

Mass Incarceration Has Become America's Answer to Social Problems, Says Speaker Donna Murch

Stockton Hosts Fannie Lou Hamer Human and Civil Rights Symposium

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Galloway, N.J. - "America has become a prison nation" as civil rights rebellions in the 1960s led to "the elevation of punishment as the solution to all social problems," said Donna Murch, an author and associate professor of History at Rutgers University, in her keynote speech today at Stockton University's 13th Annual Fannie Lou Hamer Human and Civil Rights Symposium.

Fannie Lou Hamer "was always the great hero of the civil rights movement for my mother," Murch said. "She was a child laborer and a sharecropper who was beaten so badly by police" while fighting for voter registration that she suffered permanent injuries.

For the generation who came up during the civil rights movement of the 1960s, seeing Emmett Till's 14-year-old body in a coffin was a catalyst, Murch said, much as the police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo. and other such killings led to the Black Lives Matter movement and renewed civil rights struggles.

"Police left Michael Brown's body in the street for five hours, immersed in his blood," and that was shown on social media, forcing the mainstream media to pay attention and galvanizing protesters "who will not stop until they have attained justice for Michael Brown and others," she said.

"A new national collective memory was forged" by Ferguson, she said.

The events in Missouri "represent the culmination of longstanding repression and resistance," she said. The roots of the United States imprisoning more of its population than any other country grew out of the "law-and-order" political backlash to "urban rebellions" in Watts, Calif. and elsewhere, Murch said.

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In response to urban unrest “and its political expression, Black Power,” two things happened, said Murch, whose teaching and research focuses on historical studies of mass incarceration/the war on drugs, black power and civil rights, California, social movements and postwar U.S. cities.

State spending on poverty programs increased and the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) was created.

But “the war on crime and the war on poverty were intertwined,” Murch said. In California, where Ronald Reagan was elected governor as a law-and-order candidate, “new and more repressive forms of policing” were instituted and “it created a template for the rest of the country.”

Policies of mass incarceration begun when Reagan became president have continued through both presidents Bush, as well as Clinton and Obama, she said.

“Mass incarceration is the new Jim Crow,” Murch said.

She said the challenges for today’s generation include downward mobility, state violence, mass incarceration, climate change and a sense of scarcity.

But there are also exciting possibilities ahead, she said, including young people’s openness to gender and sexuality and different roles; political activism, the Occupy and Black Lives Matter movements, non-acceptance of state-sanctioned violence; and a pushback against austerity and neoliberalism.

Donnetrice Allison, associate professor of Communication Studies and coordinator of Africana Studies, organized this year’s program. She noted that Stockton is “the only institution of higher education” to consistently honor Hamer, who fought for the right to vote.

“We must exercise our right to vote this November,” Allison said. She thanked Patricia Reid-Merritt, Distinguished Professor of Social Work & Africana Studies, for instituting the symposium.

Deanna Jackson, president of the Unified Black Students Society (UBBS), said: “I now have the right to determine the fate of this country” because of the rights for which Hamer fought. She challenged her fellow students by paraphrasing Hamer’s most famous quote: “When will you be sick and tired of being sick and tired?”

President Harvey Kesselman also cited Reid-Merritt for establishing the symposium. “Her extraordinary leadership has been most inspirational,” he said, congratulating her on celebrating her 40th year at Stockton.

More than 50 years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, issues such as vote suppression are still plaguing the nation, Kesselman said.

“We too have promises to keep,” he said, referencing the poet Robert Frost and talking about the need to continue the ongoing struggles for freedom and equality.

“As Fannie Lou Hamer said, ‘Nobody’s free until everybody’s free,’” Kesselman said.

Christina Jackson, assistant professor of Sociology, moderated a discussion on civil rights with panelists Murch and Adam Miyashiro, associate professor of Literature; John O’Hara, associate professor of Critical Thinking and First Year Studies; and Pastor William Williams of the Asbury United Methodist Church in Atlantic City.

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In response to a question from Mahalia Bazile, vice president of the UBSS, about how to respond to “covert racism,” such as when a white student said she might be interested in attending a UBSS meeting, but that her husband is “kind of racist” and might object.

“Use your voice,” Williams told Bazile. “Explain how you’re feeling and don’t be afraid.”

Murch added, “Race is not just about blackness, race is about whiteness.....Ask her to explain herself and her husband as white supremacists.”

The program also featured a video about Hamer’s life and performances by the Stockton Vocal Jazz Ensemble led by Beverly Vaughn, professor of Music, and Afro-One Dance, Drama and Drum Theatre, Inc., founded by Reid-Merritt.

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