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“Upholding the Tradition”: Connecting Community with Literacy and Service-Learning at Claflin University

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“Upholding the Tradition” explores the national program *The Big Read* and Claflin University’s attempt to form community partnerships in order to increase literacy in the primarily black, rural, and poor city of Orangeburg, SC, where the university is located. The essay includes interviews with the program director and with a key community member, Reverend Larry McCutcheon, who was instrumental in recruiting more than 40 people to take part in the reading project. The interviews demonstrate how multiple levels of planning and engagement were implemented and also how many HBCUs, like Claflin, approach service-learning. More importantly, this essay attempts to theorize ways in which HBCUs can do a better job of servicing the neighborhoods that house them. Ultimately, *The Big Read* project, featuring Ernest Gaines’ *A Lesson Before Dying*, was successful in reaching lapsed readers because it highlighted programs that brought the reader to the book and allowed him or her to become engaged with issues raised therein.

In the spring of 2009, members of the English Department of Claflin University met to discuss a problem. Many of the incoming students, it seemed, did not read or if they did read, they did not read well. And, they did not write well. The English Department recognized that perhaps much of the evidence for struggles with academic literacy was



due to regional differences—the influence of Gullah and Geechee speech patterns that did not necessarily translate well into standard written English, especially for professors who were not from the area. These and other variations of African American Vernacular English too often found their way into too many composition papers. Moreover, many of the students were from South Carolina or had grown up in small towns where access to books is limited. Orangeburg, itself, is a town with no major chain bookstore—the Waldenbooks in the mall had shut down earlier that year. Understanding that it is difficult to read when people are not continually exposed to books, we sought to create programs as a department that would provide access to the written word. However, we realized that the problem wasn't just that we needed to get students to read well so that they could write well. We also had to get the town reading and the students involved with the town so that everyone could literally begin to change their circumstances.

The Big Read, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts, was the perfect program to address the crisis in reading that we saw in the students and in the larger Orangeburg community. Claflin professors Corrie Claiborne and Stephany Rose wrote the grant for \$20,000 to, as the 2008 brochure for the program reads, “bring the transformative power of literature into the lives of Americans.” In seeking transformation in the African American community of Orangeburg, SC we realized that we would have to find a way to bridge the gap between the town and the university.

Claflin University and the Orangeburg Community

“Claflin University is a progressive, independent, liberal arts, co-educational, historically Black institution that is affiliated with the United Methodist Church” (*Course Catalog*). Founded in 1869, Claflin University is located in Orangeburg, South Carolina, a county with a population of 91,582 situated five miles from Interstate 26, and 35 miles from the city of Columbia, the capital of South Carolina. The



University has been committed to providing educational excellence and to preparing students without regard to gender, race, religion or ethnic origin. Likewise, it is committed to offering quality undergraduate programs and viable continuing education opportunities. At the undergraduate level, the university provides a liberal arts education to produce graduates who understand themselves as well as historical and social forces that impact the world. Claflin University operates under the imperative of preparing students for leadership and service in “a multicultural, global, and technological society.” Thus, as an institution it shares in the commitment of the National Endowment for the Arts’ *The Big Read* program to reinvigorate literacy within lapsed, reluctant, and disengaged communities. Therefore, through the support of *The Big Read* NEA grant, Claflin University was able to inspire a traditionally disengaged community to embrace and participate in literacy-centered activities.

As an HBCU, Claflin University services one of South Carolina’s predominantly African American rural counties where the percentage of residents living at or below poverty and educational levels exceeds that of the national averages. Often the needs of citizens living in rural communities are overshadowed by those in larger urban and metropolitan areas. However, the need is often much greater in rural communities because of minimized access to resources. The combination of disparaging economic and educational resources warrants programming that engages communities throughout Orangeburg County.

The Project

Claflin University chose to feature Ernest Gaines’ *A Lesson Before Dying* for *The Big Read* program because the novel spoke directly to historical and contemporary experiences of young African Americans, particularly males in the rural South. Our goal was to target lapsed and/or reluctant readers, area high school students, their parents, rural college students, and affiliates of Claflin University and neighboring South Carolina State University.



