

Education and the power of communities

Segue • SIUE

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Photo: SIUE Photo, Jessica Harris.

Influencing community bonds through education, near-peer mentoring and opening students' eyes through Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's new black studies program are all topics on this week's episode of Segue, SIUE's premier radio show spotlighting the ideas and issues of the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound.

In this week's episode, Greg Budzban, PhD, CAS dean, sits down with Jessica Harris, PhD, assistant professor in the Department of Historical Studies and the incoming director of the black studies program. They talk about her research, her vision for the new program, as well as educating the next generation of students through community growth.

Before arriving at SIUE in 2011, Harris earned a bachelor's from Dillard University in New Orleans. She was awarded a PhD from Cornell University and wrote her dissertation on the activism of black women in Oakland, Calif. before World War II.

During her freshman year at Dillard, Harris turned in a paper on the Black Panther Party. Her professor thought so highly of her work that they submitted it to a contest. The essay was subsequently chosen for presentation. During her sophomore year, she presented the paper to a conference filled with renowned civil rights activists and researchers.

Still quite interested in the Black Panthers, she arrived in 2006 in Oakland and the University of California at Berkeley, and got quite curious about the African American community in Oakland before the 1970s.

"The further back I went, I started to come across all these remarkable and outstanding women whose names I had never heard of, but who were highly visible in terms of the narrative of Oakland's African American history," she says. "I thought I should focus on these women, and find a way to bridge their contributions and their history to the activism that we saw in the city in the 1960s.

"It's interesting to think back to my journey of making these women visible in the historical narrative long before I reached graduate school," she says.

In her dissertation, Harris highlights the work of Delilah Beasley and Frances R. Albrier, two incredibly impactful women who made lasting impacts on the Oakland community leading to the flourishing civil rights movement of the 1960s. Beasley served as the first African American woman to write regularly for a mainstream metropolitan newspaper.

Most of Beasley's work focused primarily on a section titled "Activities Among Negroes," which allowed her to expose Oakland's residents, who were generally white, to the lived experiences of African Americans. Albrier became a pivotal part of the labor movement and was a prominent member in the Oakland community.

“These women, individually or collectively, made lasting impacts on the community in terms of networks of activism, and putting issues of concern around labor, class and race on the table that younger generations of activists were able to pick up on,” Harris says.

As SIUE works to build its curriculum for the new black studies program, community engagement activities and activism is going to be at the forefront for students.

“Black studies as a discipline started with the activism of young people, including students on college campuses,” she says. “Students demanded to see themselves as part of the curriculum, and see faculty like them hired to teach.”

One of the goals within the program will be to create a pipeline of sorts between college students and high school students in the East St. Louis community. By facilitating positive relationships, the older students can explain the benefits and experiences from college to influence the next generation.

“Finding a way to do that in the classroom, but actually find co-curricular activities to engage the community, will be critical,” Budzban replies. “The college experience is not something that is visible to these high school students. This way, they will have people they are in contact with that can give them a realistic perspective of what such an experience can be.”

“Mentoring is something that is underestimated in terms of how much transformative power it can have in a community,” Harris proclaims. “I find that when I engage with students in certain spaces, I’m not just Dr. Harris. I’m Jessica. It creates a different context of how we communicate.”

To be effective educators, it is important to identify students as human beings who have individual problems outside of the classroom. Creating a student-centered classroom is what American educator and civil rights activist Bob Moses considers the pedagogy of the future.

“In a recent conference I attended, I was able to speak with Bob about his methods and with students who spoke about presenting math that is aligned with the language they use in situations that they see every day,” she says. “Students demanding these ideas can have implications not just for the field of mathematics, but for how we deliver content for other areas.”

Through creating a network around the student, this openness influences strong, grassroots movements and activism within communities.

“The one thing that is constantly stable and perseveres the best in times of struggle is the community,” she says. “The only way to advocate for the type of transformation we’re wishing to accomplish is to have the community as a significant partner along the way.”

Catch the entire conversation at 9 a.m. this Sunday by tuning in to WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound.

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