



Prairie View A&M Students Walk the Walk of Political Engagement

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It was a typical late winter day on the rolling hills of South Texas. But something was happening just over the horizon that was not business as usual. A group of students from Prairie View (PV) A&M University, a historically black college, were approaching the Waller County Courthouse, with banners and flags, chanting “No justice, no peace.” and “We shall overcome.” It was not a scene from the 1960s civil rights era, but one that took place in February 2008. More than one thousand PV students took to the streets to protest changes in early voting locations in the county, which they saw as a challenge to their right to participate in the Texas during primary elections this spring. This was not the first time that students from Prairie View have marched for their right to vote, and some in the community say it unfortunately may not be the last time.

Prairie View’s main campus is located forty-five miles northwest of Houston. Students at the university have been involved in a longtime dispute with local county officials that date back to the civil rights era. The current dispute centered on the Waller County’s plan to have only one early voting polling place, at the county courthouse, approximately seven miles from the campus, to accommodate all Waller County residents. Texas is one of a few states that have a designated period before the actual voting date to allow its citizens the opportunity to vote early and avoid the Election Day congestion. According to student leaders, this action would have created an undue burden on students’ ability to exercise their constitutional right to vote. Initially, county officials claimed that because of budgetary restraints, they could only afford to provide one location for all county residents—some twelve thousand citizens. Some residents would be forced to travel as far as thirty miles to cast their votes. Community activists, led by Judge DeWayne Charleston, a local justice of the peace, filed complaints with the Texas Attorney General’s Office and the U.S. Justice Department. But the wheels

of justice grind slowly and as Election Day grew near, students decided to march to the courthouse on first day of early voting.

Community activists—like Judge Charleston, and other elected officials, including the mayor of the city of Prairie View, Frank Jackson, and student leaders, including student government association president Andre Evans —were intimately involved in organizing the march. Coordination with local law enforcement agencies was paramount to ensure that the event would be peaceful and to limit as best as possible any disruption to the community. March organizers made arrangements with university officials to allow students to participate in the march without penalty on their academic work.

STUDENT VOTING RIGHTS IN WALLER COUNTY

How did the PV community get to this point? A brief review of the history involving student voting is necessary to understand the deep feelings on both sides of this issue. While attending Prairie View, the author was denied the opportunity to participate in the 1972 presidential elections, as was the entire student population during that time. Waller County was the last county in Texas to allow students to register and vote. Student voting rights were not obtained until after a long court battle over a number of years that eventually went to the U.S. Supreme Court for resolution. *Ballas v. Symm*, (351 F. Supp. 876) was filed in 1972, challenging, in the words of the writ, the Waller County tax assessor-collector’s “practice of requiring students who seek to register as voters in Waller County to complete what he denominates as a Questionnaire Pertaining to Residence, referred to herein as questionnaire.” The county claimed that the questionnaire was used as an aid in “determining whether an applicant is a bona fide resident”. Only students were required to complete this form.

The plaintiffs were successful, first in the District Court and the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals rulings that the county’s



actions were a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment Equal Protection Clause and the Civil Rights Act of 1965. When the U.S. Supreme Court denied the county's final appeal in 1979, students obtained the right to vote. Unfortunately, this decision by the court did not end the controversy.

In 1979, Waller County was the only county in Texas in which the majority of the county's population consisted of African Americans even before counting students from the historically black university. At that time, some local residents expressed concern that the sheer number of minority voters might change the balance of political power in the area, particularly if the students were allowed to vote, resulting in a number of local offices being dominated by minorities and students. However, this fear was never realized in that after the initial euphoria of winning this long struggle, students became apathetic about voting. While there were some gains in minority officeholders—including the election of the first black county commissioner since Reconstruction and the appointment of a number of African Americans to municipal offices—we did not experience the dominance of student voting in local elections that was predicted.