Through *The Big Read*, held from February 11, 2010-March 3, 2010, Claflin University was able to interface with diverse audiences within Orangeburg County through a variety of activities. The kick-off for *The Big Read* was a *Taste of New Orleans Jazz Fest*, featuring the Mitch Butler Trio, where community residents, students, and university affiliates were able to explore the cuisine and musical culture that contextualizes Gaines' novel. In the weeks following that successful kick-off we were able to have a series of lectures, held on campus, at the local library, and at Trinity United Methodist Church that engaged students and community members alike. In particular our panel discussions "Saviors and the (Un)Saved: African American Religious Traditions Raised in *A Lesson Before Dying*" and "Legal Transgressions: Literacy, Race and the Law," as well as the "Race, Media, and Masculinities" panels, were well received and attended by over 400 participants in total. Likewise, the theatrical production of *A Lesson Before Dying* and the Jazz Festival were highlights because they allowed an opportunity for many different people from different segments of the community to interact. A representative from a local high school, Shalanda Mack, commented "Just a note of thanks and congratulations for a job well done! All of the students are still talking about their experience. Please extend our sincere thanks and appreciation to your staff and crew. Thanks again for the hospitality and generosity shown to us during our visit." In total 282 local high school and middle school children and 418 college students read the novel.

Further, to actively reach youth audiences, the novel was required reading for every incoming freshman through Claflin University's Freshman College. *The Big Read* at Claflin University also partnered with the School of Education and the Saturday Academy to engage in service-learning with area high and middle school students. Because peer-to-peer dialogue often proves most effective when engaging youth in small group settings, the Claflin University students had the opportunity to serve as facilitators and tutors while engaging with the novel in a one-to-one setting.



The highlight of our experience at *The Big Read* was the opportunity to interface with members in the community who never really felt that they could be involved with what was going on at the college. In particular Reverend Larry McCutcheon and Trinity United Methodist Church, a predominantly African American church that sits across the street from the university, were excellent community partners. Reverend McCutcheon made sure that over 30 members of his church had the book. Similarly, he led lively discussions and attended several events, namely the “It’s Bigger Than Hip-Hop” and “Race, Media, and Masculinities” panels, where he felt that it was important for the young members of the community to see his involvement in youth culture. He was also instrumental in helping the facilitators figure out how to best get people out to the lectures and the play.

In this analysis of community literacy programs and HBCUs, it is important that we hear from Reverend McCutcheon, who is a stakeholder in the community, because he was able to put in context the importance of having community members in conversation with university students. As a graduate of Claflin himself, and as someone who saw Orangeburg go through its civil rights struggles, he was also key in helping us to understand the political and social implications of reading.

Interview with Reverend Larry McCutcheon:

Claiborne: Can you talk about what role you see Claflin serving in the community?

McCutcheon: Well Claflin is an integral part of the community. It is one of two universities in the small community of Orangeburg. It relates to the community in several ways, mainly through programming designed directly for the community, such as with the outreach part of the campus, students volunteering in certain community agencies, and faculty and staff persons working with various community groups. Claflin is seen as a leader in the community and it is well-respected throughout the area.



Claiborne: With particular attention to *The Big Read* project that happened in February 2010, how do you think that the community responded to working with the Claflin faculty and students?

McCutcheon: I thought that it was a good response with *The Big Read*. Of course, our church participated with 30 or 40 persons to read the books provided by the university. We discussed the book. We had a discussion at the church. Some of the members attended the larger discussion on campus and they not only attended, they also participated in the discussion on campus. It was also good to see a group of primarily 60-80 year olds interact with the undergraduates.

Claiborne: Can you talk about Ernest Gaines' book *A Lesson Before Dying*? What do you think of the choice of that novel, in particular, for a community reading project?

McCutcheon: I thought that it was a good book to do for *The Big Read*, for a community project, because of the nature and the makeup of the community. The community's struggle with race, the Civil Rights Movement in Orangeburg, as well as the Orangeburg Massacre—all of those things made it a good book to study. I think that Earnest Gaines was good at portraying the life of the young man [the main character Jefferson] and him becoming a man. I think with so many of the adults at our church who work in education and other areas with young people. I think that it worked really well.

Claiborne: Are there any other books that you plan to do as a part of another book discussion? Are there any other books besides *A Lesson Before Dying* that the church has read as a group?

McCutcheon: Our church has a book club. As a part of African American History Month a couple of years ago, we read a novel by James Baldwin, *Another Country*. From the romantic side of things, the club looked at one of Terry McMillan's more recent works last year, as well. I don't think that we have done a book by a non-African



American. One of the books that we plan to do in the future is *Race Matters* by Cornel West. I have an interest in that book. It is an old book, but a good and timely book for us to read.

Claiborne: Would you characterize the congregation of your church as readers?

McCutcheon: I would characterize them as readers because of their background. Many of the people have higher degrees. The young adults get to learn the importance of lifelong learning because of the church members—that is one of the benefits of living around two universities. We do have faculty that are a part of the church. It is very challenging as well as rewarding for a minister to serve at the church because people are always reading (laughter). It is a good thing, because this month—for the last few months—I have been doing a bible study based on the poem, part of the poem which goes “live well, laugh often, and love much.” I forgot the name of the poet, but it comes from an old poem and it is interesting to see 30 or 40 people each week dissect that poem and, of course, I come from a theological perspective with various scriptures and things.

