

“Where is the Finish Line in the Race Race?”

An Interview with Dr. Edward Peeples

Candace Epps-Robertson,
Michigan State University

Dr. Edward H. Peeples’ career as an activist and academic spans some forty years and reads like a how-to on combining scholarship and activism. Just as amazing as his career was the journey to it. Growing up in the south entrenched in Jim Crow, one might assume that Peeples would have continued down the path of the status quo; however, his memoir, *Scalawag: A White Southerner’s Journey thorough Segregation to Human Rights Activism* (University of Virginia Press, 2014) recounts his story of learning whiteness and then standing firm against them.

Ed Peeples was born on April 20, 1935 in Richmond, Virginia. Most of his formative years were spent in Richmond, the former home to the capital of the Confederacy. Here, Peeples would attend public schools, watch his parent’s interactions with blacks, and learn *how* race mattered: “...the preponderance of my whiteness education took place in Richmond, and the basic message was the same. I can



Dr. Candace Epps-Robertson and Dr. Edward Peebles

recall sensing as early as about age five how much race mattered to adults” (12). His “whiteness education” was certainly not bound to the four walls of his home, and Peebles learned early on that the purpose of Jim Crow and the very institution of race, was tied to power and control, not biology. Reflecting on the psychological impact of segregation, Peebles recounts “Jim Crow did not segregate us whites bodily from blacks as much as it partitioned our minds from their reality” (14). Peebles would spend the rest of his life working to break these partitions.

Peebles would return to Richmond in 1953 to enroll in Richmond Professional Institute (RPI) after a brief period of time spent working in Ohio after high school graduation. Little would he know, but RPI would be a space where he would gain exposure to ideas, theories, and perhaps most importantly, people, who would challenge everything he’d learned about the performance of race. Peebles credits part of his consciousness-raising to a sociology professor, Dr. Alice Davis, who knew how to ask questions about race, societal standards, and injustices, and guide her students into fruitful debate. If the seeds for his commitment to racial justice were sewn in his early years through observations of his family and community, then one could say that he began to bud as an activist during his time at RPI: “As such mind-

expanding experiences at RPI took hold, so did my will to act upon them” (46).

A committed and enthusiastic young RPI student athlete, one of his first activist moments would occur on campus. In his memoir he recounts the story of when the Gallaudet College basketball team came to RPI for a game. Gallaudet’s bus driver, a young black man, was refused entry to the cafeteria for a meal after the drive. Peeples made a phone call to the business manager of the college and tried to appeal on the driver’s behalf. The response he received was that because of the law (segregation), the driver could eat the food but could not go through the cafeteria line nor eat in the cafeteria. Peeples credits this moment as his tipping point:

Hanging up the phone, it occurred to me that the linchpin of segregation was the “separate but equal” doctrine, the contention that the wall between the races entailed no inequalities for blacks. Here was a classic example of the absurdity of this claim. As a twenty-year-old white southerner I finally saw the lie in utter clarity. (49)

What he would do next would in many ways become the blueprint for his activism, he surveyed the situation, took stock of his resources, and acted: “If they would not treat our guest with the dignity he deserved, I could at least raise the price of segregation” (49). Peeples took the driver to a classroom and would then go back into the cafeteria line three times, to gather all of the choices the driver would have had if he’d been able to go through the line himself. He delivered the driver’s meal telling him, “It’s all yours, all three trays are yours. It cost them three times more to do you this way” (50). Peeples would spend the next few years as a student, basketball player, and nurturing his growing interests in social justice.

After a brief time in the Navy, Peeples would return to Richmond in September of 1959 to work for the Department of Welfare. His commitment to social justice was not tempered by a full time job as he still found time to participate in the growing number of sit-ins, demonstrations, and protests against segregation. Peeples would decide to pursue graduate school as a means of further developing

his skill-set as an organizer and seeker of social justice. He sought an interdisciplinary Masters program in human relations and in 1961 was admitted to the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. While he relocated for his studies, one of his largest social justice battles was brewing back at home.

