

Chapter 9: Donald Williams Jr. and Students for Racial Equality



Historical Background:

San José State has been dealing with racism for a long time. Historically, SJSU was a white institution. However, the demographics of the study body began to change in the mid 20th century, which of course led to deep reflection about what kind of university was SJSU going to be. In this booklet, several of the chapters have dealt with how SJSU and the larger society has wrestled with racism, including the chapters focusing on Chicano Commencement, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, and the Re-establishment of the EOP. In addition, issues of race, as well as social class, were also connected to the minimum wage campaign and Students for DMH.

Race continued to be a central issue at SJSU in the late part of the 20th century, as the decision to acquit the Los Angeles police officers that beat Rodney King rocked SJSU on April 29, 1992. On the campus, two student groups, Striving Black Brothers & Sisters and Students United for Accessible Education, led over 300 predominantly Black and Latino students through campus and the streets of the city. Students shouted “No justice, no peace”, with some calling for peaceful protests, while others broke windows and glass doors on campus (over 60 windows and glass doors were broken).¹

The campus exploded again on April, 1995, when an Administrator, Michael Day, from the Department of Admissions and Records, allegedly called Wesley Flowers, an SJSU student, a “stupid “n---er”. Fifty members of the Black Student Union confronted the new President, Bob Caret, and insisted that he implement their eight demands. The BSU was so outraged that they shut down a meeting that President Caret was having with KSJS, the student-run radio station, grabbing the microphone, and not allowing the meeting to continue. President Caret’s response was to appoint a Special Assistant to the President for Campus Climate, create a Campus Climate Office and Advisory Committee, and to develop a University Campus Climate Plan.²

In 2002, Maribel Martinez was running for Associated Student (AS) president, and the person she ran against created a racially charged poster, and put them into the men’s bathrooms. The Campus Climate Committee called on the SJSU President to denounce this racist action, and after several weeks, President Caret released a statement condemning this racism at SJSU.

In 2011, Dr. Susan Murray, a Sociology professor at SJSU, conducted a study, upon request of the Campus Climate Committee, focusing on the experience of various student groups, which included: African American students; gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students; international and immigrant students; Latinx students, Vietnamese students, and White students. The report highlighted in rich terms how students of color negotiate the negative stereotypes from faculty, staff, and other students, the feeling of disenfranchisement due to being ignored, unwelcomed, and the desire for more acknowledgment, and the hope to have their culture included in the diversity celebrations. The report also discussed how homophobia and transphobia exist on campus, and how this negatively impacts gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students. Unfortunately, the Murray report was not acted upon; in fact, President Mohammad Qayoumi disbanded the Campus Climate committee.³

The Events:



In the fall semester of 2013, Donald “D.J.” Williams Jr. was a 17-year-old freshman student living in Joe West Hall. D.J. was living in an eight-man dormitory suite, and he was the only African American. Over the course of the semester, his roommates displayed the Confederate flag and swastikas in the suite, forcibly wrestled D.J. to the ground and collared him with a bicycle U-lock around his neck, locked him in his bathroom, and called him 3/5ths (in reference to the 3/5th compromise in the U.S. Constitution over how African Americans were going to be counted as 3/5ths of a white person according to the census).⁴

D.J. responded to these attacks by asking his roommates to remove the Confederate flag, which they did for a short time. D.J. told them to never jump him again with a bike lock, but his roommates did it again later in the semester, and D.J. fought them off, receiving a cut lip in the process. In addition, D.J. asked them to not call him 3/5^{ths}, but then they started calling him fraction. On October 13, 2013, D.J. and his parents returned to his dorm room to find the Confederate flag on display again, and a racial epitaph on the white board.

D.J.’s parents contacted the campus housing officials to complain about these behaviors. Finally, San José State took action, by first removing the racist roommates from the suite, and eventually expelling them. Three of the students were charged by the District Attorney with a hate crime and battery. Incredibly, the three students were found not guilty of committing a hate crime, but were convicted of misdemeanor battery, and were sentenced to probation and community

service. Many students at SJSU, and the African American students in particular, were outraged by this decision, and they held an emotional rally on campus to denounce the verdict.⁵

It was in this environment, that Wanda Ginner, a board member of the SJSU Tower Foundation, the university's fundraising unit, made a racist comment at a campus meeting, stating "I contribute to this University because these little Latinas do not have the DNA to be successful." A university vice president, and member of the President's Cabinet, was present at the meeting, but remained silent. This was particularly shocking since San José State had responded to the D.J. Williams case by implementing a "See Something, Hear Something, Say Something" campaign to combat racism. A Latina staff member was present at the meeting, and she made an informal complaint to the University, but no action was taken. Then, she made a formal complaint to the University. However, many months went by and nothing was happening.