Claiborne: Finally, last two questions: What was the impact of *The Big Read*? Do you think that it made people want to read more? Do you think that it sparked people’s interest in further partnerships between the church and Claflin University?

McCutcheon: Both. I think that people got excited—people wanted to read more. And it was good because I think that a good male population of the church looked at the book and they started reading because of that partnership. It was a good response to it. It built more community with Claflin and some of the young people that we’ve encountered [because of that project] still come to the church. It was really good for us. We really enjoyed it. As a matter of fact someone asked me if we were going to do another one this year.



Claiborne: This leads to my last and final question: Are there any specific types of partnerships that you would like to see between Claflin and the Orangeburg Community—any programs that perhaps Claflin is not doing that you would like to see?

McCutcheon: Because we did *The Big Read* together, we would like to partner with some more professors there. Well after *The Big Read*, unfortunately, the two principle persons involved [Claiborne and Rose], leading the discussion, went elsewhere, but we really want to partner with Claflin University again and we are looking for other members in the English Department to do that. It was really good and, like I said, we are very happy for the two professors who moved elsewhere. However, we do miss them and wish them well. They were integral for helping us build those relationships.

Moreover, the conversation between Corrie Claiborne, the Executive Director of *The Big Read* project, and Stephany Rose, the Program Director reinforced many of the things that Larry McCutcheon said about Claflin's role in service-learning and community literacy. More specifically, Stephany Rose had much to contribute about the historic role of black colleges in the community and her experiences as both an undergraduate and employee of a HBCU. Her interview explains the philosophy behind community partnerships with HBCUs.

Interview with Stephany Rose:

Claiborne: Can you talk about the role of HBCUs in service-learning?

Rose: We have to begin with the idea of what role HBCUs play in the United States and as institutions that historically served underrepresented populations. I think that they have a necessitated partnership with the communities in which they are situated locally, nationally, and internationally to service those communities as organizations.



Claiborne: When you say service, what exactly do you mean? What do you envision as the service historically black colleges should provide?

Rose: Well they should definitely be educating those that are part of the community in which they are situated. I know many of them by having experienced living, working (teaching), and attending different HBCUs. I know that many of them are situated in urban centers or rural centers that are populated by underserved minority populations. In order for them to work and fight and maintain themselves throughout the twenty-first century, the schools need to serve. For people that are close to the university, physically close in the communities, they should be gaining as much enrichment, education, intellectual endeavors, and infrastructure within their communities as possible. I think that these colleges and universities should be providing to the communities in which they are situated. As a student at Clark Atlanta one of the first things that we learned is the model of “culture for service,” meaning that if we are not representative of the community and if we are not giving something back—with all we have gained from the school in our professional and personal lives, our domestic lives—if we are not sharing that and reaching back and providing opportunities for others who will come behind us, then we are not servicing those communities. And, perhaps, in some ways we are exploiting the communities in which we are situated—that means we should be mentoring, tutoring and working with the local schools and social and economic programs. We should be bringing dollars and economies into the communities.

Claiborne: Well can you speak specifically about *The Big Read* project and that work with the Orangeburg community which you jointly headed?

Rose: Well, as a professor at Claflin University in the English Department, one of the things that we collectively noticed, and it



wasn't difficult to note because this is evident around the country, was that many of the students (our population comes from the local area) were coming with deficient levels in literacy. In the high schools and junior highs we too noticed that there was a lack in excellence in terms of literacy and the interest that the community had in literature. So we looked at this national program that has been going on for years and was being implemented throughout the country. We looked at the National Endowment for the Arts and saw it as a wonderful opportunity to ignite a sense of passion or even just an interest in literature, that is not only labeled as great works, but that actually speaks to some of the same conditions that our students and their families were living in or are living with. It was the opportunity to bring to life, through literature, some of the same conversations, themes, and issues that community members were dealing with in their personal lives. Literature is the gateway into the culture of the community. *Big Read* participants got a chance to see that for themselves—that is why we specifically chose *A Lesson Before Dying* because it deals with a rural community and an African American male who for many reasons is caught in a situation because of lack of knowledge.

Claiborne: How do you think that the community responded to Ernest Gaines' novel? How engaged do you think that they were?