Just sixty miles southwest of Richmond, Prince Edward County refused to fund its public schools and closed them for five years, 1959-1965 to resist integration. The white community responded with the creation of a private segregationist academy. Efforts in the black community ranged from crash courses, church relocation programs, to a one-year Free School established by the Kennedy administration. Despite the distance, Peeples began working in Prince Edward, conducting interviews with ardent segregationists and collecting data on the disparities between the black and white communities. His 1963 Master's thesis, "A Perspective of the Prince Edward County School Issue," was the first study conducted of the social condition of the community that was not sympathetic to segregationists. He also became a documentarian, taking hundreds of photos in the county to document the disparities between black and white schools. His work in Prince Edward was not limited to the academy; he assisted with the organization of a grassroots organization, the Richmond Committee of Volunteers to Prince Edward, a group that sought to bring recreational activities to the children. His work in Prince Edward also included supplying allies of the black community with information he was able to gather from white segregationists who assumed he was on their side. His stories of the time he spent in Prince Edward are filled with the terror and hope that marked so much of the Civil Rights Movement.

Upon the completion of his Master's degree, Peeples would teach sociology and anthropology courses at the Medical College of Virginia in Richmond. Intrigued by the developments he saw in interdisciplinary programs in the behavioral sciences, he would attend the University of Kentucky for his doctoral degree. Despite the move to Kentucky and the opportunity to cast a wider net for jobs, Peeples would return to Richmond.

Returning to the very place that ignited his spirit for social justice, Peeples found himself in the frontlines of developing a university when a merger between Richmond Professional Institute and the Medical College of Virginia would birth Virginia Commonwealth University. Peeples recounts this as a particularly exciting moment: “Beginning in the summer of 1968, a little army of pioneers set about the grunt work of building a new university... We just plunged into it trusting our collective experience and best instincts. We dreamed big and worked hard” (145). Peeples would relentlessly crusade to recruit black students and faculty to this new institution, but his work would not stop there. The mere admittance of black faculty and students was, of course, not enough to change the minds and actions of the Old South, and when problems and issues arose, Peeples continued the fight.

I recently had the opportunity to sit down with Dr. Peeples at his home in Richmond. We sipped sweet tea, and he told stories about working against racism, oppression, and working for goals that are larger than one’s self. I listened to his stories and had the pleasure of asking questions and learning from someone whose very life embodies many of the theories we read about social justice work and community engagement. Dr. Peeples’ work and scholarship carry important messages for those in rhetoric and composition who are committed to anti-racist pedagogies and community engagement. His story is one of perseverance and a relentless critique of the institution of race. For those of us committed to social justice, his life and work remind us that the journey can start, and often should, right in our own backyard.

Candace Epps-Robertson (CER): Ed, we share lots of connections.

We are Southerners, Virginians, and Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) graduates, although it was Richmond Professional Institute (RPI) when you were there, but for those who don’t know the story that was told so poignantly in your book, *Scalawag*, can you tell me about how you arrived at this moment? How did you come to write your book?

Edward H. Peeples (EHP): Well, I had been an activist and an academic, and among my writings were stories I'd written. I'd accumulated several dozens of them. I was first an activist in Prince Edward County during the school closing era and ended up becoming a documentarian of the school closing era and writing a Master's thesis on the school's closing. This was the first treatise of the school closing that was sympathetic to desegregation, and it was finished in April of 1963. That thing lay fallow for a long time, and I also took photographs of all the schools at the time. I won't go into the detail of the Prince Edward school closing, but nobody would look at the photographs, nobody would look at the thesis except a very few insiders who were sympathetic to the problems of the black families in the county and the children. But by 2004, it was the fifth anniversary and people started to turn toward it and turn toward my other knowledge about race relations, the Brown decision, and so forth. A succession of media, even national media, local media, students, organizations, and all kinds of people started showing up at my door. My material ended up online thanks to Ray Bonis and others at the VCU libraries archive, and the Cabell library. I became well known through that Prince Edward material online.

One day I got this letter from Nancy MacLean. She was the Chair of History at Northwestern University and she said, "Can I come see you?" She showed up on my front steps, and I welcomed her in and we became friends. She asked to see some of my stories. She looked at them and apparently she thought this deserved to be a book. She accounts for this in the Introduction of the book in better detail than I, and she said in so many words that she would adopt me as her oldest graduate student. I don't think she's ever had any graduate students in their seventies, but she did, and for seven years we worked together, and she beat me about the ears and head until I learned the lessons of writing a narrative, and she was beautiful about it! She's a brilliant woman and has written other books and some to come that are going to have, I hope, a tremendous impact because they are about white supremacists ideology and its perseverance out of the segregation era into modern conservatism. She is a person I admire. Later on we added Virginia historian James Hershman who is well known in Virginia for his understanding of Massive

Resistance and segregation, just a wonderful person and brilliant scholar on these events. He wrote the Afterword. Together McLean's Introduction and his Afterword put my memoir, my little tale of woe and joy, in context with social movements in the contexts of the events of my time in Virginia.