At this point, the students became involved. The students responded by organizing a new group, Students for Racial Equality, and they developed three demands: (1) the removal of Wanda Giner from the Tower Foundation Board, (2) a letter of apology from the university to the Latina staff member who was present at the meeting and who had made the formal complaint, and (3) mandatory anti-racism trainings for administration, faculty, staff, and students. Students for Racial Equality targeted the university President Qayoumi, and all actions were focused on him. Within three days of the group's kickoff event, which was attended by media from all the major TV networks, President Qayoumi was pushed to act, with the president announcing that the board member was stepping down. At this time, the president also announced the resignation of the vice president who was present at the meeting but did not challenge the racist comment. Within the year, the second demand was met, as the president apologized in a letter to the Latina staff member who had filed the informal and formal complaint.⁶

In response to the D.J. Williams case, the issues raised by Dr. Murray's study, and the rising racial discord, the University responded in 2014 with a Special Task Force on Racial Discrimination, composed of faculty, staff, students, and chaired by Judge Ladoris Cordell. The task force would make 54 recommendations to the University. One of the key recommendations, which was to hire a Chief Diversity Officer, occurred in April of 2016, with the hiring of Kathleen Wong(Lau). Importantly, Wong(Lau) has implemented a five-hour Freshmen Diversity experience, which trains more than 5,000 students a year, and the University recently has created the African American/Black Student Success Center and the Chicax/Latinx Student Success Center, both of which are community learning spaces to build community, to get personal and academic support, and to learn about campus and community resources. More recently, SJSU has announced the search for a program director to support the Asian Pacific Islander Desi American community and the creation of another student success center.⁷

Resources:

- “Jury Finds SJSU Defendants Guilty Of Battery, Not Hate Crime”, February 23, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZ1P7WN50RI>
- “San José State University Students Denounce Board Member's Alleged Racist Statement”, November 11, 2014, www.nbcbayarea.com/news/local/san-jose-state-university-students-protest-board-members-alleged-racist-statement/78156/ (accessed, September 5, 2021).

¹ Daily Staff Report, “Riot Breeds Violence”, *Spartan Daily*, May 1, 1992, scholarworks.sjsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=8277&context=spartandaily (accessed January 8, 2018); Daily Staff Report, “Rallies Spilt Between Peace and Destruction,” *Spartan Daily*, May 1, 1992, scholarworks.sjsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=8277&context=spartandaily (accessed January 8, 2018).

² Kristina Allan, “President Speaks with BSU”, *Spartan Daily*, October 20, 1995, scholarworks.sjsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=8751&context=spartandaily (accessed January 13, 2018).

³ Susan Murray, “Final Student Report of the Campus Climate Focus Group Research Project”, Fall, 2011, www.sjsu.edu/people/susan.murray/mypubs/FGReportStudent_LogoFinal.pdf (accessed January 13, 2018).

⁴ Tracy Kaplan, “San Jose State Expels Three Charged with Hate Crime”, *San Jose Mercury News*, May 2, 2014, <https://www.mercurynews.com/2014/05/02/san-jose-state-expels-three-charged-with-hate-crime> (accessed January 18, 2018).

⁵ NBC Staff, “3 San Jose State Students Guilty of Battery on Black Freshman, But Not Hate Crime”, *NBC News*, February 22, 2016, www.nbcbayarea.com/news/local/Jury-Verdict-in-San-Jose-State-Hate-Crime-Against-Black-Roommate-369701611.html (accessed January 13, 2018); Jodie Hernandez, “San Jose State University Students Protest Against Campus Hate Crimes”, *NBC News*, March 17, 2016, www.nbcbayarea.com/news/local/San-Jose-State-University-Students-Protest-Against-Hate-Crimes-372499552.html (accessed January 17, 2018).

⁶ Kate Murphy, “San Jose State Donor’s Alleged Remarks about Latinos Investigated”, *San Jose Mercury News*, November 10, 2014, “<http://www.mercurynews.com/2014/11/10/san-jose-state-donors-alleged-remarks-about-latinos-investigated> (accessed January 13, 2018); “‘Latinas Don't have DNA to be Successful' Comment Leads to Resignations at CA University”, *Fox News*, November 15, 2014, www.foxnews.com/world/2014/11/15/latinas-dont-have-dna-to-be-successful-comment-leads-to-resignations-at-ca.html (accessed January 17, 2018).

⁷ Kate Murphy, “San Jose State Racial Bias Fixes have Long, Unfulfilled History”, *San Jose Mercury News*, April 19, 2014, www.mercurynews.com/2014/04/19/san-jose-state-racial-bias-fixes-have-long-unfulfilled-history (accessed January 17, 2018).