Rose: I think that the Orangeburg and surrounding community, because we were able to reach outside of the town itself, were really excited. I think this is evident by the turnout that we had for the theatre production that Claflin put on of *A Lesson Before Dying*. First of all, all of the freshman students on campus were able to read the book. So we had over 400 freshmen read the book. Then, they were able to have some of those same conversations with their families and community members that they were having on campus. We had family members who became interested and wanted to read *A Lesson Before Dying* too. We were able to reach out to people through the



public library and the turnout for that was a phenomenal response to just being engaged and having a sense of relationship with what was going on. Being able to speak at the number of churches and getting feedback from community members and stakeholders, where people who were older, even, said that this community-wide reading sparked their interests in reading again. This was unbelievable. Many of the readers reported that after *The Big Read* they wanted to pick up other Ernest Gaines novels. Community members asked if we were going to do another community book project. Finally, we were able to reach students as young as junior high. When they were able to see the live performance of it. They literally saw literature come to life.

Claiborne: What would you say was the most valuable aspect of having this partnership between the university and the community? What was the greatest impact?

Rose: I think the greatest impact was having the entire community or members at multiple levels being engaged in a conversation with one another. We were able to talk to the chief of police in Orangeburg and talk about social justice issues within the criminal justice system based on what came out of Ernest Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying*. In many ways, students and community members only get to see one side of the criminal justice system and, because of this, we were able to bring multiple sides together. We were able to bring biologists and scientists together to explain forensic science and what goes on with DNA and fingerprinting and how that impacts social justice issues. We were able to talk to an attorney who deals with family law and who has seen a number of African American males unjustly experiencing the criminal justice system. So that was the greatest impact. We were able to bring people from a variety of walks of life throughout the community into conversation with one another in ways that would not have happened prior to this.



Therefore, the key to what we discovered about community literacy programs and HBCUs is that there has got to be ongoing conversation between community members, stakeholders, students, and the university professors if change is going to happen. Moreover, this is a model that has existed for HBCUs since their very founding. Ultimately, even as the people who came from inside the academy, we found that being a part of this big conversation augmented our own scholarship. Reading as a community closed the gap between the ivory tower and the street in ways that can serve as a model for other community and university partnerships.

Upholding the Tradition

At the close of the nineteenth century, The American Negro Academy published several occasional papers. In W. E. B. Du Bois' widely heralded contribution, "The Conservation of Races," he provided a manifesto and a seven point *Academy Creed* highlighting inherent connections between intellectual development and the honoring of human communities regardless of race (104-111). These connections have been the bedrock of historically black educational institutions and the communities invested in the maintenance of such institutions. As time progresses, we must reevaluate and recognize that some things must be done away with; however, when practices have positive and lasting impacts on communities for generations to come, those are the practices we should continue to look to and gain from. Historically Black Colleges and Universities continue to provide substantive programming, development and experiences for their immediate local communities, larger cultural communities, and national as well as global communities, which is a framework to continuously build upon for generations to come.

The relationship between Claflin University and the Orangeburg community serves as one of the many models where institutions of higher education and local communities are being reciprocally transformed. As highlighted by Reverend McCutcheon, the book chosen was relevant to

the issues that occur in the local community: racism, black masculinity, and education. Thus, impact of *The Big Read* service-learning project was multifaceted for the Claflin-Orangeburg communities: a renewed interest in reading, especially with the male audiences; cross-generational and experiential dialogues; and a firmer relationship with college students and the students in the local community, providing a practical arena for students to apply discourse gained in the classroom to real life experiences.

In conclusion, in institutions of higher education our lives are surrounded by ideas in books, curriculum, and daily discourse; however, what significance are ideas if they are never put into praxis? The role of academia is to transform society hopefully for the best of humanity, particularly for communities that have been alienated and denied the honor of their humanity. Historically Black Colleges and Universities provide programming and services to local, cultural, and national communities through students volunteering and faculty and staff assisting with the development of the communities in which they exist. Moving forward, the goal should be to continuously extend these relationships for generations to come.



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From left, Solomon Young as Rev. Ambrose, Colin Currie as Jefferson and Annette Grevious as Miss Emma rehearse a scene from “A Lesson Before Dying.” (Christopher Huff/ *Orangeburg Times & Democrat*) February 18, 2010



THE BIG READ PROGRAM, CAMPUS PROGRESS,
and Claflin University
Present

RACE, MEDIA AND MASCULINITIES:
WHAT A LESSON BEFORE DYING HAS TO TEACH US

Dawn-Elissa Fletcher
San Francisco State University

Stephany R. Spaulding
Claflin University



Mark Anthony Neal
Duke University



Adam Marsbach
Author, *Angry Black White Boy*



Tuesday, March 2, 2010
WVM Fine Arts Auditorium
6:30 PM
(author signing 6:00 PM)
Free and Open to the Public

The Big Read is an initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with the Institute of Museum and Library Services designed to revitalize the role of literature in American culture and bring the transformative power of literature into the lives of its citizens. The Big Read brings together partners across the country to encourage citizens to read for pleasure and enlightenment.



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