CER: Many times when I first started my academic research on Prince Edward, which would have been around 2008, no matter who I spoke with they all asked: "Have you met with Dr. Peebles?" As you know, my mother's family is from Prince Edward County, so I grew up with these stories, with this history. I knew about the school closings from my family's lived experiences, but I didn't know your scholarship existed.

EHP: Is that right? Did you know R.C. Smith's book?

CER: I did know that book.

EHP: He was working on it while I was working on my thesis. I did contact him, but we never got together because we were preoccupied. His came out a couple of years later and he didn't dwell on the same things I did. He was a journalist from, I think, the Norfolk newspaper. I didn't have resources. I got a nice, little, tiny grant from the University of Pennsylvania. I don't know if the story is in the book about Martin Chworowsky finding me the money, because he knew I wouldn't do any other Master's thesis. It's a good thing I did. I had to borrow a car, didn't even own a car, my father-in-law loaned me a car. I spent a lot of time on the road between Philadelphia and Prince Edward and Richmond and Farmville but not only Farmville. I think that people forget that two-thirds of the population doesn't live in Farmville. All the programs were centered in Farmville and so the rural folks were isolated. I interviewed all over the county for my Masters thesis and took pictures of every school because whites told me that having built the more modern brick high school for blacks had made separate but equal now equal, and of course, it didn't. Even the dollar amount spent on the facilities was not equal, and I took pictures of every one of them. I had to get a lawyer to get the data from the State Department of

Education. They didn't want us to know. I passed this on and collaborated a lot with Dr. Rupert Picott, head of the Virginia Teachers Association, which was the black teachers organization. He was a powerful and remarkable man. He was a great hero of mine, and he funded me to do some of this stuff. When I say funded, I mean like three hundred dollars, but that went a long way. I was able to hire students part time to go down to the Department of Education to transcribe data, which we used and published online eventually, and it sold people on the fact that equality had not come with separate but equal.

CER: Can we back up for a minute? Often, when people learn about my research and work in Prince Edward, they ask what draws me to Prince Edward. For me, there are two answers. Number one, it is home, and two, as an academic interested in race, language, and community engagement; the history there is phenomenal. If you would, tell me what drew you to Prince Edward in the first place?

EHP: Well, like you say, in summary of what you say there, it is a museum piece for the American trial on race and that attracted me. I love my Virginia. I love everything about it, except it's like having a spat with your lover. You can love somebody and still hate what they do: "Pick up your clothes. Quit letting things hang around. Put that back where it belongs." When I think of democracy and the way Virginia was during segregation I think, let's put that back where it belongs, straighten up in here.

I was attracted to cleaning up my own house. I'd been in the Navy, and it made an impression on me. There was a big billboard outside of the base in North Chicago where just outside the gate that said, "Power for Peace." Now, I was told the reason we needed power for peace was because I was supposed to defend our country as we roamed the globe to defend democracy. I went to the military, and they didn't send me abroad, I served at home, but when I came home I was embarrassed. I'd been serving in a military that was supposed to extend democracy around the world and what was happening in my own state was inconsistent.

Farmville/Prince Edward is also part of central Virginia in many ways. For the longest time people in Prince Edward would come to town (Richmond) to shop. They'd come in for lunch and stuff like that. As a boy I always went through Farmville on the way to Lynchburg. My mother, if I was good, would take me to get ice cream in Farmville, so it was no strange place.

When I went down there (Prince Edward) as a volunteer, the story is in the book, it's too long to retell now; I grew attached to certain people. I saw how resilient they were, how they showed such courage in the face of such humiliation and deprivation and so you couldn't help but leave a little love there and take a little love back with you. I volunteered to organize the Prince Edward County Volunteers of Central Virginia and got my friend Ruby Clayton Walker to help. She came from humble beginnings in New Kent County and was the star of her community and never stopped being a star in my mind. We partnered in so many things. Her roommate at Virginia State University was from Prince Edward County, and so the circles were intertwined. Prince Edward was still part of my neighborhood.

