

Stockton Celebrates Civil Rights Legacy of Fannie Lou Hamer, Hears of Ongoing Struggle

Congresswoman, Panel Urges Students to Vote, Fight for Justice

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Galloway Township, NJ - Hundreds of Stockton University students and members of the community packed the Performing Arts Center here today for the 12th Annual Fannie Lou Hamer Human and Civil Rights Symposium, which included an address by U.S. Rep Bonnie Watson Coleman, the first African-American woman to be elected to Congress from New Jersey, and a panel discussion: "Race and Social Justice: Do Black Lives Matter?"

Asking whether the goals of the civil rights movement have been achieved, Watson Coleman said, "I believe we'd probably answer - not yet and not enough. But ask ourselves: What are we going to do about it?"

She urged the crowd to take action on many fronts to achieve racial, economic and social equality for all who are discriminated against.

"Organize yourselves," she said, and vote in local, state and federal elections. "Remind officials what matters to us and that we're holding them accountable," she continued. "Make our communities strong from the inside out.

"Remind everyone of our collective responsibility to each other," she said. "Cast our vote, raise our voice, hold people accountable."

"Black Americans still make cents on the dollar compared to white Americans," Watson Coleman also said, adding that the "top 1 percent" is raking in more than everyone else combined. The middle class needs "to be built out and up - then everyone prospers."

Watson Coleman, who served as a member of the Stockton Board of Trustees from 1981-1998
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and as the board's chair from 1990-91, was introduced by Patricia Reid-Merritt, Distinguished Professor of Social Work & Africana Studies, who organized the event.

Watson Coleman was the first African American woman to lead the New Jersey Democratic State Committee and served as the Majority Leader of the New Jersey General Assembly from 2006 to 2010. She represents the 12th congressional district, which includes municipalities in Mercer, Middlesex, Somerset and Union counties.

Stockton is one of the few universities to celebrate the legacy of civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer, on what would have been her 98th birthday.

Hamer helped organize the Mississippi Freedom Summer voter registration drive for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in 1964. She also helped found the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to oppose her state's all-white delegation at the 1964 Democratic Party Convention in Atlantic City. Hamer, who died in 1977, brought Mississippi's civil rights struggle to the national stage during a televised speech at the convention, which is seen as a turning point in the civil rights struggle.

Hamer famously said, after noting that slavery and its effects had already gone on for 300 years: "I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired, and we want a change."

Interim President Harvey Kesselman praised Reid-Merritt's leadership and said Hamer's bravery "helps us to share her civil rights legacy with new generations of students."

Deanna Jackson, president of the Unified Black Students Society, said Hamer's actions motivate her to continue the struggle: "She took on the worst so that I could have the best."

"We all have a voice and we need to use it to fight for social justice and equality," said Jackson.

Distinguished Professor of Criminal Justice Janice Joseph led off a panel discussion on race and social justice by stating, "No - black lives do not matter in the United States justice system." She pointed to cases such as Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., Eric Garner in New York and other black men killed by police officers who were not prosecuted for murder.

"Police brutality is nothing new," she said, but cases in the past decade have garnered more media attention. However, white people's distorted image of black people as dangerous remains unchanged, she said.

Bishop Dwayne Royster, executive director of POWER and founding pastor of Living Water United Church of Christ, said studies show that white people perceive black people as a threat.

Royster said he was brought up in the 1970s, when his parents thought the civil rights movement had prevailed and they taught him to believe that "if I did the right thing, I would be treated the way I should be treated." He called that "a 46-year-old lie."

"We got rid of Jim Crow and then James Crow, Esquire came along," he said, referring to laws that cut back on voting rights and the fact that a disproportionate number of African Americans are incarcerated.

He said laws and political decisions are made for "the oppression of certain people and the

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elevation of other people.” He advocated taking organized action on many fronts, including street demonstrations and political activism.

Associate Professor of Philosophy Anne Pomeroy said that the counter-statement to “Black Lives Matter,” _ “All Lives Matter” is a false argument - a move of erasure. “White privilege is built upon black disenfranchisement,” Pomeroy said.

“You must fight like hell for black lives to matter,” she said.

Donnetrice Allison, associate professor of Communications and Africana Studies, was the panel moderator and called for questions from the audience.

A student asked how young people could be expected to stand up and fight when the risk is arrest and incarceration, leaving them unable to get a job afterward.

“I’m not suggesting folks just throw rocks,” Royster said. He said actions have to be planned and activists need to be strategic about what results they intend to achieve.

A student asked how to get white people to acknowledge that they are privileged, even if they are economically disadvantaged.

Pomeroy suggested appealing to their sense of wanting a better world for everyone.

Royster also said that all generations need to work together “so we can change the system that’s killing everybody.”

The symposium included a tribute, “The Women of Selma,” performed by Afro-One Dance, Drama and Drum Theatre, of which Reid-Merritt is artistic director, and a selection of freedom songs performed by members of Stockton’s Highest Praise and Jazz Ensemble vocal groups, led by Beverly Vaughn, professor of Music.

The event was sponsored by the Africana Studies Program, Unified Black Students Society, Office of the Provost, Office of the President, Office of Institutional Diversity and Equity and the Social Work Program.

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