

Dr. James E. Conyers: Trailblazer

By Crystal Mikell Reynolds, Ph. D. 2014

Introduction

Dr. James E. Conyers is an educator, researcher, writer, and noted sociologist. His remarkable career spans over fifty years, from humble beginnings in South Carolina, to service to his country, through his years in Atlanta as a mentor to some of the most noted civil rights activists of our time, to his tenure at Indiana State University. This Renaissance man continues to light fires and to inspire people wherever he goes.

Early Years/College Years

Indiana State University's first African American faculty member, James E. Conyers, was born in Sumter, South Carolina in 1932 to Emmett and Crenella Conyers of South Carolina. His parents were both college graduates: his father received his bachelor's degree in the early 1920s from Morris College (South Carolina) in the school's first graduating class and later worked in the college's printing office until his retirement; in the early 1920s, his mother received her degree from Bethel Baptist College and served for many years as an educator. These remarkable people instilled in the young Conyers both the importance of and the love of education.

James was the second of four children, all of whom would have successful teaching and professional careers. He, along with his three siblings, attended Mores Elementary School, a school whose genesis can be traced back to his mother Crenella, the school having begun in her living room with only a handful of students. In 1950, he attended the segregated Lincoln High School in Sumter. An average student in high school, James still enjoyed his experiences at the high school excelling in both music and art. As he maintains, "I was an average student in high school; but I loved to sing; I sang every day in high school."

Upon graduating from high school in 1954, the same year as the historic *Brown* decision, James attended Morehouse, the acclaimed historically black college, in Atlanta, Georgia. Majoring in sociology, unlike his high school experience, he excelled in college. James chose the field of sociology because the subject interested him and as he jokingly states, "I knew I could get good grades in it." Soon he discovered that getting good grades in the field was not his primary motivation for his major, he actually liked the subject of sociology with its study of society, social institutions, and social relationships. He also began to love Morehouse College as well, but more importantly, he loved the city. Speaking of the Atlanta 60 years later, he states firmly that, "Atlanta was and still is the best place for Black people."

After graduating from Morehouse (the college of Martin Luther King, Jr.), the more mature James entered graduate school at the prestigious Atlanta University (a graduate level college),

graduating from there in 1956 with a masters of arts in sociology. His master's thesis, *An Exploratory Study of Musical Tastes and Interests of College Students*, which explored the musical taste of college students, built upon his love of music and song. Soon after receiving his graduate degree, he was hired by Lemoyne College in Memphis as instructor of sociology at the tender age of 23. His tenure there, 1955-56, would be curtailed due to the call of Uncle Sam. In 1956, James joined and served honorably in the United States Army at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas in the car pool division of the military hospital, Brooke Army Medical, for two years. Prior to joining his fellow soldiers for basic training at Fort Jackson in South Carolina, he married Jean and the first of his three children was born on the base.

After serving his two year stint in the military, James pursued his dream of receiving a doctorate in sociology. He chose the University of Washington for this journey primarily because he was keenly aware of the University's stellar reputation of educating Black doctorates in the field of sociology and because the university graciously offered to help him financially. He enjoyed the University of Washington and reveled in its academic rigors. His dissertation entitled, *Selective Aspects of Negro Passing*, explored the phenomenon of African Americans' ability to become members of the dominant culture in both theory and practice to escape the hardships and realities of racial America. In 1962, all of his hard work paid off when he was awarded a doctor of philosophy degree in sociology, a rare feat for African Americans in this country at the time.

Armed with this prestigious degree, now "Dr. Conyers," went in search of a university teaching position, which had been his dream for several years. He chose education because it was something that came naturally to him and he knew that there was a need for Black teachers. He believed that he was employable in a field that he could enjoy. And, in the back of his mind, he was following in the great footsteps of his mother, the consummate educator.

With his goal of one day holding a teaching position, he interviewed at several colleges, but Indiana State College would take the bold step of hiring him as their first African American faculty member in 1962. When asked why he chose ISC, he responds, "they were welcoming and they made me a very quick offer." Conyers credits his being hired at ISC to a remarkable and forward thinking man. He believes that Dr. Cloyd Anthony, then chair of the Social Science Division, was a forward thinker who knew that the world was changing and that ISC needed to change with it. Impressed with Dr. Anthony, he credits him with establishing what Conyers terms a, "United Nations" in the Social Science Division at the College, for Conyers was one of several minority faculty members Anthony would hire within a five year period. It would be several years before other departments would follow his lead.