CER: You say something a few times in the book when you talk about your experience in Prince Edward, and you say that you had to learn how you were going to enter the space and the conversation as a white man. That's something that I don't have any experience with, being a white man...

EHP: (interrupts) Well, it ain't all that great! (Laughs)

CER: But oftentimes when I first began going into Prince Edward, if people didn't recognize me by my family's name, or if they picked up on me being an academic, first, they were often suspicious. They want to know what I'm there for and what I want to do. I wonder if you could talk a bit about what that experience was like for you, realizing that for the average black person in Prince Edward County you didn't look like an ally. How did you reconcile with that?

EHP: Yeah, most of the people who made trouble for the African Americans there had pale faces, you know. Yes, you'd be suspicious. Well, first of all, I knew from my experience in organizing that you don't just descend on somebody, anybody, and land in on their turf and start telling them what to do. So I went to my good friend, Reverend Gene Pickett, a Unitarian minister, who was a great hero of mine for standing up against closing schools. See, they wanted to close every school in Virginia. He lived a life under terror. We think of Virginia as a genteel place, but you couldn't have convinced him or his wife from the bomb threats on the telephone at the First Unitarian Church, which was on the campus of VCU. I went to see him, and he, of course, affirmed the important principle: don't descend on anybody without an invitation. So I waited for some ideas about how to meet people and so forth. One day, Helen Baker was representing the American Friends Service Committee, and she was a community organizer. She was African American and a Virginian, from Suffolk. She came to the Richmond Council on Human Relations and told the story of what they were doing, the American Friends Service Committee, and I said, "Helen, what can folks like us in Richmond who have little resources, do?" She said, "Come down and we'll get you started." So I organized the group (Volunteers of Central Virginia), and she put the signs up and introduced me to people.

I got deeper and deeper into the community and met Reverend L. Francis Griffin. I grew to know Rev. Griffin early on, and we began to sometimes meet here in Richmond and have lunch. There wasn't any place we could go and sit down together, so we'd go to Thalhimers, go get a deviled crab, and take it down to the Capital Square and sit down on a bench. Then the cops would come along and ask us to get up. They didn't arrest us or anything, but they didn't like its unusual nature for me to be sitting with a black Reverend General. What white cop wouldn't want to protect their own against a famous [black] Reverend General who had been a decorated hero in WWII? (Laughs)

CER: He was quite a force in Prince Edward County.

EHP: Quite a force all over Virginia. He inspired us all. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) youth council had a tribute to him, and they asked me to talk about “A Day with Rev. Griffin,” and I was honored to do that. What a man he was. He was an intellectual. He and I would talk about the books of the day. He read sociology and anthropology; he’d done it all. He was not just a country preacher. He could whip out the Bible and create big sounds with it, but he was also an intellectual. I loved him dearly. He’s my next proposal for a spot on Monument Avenue!

CER: What I’m hearing from you and the experience in Prince Edward is that you had to learn to listen to this particular community.

EHP: Oh yes. I already knew I had to listen. I knew the principle and I applied it here.

CER: I know from reading your book and from our conversations that there were other social justice efforts you organized and other ways you demonstrated your commitments to equality. Can you talk about some of those?

EHP: Well, one of them that I think was important was during the post civil rights era, if there was such a thing. There are scholars that argue that the civil rights movement is a long, long continuum. When the 1970s came, the various separated caucuses developed, the Black caucus here, the Women’s caucus there, the Disabilities caucuses here, the Latino caucuses there, and the LGBT caucuses, the question arose: Don’t we still have common concerns? I’d always been in favor of solving the caucus landscape with a coalition. I conceived of this as a coalition in which we would come together when we could and go our separate ways when we couldn’t. I proposed it to the Richmond Council on Human Relations (RCHR), and I laid it out at Main Street Grille, which was radical central. RCHR was a chapter of the Virginia Council on Human Relations (organized around 1956), which was the state organization of the South wide Southern Regional

Council, which was organized much earlier. I've forgotten the date. We ended up organizing the coalition, and I think the story is told in the book. It lasted for twenty years under the able leadership of Wayne Young for a decade, a hillbilly community organizer, (he's mentioned in the acknowledgements), and then Beth Marschak who's been a leader in so many progressive things in our community. I think the Council played a role for about twenty years.

