemoration of what would have been his one hundredth birthday. To kick off that initiative, the university funded a trip for us to embark on the same path of the 1961 Freedom Riders. To be able to take 45 students and 20 community members, that was the last Social Justice Fall Break Trip that we've done. But to have the university backing for that on top of the initiative and just to support for some of the other programs that we've launched since then, like the Farmer Fellows, the university is really seeing how important Dr. Farmer's, not only his presence was here, but also the legacies left behind. I

think they're doing their due diligence and uplifting him as one of the Big Four of the Civil Rights Movement. Because without him and his push for multiculturalism and social justice we very well might not be sitting where we're sitting right now.

SH: Yeah. Thank you so much, Mr. Williams. Is there anything else that we didn't touch on today question-wise that you would like to add about just Dr. Farmer in general or the renaming?

CW: I just think that this is really great to see Dr. Farmer's name on an academic building outside of just our Multicultural Center. It's very fitting that the academic building is right across from his bust. It was a great location. Yeah, it's a really good thing to see that come into reality.

SH: Thank you so much, Mr. Williams! I really appreciate you taking the time to answer these questions today.

CW: Sure! You're welcome.