Entering ISC as an assistant professor, Conyers was assigned to teach foundational sociology courses and courses on intergroup and racial relations. His classes were very popular with both Black and White students and he adjusted well to life in academia. While Conyers enjoyed the students and the college and was very appreciative of the opportunity to teach at ISC, in 1964, he heeded the call of Atlanta once again. When his alma mater offered him a position on its

graduate faculty, and he knew that he had the opportunity to be at ground zero of the Civil Rights Movement, he accepted the new role at Atlanta University in the rank of associate professor of sociology. And, as he states, “Atlanta looked better at the time. You know the grass is always greener on the other side.” In this new setting, he was very productive and gained much satisfaction in his role as graduate faculty working with the best and the brightest African American students - W.E. B. Dubois’ Talented Tenth, if you will. In addition to teaching, he was also one of the editors of the only race-based professional journal at the time, *Phylon*.

However, after about four years, the rigors and demands of his new role began to take its toll on him. Realizing he needed a change, he decided to return to ISC (now Indiana State University). Due to the good relationships that he had maintained with his social sciences colleagues at ISU and because of his significant achievements in the field, in 1968, Anthony, rehired him into the division of social sciences as professor of sociology, the setting where he would remain until his retirement in 1996.

Professional Years

Teaching

Conyers remained on the sociology faculty at Indiana State University for 28 years; he was one of only two full professors in the division of social sciences (then department of sociology) for many years. As a faculty member, he achieved teaching excellence, receiving numerous awards and accolades for his teaching brilliance. Students unanimously agreed that his classes were some of the best courses that they had taken and that he was an extremely knowledgeable professor. The courses that he taught that were most popular included Social Problems, Black Community, and Minority Groups. While a faculty member in the Department of Sociology, Conyers’s classes were cross-listed in African American Studies, a program he helped found and develop.

Scholarship

Conyers would not just rest on his teaching laurels, he also was a prolific writer and researcher in the area of race relations. He authored several books, journal articles, book reviews, monographs, and pamphlets. Often asked to present at both national and international conferences, his fame in this area continues to echo today. One of his most noted writings include *Black Elected Officials: Study of Black Americans Holding Government Office*, based upon a questionnaire, this work includes the first nationwide profile of Black Americans holding elective governmental office in the mid 1970s. The book compares Black elected officials with their White male and female counterparts.

Another noted work was *Black Youth in a Southern Metropolis*, a work coauthored with William J. Farmer and Martin Levin and published by the Southern Regional Council in 1968. That same year, *Black Youth* and its authors were recognized on the CBS national news for their outstanding work. Other works include *Sociology for The Seventies* published by John Wiley

and co-authored with Morris Medley (1972) and journal articles “Negro Passing: To Pass or Not to Pass” in *Phylon* (Fall 1963), “Racism Ain’t Dead Yet” in *Journal of Social and Behavioral Sciences* (Spring 1981), and “Racial Explanations” in *Western Journal of Black Studies* (2002).

Awards

For his teaching, research, and writing efforts, Conyers was often recognized by his peers. Dr. Conyers was the recipient of several academic awards including the prestigious W.E.B. DuBois Award in 1981 from the Association of Social and Behavioral Scientists and the distinguished Scholar Award in 1994 from the Association of Black Sociologists.

He was also the recipient of several professional honors including: being listed in the 12th edition of *Who’s Who in the Midwest*, 1970-1971; listed in the 1971 *Dictionary of International Biography*; listed in the 1969 edition of *Personalities of the South*, American Biological Institute; listed in the 11th edition, 1968, of the *American Men of Science*; and listed in *Who’s Who Among Black Americans*, 1981.

Organizations

Even though teaching, research and writing were his first priorities, he gave his time and talent to several national organizations. He was a member of several, including Association of Black Sociologists (ABS), an organization that he founded and served as its first president in 1973; the Association of Social and Behavioral Scientists, of which he was president from 1970 to 1971; the Council of North Central Sociological Association, member, 1991-1993; and American Sociological Association, member of the nominating committee, 1991-1992.

Service

Always willing to help his fellow man, Conyers was active in several service organizations in his community including: member, Young Men’s Civil Club, Terre Haute, since 1970; member, Board of Governors, Community Foundation of the Wabash Valley, 1969-1976; member, NAACP, Terre Haute Branch and National Branch, life member since 1994; consultant, Community Action Program, 1969-1976; member, Executive Committee of the Indiana Black Political Caucus, 1970; member of the Developmental Council of the Hyte Community Center, Terre Haute, 1970; board member, Terre Haute Symphony Association, 1979-1985; president, Evening Optimist Little League, Terre Haute 1979-1980; and vice president, West Central Indiana Civil Liberties Union, 1986-1987. In addition to his being a member of formal organizations, he both participated in the Afro-American Culture Students Farm Group (1972-1975) and taught courses at Farm Camp at the United States Penitentiary in Terre Haute on a voluntary basis until his retirement in 1996.