I advised the people who were organizing The Peace Education Center initially, but I didn't build the structure. It took a lot more to do that. I couldn't be seen as being a part of creating that, although I did connect people. People would always call me and say, "Edward, who do I talk to?" I would always have a list; in fact I keep a long list, a binder that has every name of every activist that I've ever known, in particular in Virginia, but elsewhere across the South, because I roamed the South for other things like the Encampment for Citizenship. There's two chapters in the book about its influence on me and my influence on it, I guess you might say. It was very important in training and leadership, and there's a lot of famous people who have been a part of it. I was greatly inspired by it. I traveled the South recruiting kids for that and also a variety of other things. There is no such thing as "a guy" organizing anything, but one of my skills was talking people into cooperating.

CER: So you are a rhetorician, also? (Laughs)

EHP: Is that what it is? (Laughs)

CER: Yes, that's a part of it!

EHP: Within a lot of contexts, I organized stuff, but it usually was after an assessment of a need, and of potential, and of resources known.

CER: That seems to be a most useful formula for thinking about community engagement.

We've talked about who you are as an activists, and your work as an organizer. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about who you were in the classroom. One of the stories from the book that will forever haunt me was the story you tell about the Klansman coming into your classroom. You write, "Suddenly my gaze fixed on a large figure sitting in the back row wearing a white robe with a St. Andrew's cross over the heart, eyes peeking out at me through a tall white pointed hood" (111). That hooded figure is supposed to represent doomsday and terror, but you raised some really interesting points about using that as a teaching moment. I don't know what I would have done in that moment. Could you talk about that instance and who you were in the classroom? You seemed to be very radical for that particular time period.

EHP: Well, I tell you. To be radical in those times means you had to practice living with terror. You had to be acquainted to living with terror and threat in order to know what the likely outcome was going to be. In other words, when that person came in there, I already had been threatened many times. I'd gotten calls on the phone and this, that, and the other, and was personally accosted, so I just kind of felt that nothing was going to happen. It was in a confine, and there must have been compliance in the room with this act. Somebody let him in and I just said to myself, "I'm not going to let it rule me." I've always had a habit of taking situations and converting them into teaching moments. I did that as a parent. You can't be naive about what's going to happen to you, You've got to be ready for surprises. One of the things you learn about being yourself, you call it radical, I call it being myself, is that there is a whole spectrum of how people deal with you when you are an unusual individual. There's the cold shoulder, the marginalization, the scowling, verbal insults, losing your economic security, kicking you out of your apartment, all the way over to assaulting you physically. That's the spectrum deployed in making a totalitarian system work. If people in the society do any one of those and it's aided by the silence of the well-meaning people, I've forgotten what King and other philosophers said about people who are indifferent. But that's the way white people in the South were. There were a certain number of white people who were sick with racism, who needed to have white supremacy to fill a void. There's a kind of a racist

for whom it's so intrinsic to their nature that they just couldn't learn anything about it, but there's always some exception in every group that we like to generalize about, and the vast number of white people in the South were ignorant about race, but well meaning. In other words, they would be outraged to see a beating, but they would never step in. I think I treated that in the book a little bit. They also didn't approve of most of the outrageous behavior. I knew from talking to people in Mississippi at the time of the Klan there, that they didn't approve of the Klan, but they didn't know how to stand up to it. The government and politics didn't know how to stand up against it, and some of them, like Bull Connor, was probably one of the sick racists. I guess I've kind of gotten away from the original point, but I was trying to make these distinctions between people, the real crevice of social psychology was race, and I sought to be a teacher in that respect.

If you're asking about survivability in the classroom well, I didn't survive all the time. I got canned! I tried to teach a course on race relations at RPI; I think it's in the book, when I had in a black minister, and he was my guest. He told a story about how he as a young man had to leave the South to go North for opportunity, for education, and he came back, fortunately because he was a brilliant man, a famous local minister, your family would have known him. He also taught at Union Theological School.

CER: Yes, I remember this story. The Chair of the Sociology department complained about your having a black man come and speak to your class, and your request to teach that course again in the spring was denied.

EHP: So I didn't survive all of those things, yeah I wasn't happy about it and it was disgusting and I felt hurt that I wasn't appreciated.

