

Arkansas's Experience Compiling a History of Black Deaf Studies Before And After Integration

Black Deaf Studies Symposium Proceedings

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Abstract

Dr. Glenn Anderson narrates the struggles and achievements in documenting Black Deaf history. He emphasized the lack of resources and documentation, drawing from his experience in the Arkansas Black Deaf history project. Anderson highlighted the systemic barriers, such as underfunding and erasure of Black Deaf institutions. A defining moment occurred during an interview with Ms. Eliza Taylor, a former Black Deaf school student, illuminating obscured historical narratives. Anderson underscored the urgency to document and preserve the rich yet overlooked Black Deaf history, urging collective efforts to capture and immortalize these vital stories before they fade into obscurity.

Keywords

Black Deaf History, Systemic Barriers, Documentation, Preservation, Erasure, Oral Histories

Presentation Transcript

[00:00 – Slide 1]

Good morning! Good morning. Yeah! I really want to say congratulations to Dr. Carolyn McCaskill, Professor Lindsay Dunn, and Ms. Evon Black for successfully launching the Black Deaf Studies Symposium on behalf of the Center for Black Deaf Studies.

Yesterday and this morning, from my interactions with people, there were good spirits. People saying good morning, hello, and hi, Dr. Glenn. Wow! I'm feeling the spirits of all people and I'm truly inspired!

[00:45 - Slide 2]

I want to start my presentation, the title "Defining moments," but this is not the right sign.

[00:56 - Slide 3]

It is more about overcoming the obstacles, such as events, experiences and situations that show up in our everyday lives that cause us to overcome the barriers. When you're doing Black Deaf history, you experience many obstacles and barriers, whoa. I did the Arkansas Black Deaf history project, and it took me over ten years of doing it. Why did it take so long? Because of so many obstacles and barriers. So "defining moments" meant something that helps break through the obstacles.

[01:40 - Slide 4]

I will mention a few (defining moments) that helped me to overcome the barriers when doing the Arkansas Deaf History project.

[01:48 - Slide 5]

Okay, I have had several defining moments that happen to me.

[01:56 - Slide 6]

The first problem is the resources such as yearbooks, records, stories, and written texts – there were none. I had to ask several Black Deaf people in Arkansas for their resources but there were none.

I thought to myself, it is impossible that there are none. Later, I realized that the Arkansas School for Deaf (ASD) (white Deaf school) and Black (Deaf) school are not the same. The funding for Black Deaf School was not the same as white Deaf school. The Black school did not have the funds to publish yearbooks, or newsletters, or sports – there was none of that. It clicked to me that they didn't have funds for it but I didn't give up. I want to mention one situation that lit more of a fire in me.

Okay, the first school I visited was South Carolina school for Deaf (SCSD) several years ago and when I first arrived, there were several people really urging me to go to the SCSD's museum, but I thought I came to SCSD for the students. I managed to find time to go into the 2nd floor of the museum. The South Carolina Association of the Deaf (SCAD) collects different artifacts and pictures. It was all set up and displayed.

And wow, it was beautiful. It was really impressive as it was meticulously labeled and contained specific information. After a while I looked around and noticed that across the room, there was a wall of photographs. At the top it read: "Black Deaf students." Excitedly, I thought ooh... I sped walked my way over there. I looked up at it, feeling terribly disappointed. Why? There were no labels. There was no additional information. Who's there? What's up? What's going on? What's the situation?

The person there said to me, do you like it? I looked at them perplexed, why would I like this? I don't know anything about this. The person shrugs and says, blame the black people who gave it to us. That lit a fire in me.

Next.

[04:51 - Slide 7]

Who were the teachers? We have a picture from 1887–1900, within that range. We have a picture of the Black students and teachers who were white. Did they sign; are any of them deaf; where were they trained? Don't know. The students are lined up in a row, dressed nicely, with ties and suits. Who are they? What are their accomplishments? Don't know.

Up until the 1940s, a majority of the teachers were white. What's the background of why they (white) taught those Black students? Don't know. So that was an obstacle.

Okay.

I wondered, where is the Black school building established on the ASD campus? Where was that? It was unknown where the building was because it had been demolished. The building was razed. Not even a plaque or sign to represent it in memory. There was nothing.

Hm... [Where, where, where? And then it happened – the AAD, Arkansas Association of the Deaf, reunion. Some of you know Race Drake Sr... At that time, he was in his nineties which meant he had gone to school in the 1930s, graduated Gallaudet in the 1930s.