Mentoring

Conyers believes in mentoring the younger generations. This natural mentor has spent most of his life educating others. His role as mentor has manifested itself in several ways throughout his career: prime examples of this were in his days at Atlanta University and during his early teaching career at Indiana State University.

While on the faculty at Atlanta University from 1966-1968, Conyers had the opportunity to work among some of the veterans of the Civil Rights Movement. He served as both teacher, mentor, and confidant to Civil Rights leaders Maynard Jackson and Julian Bond. Jackson, three time mayor of Atlanta, became the first African American mayor of a major southern city in 1973. Bond, who was one of Martin Luther King, Jr's lieutenants, would be instrumental in effecting change for African Americans in the 1960s. When Julian Bond visited ISU's campus in 1968, a visit in which he called for the establishment of an Afro-Studies Program at ISU and lit a fire among the Black students on campus, he publically acknowledged his mentor and friend Conyers. Conyers also had the honor of introducing this great leader at his keynote address on campus.

At Indiana State, his gifts manifested themselves beginning in 1970 and continued throughout the 1970s as he served as a mentor and advocate for Black students as they demanded full participation and equality at Indiana State University. Although the University was more progressive in race relations than its Midwestern counterparts and decades ahead of its southern counterparts, by 1968, students of color demanded full participation in college life. The Black students were no longer satisfied with the status quo; they demanded recognition of their culture, traditions, and history. The African American students found strength, support, and leadership from their mentor Conyers. Acting as a rational voice and providing guidance to the students in the aftermath of the takeover of the school's administration building by students calling themselves "Students for a Better University," he was a calm voice at a time when guns and violence were the voices that many chose to use.

And, in 1970, when the campus was hit by a storm of discontent by students of color with a resulting race riot, Conyers once again served as a calming voice to the students and their leaders. Sam Dixon, former president of the Black Student Union during these tumultuous times, maintains that Conyers was always accessible to the Black students and that they could always go to his office for "rap sessions." Conyers along with Dr. Andre Hammonds, the other Black faculty member in sociology at the time, would often help them to conceptualize their thoughts and feelings. This remarkable man continued to work toward what the Black students on campus, then and now, termed "The Struggle" long after the campus had calmed down, the guns were withdrawn, and the riots had been squelched.

Recognizing that "the Struggle" continues, even after the tumultuous 1960s and 1970s, he continued to mentor and educate students, recognizing, as did his parents before him, that

education is the key to success in American society. With that in mind, in the 1970s he established the Iverson Bell Scholarship (first African American veterinarian in Terre Haute) as part of the mission of his organization, the Young Men's Civic Club. The funds raised from the annual ball provide scholarships to worthy students regardless of race. In 2014, five students representing four races and from four local high schools were the recipients of this award. In addition, he volunteered at the United States Penitentiary in Terre Haute for many years, serving not only as an instructor of sociology but also as a mentor to the troubled men there.

Emeritus Years

At the great age of 84 years young, Conyers continues to live life to the fullest and uses his gifts to help his fellow man. Since retiring from ISU in 1996, he has become even more active in his favorite organization Young Men's Civic Club, an organization whose goal is to provide financial support to students of all creeds and colors. He has also been active in the Terre Haute Symphony, and he continues to give of his time and talent to the local branch of the Terre Haute NAACP, of which he is a life member.

Even in retirement, he continues to write and publish. In 2002, his article "Racial Inequality: Emphasis on Explanations" appeared in *The Western Journal of Black Studies*.

Conclusion

In 1970, Conyers encouraged William "Bill" Powell, former president of the Black Student Union and one of the founders of the Students for a Better University, to work to his full potential. "I never did. He encouraged me to use the full values of the opportunities that came my way. I wish I had" states Powell.

Now at 68 years old, Bill Powell, is once again a college student. He is pursuing a graduate degree in renewable energy engineering. He credits the advice Conyers gave him so long ago with why he has done a full circle. Conyers' words of wisdom that remained dormant in his mind for so many years came out of the darkness a few short years ago.

Now, at 68, I'm taking his advice and working on a Master of Arts in renewable energy engineering. Taking subjects I wouldn't have dreamed of--calculus, physics, chemistry. And subjects that didn't exist before--wind power, alternative energy, and solar energy. Now that my life has come full circle, I'm totally dedicated to my studies, understanding the possibilities of my contributions. That, perhaps, is my *highest tribute* to my friend Jim.

Today, as in the past, Conyers, with his beautiful mind and spirit, continues to inspire others. The *highest tribute* that his former students, colleagues, and friends can give to Conyers is that every day we work to our full potential and to continue to work toward "The Struggle."

References

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