In class I had one advantage; I was the guy who gave the grade. Now, I never used it that way. I accepted students, and as I said in the book, I tried to avoid being heavy-handed. I always thought the classroom would be a safe place, but you would have to contend with data. The great thing about my field is that the data was all self-evident. If all you do is pull out the differential

statistics in health, race, ethnicity, and gender, and it speaks for itself. I didn't have much of a job to do, so the students were civil to me and also, the society was changing a bit and they were hearing it from elsewhere. So I was just another voice about it, but it was a wild time. As time went on, people started to see what I was all about, and it became more comfortable for me. I never had people stand up and scream at me or anything like that. There was a certain civility in the university that people respected, and of course, they ultimately knew that they couldn't go but so far with the guy who gave the grade. That's sort of how I was looked at as a teacher. Of course, I knew a lot of people did hate me, like other faculty. They literally hated me, and I got a lot of silent treatment for many years. That marginalization was what gentleman do. You know, they don't wear hoods, their hoods are colorful, and they wear them at graduation. There's a lot of intellectual racism. They call it intellectual, born out of these think tanks. Think of the stuff they pump out and that's where the average Joe is getting.

Also, I had a lot of self-doubt. I mean, am I right to be doing this, at this pace? I felt right about it, I didn't know whether we could win, that was an early feeling of mine. It took a lot for King and some of the others to convince me that we were going to win, because everything around me was always saying we were losing. Desegregation was always losing because if you made a little break through here, there'd be kind of a rush of the water into it to do it over. The sixties and seventies were like that. When they got to the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the subsequent four or five years, we had a lot of intense realignments, and then the whites got a second breath and started stepping it up again.

The interesting thing was the right wing think tanks (or thoughtless tanks as I would put them) started creating devices to speak about race that were euphemism and code words. They were really pumping it out, and they were calling themselves intellectuals. It was out of the tradition of James Jackson Kilpatrick and many others. Kilpatrick went to work for the National Review for Buckley. Buckley at first was open about white supremacy, until he finally saw it was embarrassing, and he

hid it and quit allowing it to be said and tried to act like it wasn't an issue. The same with Kilpatrick. He started to mop up around the mess he'd made, and so they devised this new ideology, and guess who's writing about it? Nancy MacLean! She's already written part of it. It's in her last book, and its going to be great, because it will take us right into this 21st century where white supremacy 3.6 is the operating system.

CER: One of the reasons why I tell people that the story of Prince Edward is so important from a historical perspective is because just as you said, some of these arguments are still being made. I was looking at some old speeches from Senator Harry F. Byrd, and the type of fear mongering he was using to generate an audience and followers is the same thing we hear on the news today, "This is about citizenship!" "If you're a patriot, then you'll act now!" There's a particular type of citizenship that's being advanced there.

EHP: I want to remind you that this [Virginia] was the seedbed for all of the recalcitrance in the other states. How did they learn to close schools? How did they open segregation academies? How did they learn to write pamphlets? All the other things came out of Kilpatrick, who was the education director for a state agency. The agency had a euphemism that it was for liberty and freedom and all that, but what it meant was it was the cause for preserving segregation. The more militant one in Mississippi was created based on Kilpatrick's model. It was all over the South; everywhere I went there were a lot of references to Prince Edward. We were the factory for all of the products that were used around the South; it was a leader in the Revolutionary period in the way it was; it was a leader in the slavery era in the way it was; it was a leader in the Civil War in the way it was; and it was a leader in the way it was in Reconstruction; it was a leader in the way it was in what other people call the Progressive Era, which wasn't progressive with respect to race or eugenics, and then it was a leader in Jim Crow. So, we are the mother of precedents, not just presidents, I'm using a "c" when you may be using a t, if you know what I'm talking about, so we're the mother of precedents with a "c" and it's always been that way. (Laughs)

Some of the students starting in 1969-70 were ready for something different, and I hope I conveyed that in the book. In this crowd of civil rights interests kids, there were as many whites as there were blacks.

CER: Any work that deals with the eradication of racism and racist ideologies can be both physically and mentally draining. You talk about having to learn to live with terror, but mentally, it can take a toll on you as well. I'm curious, what has helped to sustain you all of these years. What keeps you going?

EHP: There is acute and chronic illness associated with defense of justice. In the acute you run away and go sleep on somebody's couch, go and watch some mindless television, or you read a novel. I don't do those things because I get relief from Prince Edward terror by coming home and watching a documentary on Mussolini! That's my escapism! (Laughs) My wife teases me about that, she says, "What are you going to do tonight? Watch Mussolini?" It's escapism from the immediate thing. I don't have to worry about Mussolini; they got him.