[07:06 – Slide 8]

Anyway, I personally asked him, where was the Black school? He said, oh, come. He took my arm and walked me there himself. He said it was near the gym where they played basketball, close to there. Oh, okay. I noticed there was a huge oak tree. It was huge, its branches extending over. So, the Black school was over there, I asked? Yes, he adamantly said. Well, that's an obstacle. Why is that obstacle? Because the tree was over a hundred years old. It can't sign; it can't tell me what happen in the past. Tree, tell me what happened all that time ago, tell me.

Unfortunate.

Now we knew where the building was located. And it was pretty far apart from the white school building. The white school was closer to the front of ASD campus, and it was

prominent when entering campus. The Black school was way in the back, obscured, overlooked.

[08:35 - Slide 9]

Okay.

In the back of my head, I couldn't stop thinking about this, and my fire kept burning; this was ongoing for several years.

[08:45 - Slide 10]

A situation happened where two professional colleagues of mine mentioned something. They mentioned an older Black Deaf woman over in central Little Rock. They came up to me, asked me – do you want to go visit her? I thought, okay, okay, yes. We went to her home. As we rang the doorbell, the lights in her house lit up. She came around to the front door, opened it, and said come right on in. She was pretty petite. We chatted and chatted.

Wow, she signed. She really signed. She had good ASL, it was beautiful.

I asked her – did you go to the Black school? Yes, I did, she said. I asked, when? 1919.

My mouth dropped. 1919. Wow. I asked about the signing there. Oh, we had deaf teachers, they were white, she said.

So, as we progressed through the interview, I asked her several questions about her time at the Black Deaf school. She responded, don't remember, forgot. We asked and asked, but – forgot.

Then I realized, stupid of me. Her time at the school was 75+ years ago. Suppose you asked me what happened at Gallaudet 75 years ago, during my time as a student, I'd probably be the same – I'd forget. It was too long ago.

We needed to go back, slower, again and again and again. And the memories would resurface, one by one. That helped me to frame how to do Arkansas Black Deaf history in DVD and book. I could start in 1887 where the first school was established, to 1919 when this woman named Ms. Eliza Taylor. Her time and experiences took place, to 1928 when she graduated and until 1949 when the Black school was moved off the ASD campus.

Okay, I wondered why the Black school was relocated off the ASD campus. I came across a copy of the AAD's 75th anniversary publication and noted why the Black school was moved

off the ASD campus. I looked at it and realized the reason why the school had moved off campus was because more and more of white lower school students were flocking in and ASD needed space.

[12:41 – Slide 9]

That didn't sound exactly right to me. The new school cost \$200,000 to build in 1949. So anyway, what happened was a friend of mine contacted a former principal of the Black school. We had called this principal, and I asked him, why'd the school move? The AAD anniversary publication says it was because ASD needed more space for the influx of white lower school students.

The principal burst out in laughter. No, no, no, he said, integration and desegregation were coming, rolling around the corner. And the white people weren't exactly ready for integration. Because of that, it was better to just build a new school and place it way over there; hope that keeps everyone quiet and reduces complaints about integration.

Oh, "that" makes sense to me. A much more accurate record of what happened. For me, the defining moment in this situation, this is my sign for these defining moments, "that." That.

I met Ms. Taylor, I was inspired. I was more able to finish the project because of her.

[14:19 - Slide 11]

At the time of that interview with her, she was 92. She passed away at 106. I went to her funeral services. Her family was huge and wow, there were rows and rows of fifty people – signing. She was respected by family. They all looked up to her. That was wonderful to see.

[15:08 – Slide 12]

The book was published in 2006. I'll summarize its contents for you.

[15:18 – Slide 13]

First, there was a summary of the interviews I've done and the transcripts. There were also filmed DVDs so that the interviews could be watched as well.

Ms. Taylor, in her interview we asked about her parents – we asked her about her parents; we asked, does your mom sign? She responded enthusiastically, yes, she signed good. Does your dad sign? Eh... so-so. Typical father – eh...so-so. A little fingerspelling, a little fingerspelling.

Then, we asked about the Black school, sports, and did she meet white students – she said, no, the school was segregated. The Black school was here, and the white school was over there. We asked, how many students? She said, a small number of Black students, maybe fifteen, twenty? But the white school was HUGE, it was huge, she said. At that time there were maybe three hundred white students? Black students – eh...so-so. Thirty, maybe.

I asked her about whether the teachers were hearing. And she said no, no. They were all white and deaf. This meant the Black students had access to white deaf teachers who were sign models for the students.

When the school moved off campus, the teachers at the school were Black. The white teachers had stayed there at ASD with the white students. Why'd they stay? Don't know. We do not have the information about why those choices were made.

There was no Deaf education teacher training program for Black teachers. HBCUs had this but there were no options for deaf education. Nothing.

So, there was a communication gap between the Black students and the Black teachers at the off-campus school building called the Madison School for Black Deaf.

[17:46 – Slide 14]

I interviewed six Black deaf interviewees. The last one is Evon Black. This was an awesome interview. Really awesome. I was aware that several Black deaf ASD graduates had attended Gallaudet and most had earned their degrees from Gallaudet. Most had attended Madison School and then were among the first groups of students to integrate ASD. They were all Black deaf and female. What made this possible?

The Black female students had a tradition that began at Madison and continued when integrated ASD. In her interview, Ms. Black mentioned the “Big Sister” program. At Madison, the older Black female students were help the younger girls with everyday routines such as packing and unpacking and cleaning their clothes and explain about school rules.

Once the Black female students integrated at ASD, and the first Black female from ASD entered Gallaudet, she unintentionally began a tradition of Black ASD females entering Gallaudet and during breaks from college, dropping by the ASD girls dorm for informal mentoring with the younger girls. The mentoring focused on preparing for college after graduation from ASD as well as sharing tips and information about everyday life.

We no longer do that today. And maybe we need to go back to that kind of support system, because that was an important foundational thing that provided support for young Black

students to become leaders and take opportunities to leverage what they could take advantage of here at Gallaudet.

Today, I see many young people and I feel old! People are probably looking at me like, who is that old man? Now, there's so many youth – that's good! That's good to see. "Time" keeps our progress and legacy going. I'm really delighted to see that happening.

Okay.

[20:10 – Slide 15]

Madison school did not have a basketball team, football team or any student activities. There were none. However, something happened: a former student at Madison brought a picture to my office. The picture was quite old and crumpled by the time I received it, and I had to go to a professional studio to have the picture restored. The picture was of Madison School students at various ages, the youngest was maybe ten, eleven, the oldest was eighteen. Why the variety? Because there was a small number of Black students.

I looked and thought, who are these people? We do not know exactly who they are. In the picture, there is someone wearing a number 14 jersey, and that is the person who brought me the picture. And I have to let you know that there is a gem in this picture. If you do not know and do not realize it, we have a gem in this picture. Let me identify who it is.

First, second, third, fourth.

The fourth person from left in the picture is in the Arkansas Sports Hall of Fame. He was the only one deaf. All the others were hearing. He was in ASD, right around this time in 1964, then in the following year in 1965, desegregation happened.

So anyway, this student (Bennie Fuller) averaged 50 points a game during his senior year at ASD. In one game, he scored 102 points. I copied the score book. I noticed that he had scored 102 points in one game. If anyone thought it was fabricated, I have the proof (scorebook) to show you this student scored 102 points. The scorebook recorded different games – 70, 50, 60, 70 points.

There was no basketball team in Black school, so how did they play so well? The coach was Deaf, and they were fortunate to have a good relationship.

And wow, his hands were big, so he was able to make those shots. I did ask, how were you able to score 50, 60 points a game? At that time there were no three pointers. Only two pointers. What happened is that the players would continually steal the ball and pass the ball

to him, and he was able to just shoot it every single time. I can imagine he shot the ball like it was a machine gun.

Hearing people in the Little Rock area know him. The sad thing is that ASD did not have a place for him after he graduated. They should have created one, because he (Bennie Fuller) could have been a role model for the Black Deaf kids. So, what did he do? He moved to Oklahoma City and worked in the post office.

His story was not well documented. His story was incredibly overlooked even though he was a stellar athlete in ASD. Many of our youth don't know about him. To me, that's very, very sad. So that's why it's so important that we have Black Deaf history documented through books, videos, interviews – to preserve our stories.

The problem for us, now, is time.

Go ahead a little bit.

[25:19 – Slide 17]

The problem is time. Many of our people are gone, they are passing away. Stories gone with each loss, gone with them to heaven. We are here. We need every state – really, there were about fifteen states that had segregated schools, and we need to move things along and document more. I don't mean that, from all over the U.S., there would be one source of information... But each state needs their own documentary video. Then we can combine all of these into one book or one film, maybe.

But I realize that time is important, so don't stop! Who is ready to roll their sleeves up, who can take charge of this project? I know one, Arkansas; two, Louisiana; three, Florida; four, Georgia – they've made efforts. The quality is not the same across these (Southern) states. Still, we need more. So come on. Make it five, six, seven, eight, nine, more and more.

I pray that we collect and document these stories before it is too late. Thank you.

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