The acute is that you really do need to get out of the situation a little bit. You have to be mindful of yourself as an instrument. You're an instrument of change if you look at yourself that way and for the long term, you have a lot of things to stay healthy for. The question is sometimes connected to the kind of person you are. Are you a person who is optimistic? Are you a person who's pessimistic? Are you sarcastic? Do you look at things with sarcasm? You have to fashion solutions for yourself around the kind of person you are, but you do need relief. You need to rest. In Prince Edward, I would get so sick of hearing the white supremacist spewing out that after a few days, it would accumulate and I would get so morbid about it, and so pessimistic, and it would wreck my perspective about being on a journey toward something. I just thought of it as a hopeless chasm of wild animals. I'd come down to Richmond and sleep on somebody's couch and have a crab cake or something and then I'd go back. I only needed one night, and then I could do it a little bit more. I think I have the kind of personality that I see it as everything is a

test, and I'm not sure all of the reasons why I hold up, but I guess I persisted. I'm close to eighty now, and ever since I was eighteen, this has been central to me, and I never seem to lose interest.

CER: You talk about how Virginia set so many precedents with regard to resisting integration. I wonder if you could talk about your dreams or hopes for Virginia with regard to becoming a leader for dismantling race. What can we do, given our history that might pave the way for other communities to confront and challenge race?

EHP: Once we were the mother of presidents, the best offered at that time. Today we are the mother of precedents, among the worst offered in our time. The question is, will we do better? It is hard to believe that we can with the prevailing leadership on life support provided by the plutocracy; the present celebration of ignorance by so many; and the dismal voter apathy. It may be that the leading role that Virginia once played in American history is ending. We have become a state where we simply want to be different like everybody else. So perhaps the best we can do now is to say we are all from Bland County. Who then, among our eight million, will step up and prove me too cynical?

CER: I hope we will. We've got a legacy of fearless leaders to follow. Ed, what message do you hope people take from your book?

EHP: I hope the stories told in my book somehow show how an ordinary guy with the help of a handful of patron saints rose above his beginnings and then outside the spotlight, found a way to make justice seeking a way of life. And if it could happen to me, why can't it happen to many more? But some are reluctant to become engaged for a variety of reasons, one of which may be because they think that there is but one way to be a justice seeker. Not true. There is a job for everyone in the justice-seeking endeavor. Never mind that you think you don't have the skills, education, resources, free time, courage, patience, fortitude, strength of character, self-confidence, speaking or writing ability, or you are not the right color, ethnicity, gender or social status. There are every imaginable combination and permutation in

justice seeking settings crying out for some kind of intervention. And there are infinite ways to weave this activity into one's life. I pray that my book illustrates this.

But as one who has seen more than 60 years of what it takes just to change what was in my time, I know that public demonstrations and the appearances of high profile celebrities cannot in themselves end patterns of injustice. It is what happens after the Martin Luther Kings leave town. Only relentless pursuit of knowledge of the inner workings of injustice and the constant witness and action with these facts by a critical mass of dedicated local largely unknowns can, in the end, break the grip of the enemies of egalitarianism.

Justice seeking is not often a hard and lonely journey, nor are the rewards timely. So when prospects seem dim and thoughts of despair and foreboding creep into our head, it is comforting to know from history that the struggle for human equality and dignity is a multi-century movement, and we are really never alone. All the heroines and heroes of the ages stand with us.

Dr. Candace Epps-Robertson is a Virginia native who traces her roots back to Prince Edward County. She is a graduate of Syracuse University's Composition and Cultural Rhetoric Program. Currently, she is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Writing, Rhetoric, & American Cultures at Michigan State University where her research focuses on social histories of rhetoric, African American rhetoric, and Critical Race Theory. Much of her current scholarship focuses on the school closure period in Prince Edward County, Virginia in the wake of Brown v Board of Education. Candace has a forthcoming article in Literacy and Composition Studies (March 2015) examining pedagogy as activism in The Prince Edward County Free School, 1963-1964. Her book manuscript, about the five-year school closure period in Prince Edward, examines the arguments and methodologies segregationists used to close the schools and the counter rhetorical responses made by grass roots organizations. In addition to her scholarship, she is active with The Robert Russa Moton Museum, a space dedicated to remembering and healing in Prince Edward County.

WORKS CITED

Peeples, Edward H, and Nancy MacLean. *Scalawag: A White Southerner's Journey through Segregation to Human Rights Activism*. Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2014. Print