Because of this unique history, any attempt by county officials to alter the delicate balance involving student voting was met with suspicion and concern about attempting to turn back the clock. This concern was evidenced in 1992 when then-District Attorney (DA) Buddy McCraig indicted nineteen Prairie View students for illegally participating in the 1991 general elections. According to the indictments, these students, who became known as the PV 19, voted twice—first in their hometowns and then in Waller County. Discrepancies in election records were the primary source of these indictments. Students and community activists viewed the DA's action as an attempt toward voter

intimidation. This litigation led Prairie View students to organize their first march, which became known as the PV 19 march, to demonstrate support for these students.

"The [2008] march was very similar to the PV 19 march in that the immediate objective was to get the students to vote," Mayor Jackson recalls. "Once they (the students) came to realize that their votes mattered and that if they elected people that had their best interest in mind and would represent them, then they would better realize themselves as agents of positive change."

The 1992 march was a peaceful demonstration without any incidents that featured both elected official and community activist speakers. The event brought needed public attention to the situation in Waller. As a direct result of the march, which increased the media's and justice officials' scrutiny of the students' case, all nineteen indictments were

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eventually dismissed for lack of evidence. One case in particular turned out to be a father and son having the same name, voting in two different locations.

Twelve years later, in 2004, another Waller County district attorney, Oliver S. Kitzman, again challenged Prairie View students' eligibility to register and vote, claiming again that they did not meet the residency requirements as defined in the election code of the state of Texas. According to District Attorney Kitzman, a number of complaints had been raised concerning voter fraud involving student voting, and he publicly questioned the legitimate residency of students. He challenged the interpretation of

the Supreme Court decision granting residency rights to students in a letter to the editor of a local paper.

Despite contrary opinions by the Texas attorney general, the Texas secretary of state and the U.S. Justice Department, the district attorney's opinion reignited the controversy that resulted in a second march on January 15, 2004, the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday. Led again by Mayor Jackson and Judge Charleston, with other elected officials including State Representative Al Edwards and U.S. Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee, two thousand students made the trek from campus to the courthouse. This controversy was eventually resolved with the resignation of the district attorney, but lingering suspicions remained.

The 2006 General Elections had its own controversies. More than 700 votes at the Prairie View Polling Station were challenged because they were cast without

proper voter registration verification. The majority of these votes were cast by students who had registered thirty days prior to Election Day but had not received their voter registration cards. After the election, a number of unprocessed voter registration applications were uncovered in the Election Office. The county election officer was removed and an ongoing investigation was commenced by the Texas Attorney General and the Justice Department.

THE 2008 MARCH

The decision by the commissioner's court to only provide one polling place for early voting in 2008 for twelve thousand

residents of Waller County caused an immediate response from community activists in Prairie View. Formal complaints were filed with the Texas Secretary of State and the U.S. Justice Department, and activists decided to embark upon another march to draw public attention to this perceived attempt at voter suppression.

Working with student leaders and university officials, the 2008 march was scheduled to take place on February 19. Meanwhile, the commissioner's court, in an emergency meeting the day before, agreed to open three additional early voting sites, including one at the Prairie View Community Center. Students had demanded a site on campus, but the community center was seen as a compromise in that it was a mile from the campus and within walking distance. Despite the court's actions, organizers decided that the march would go forward.

More than one thousand students and supporters participated in the march that day without incident. Upon arrival at the courthouse, the marchers were greeted by other community leaders and supporters. A number of persons voted while others listened to political speeches extolling the virtues in exercising their constitutional rights. At the end of the day, more than five hundred students had voted, according to Judge Charleston, and "an additional one thousand students voted during the primary election."

Because of this history, a legacy of political activism has been created at Prairie View. From their first day on campus until graduation, students are constantly reminded of the struggle for equal voting rights at Prairie View. Through their history and political science classes, they are exposed to the history of the civil rights era in this country, but also to the struggles that have taken place on our campus.

Criminal justice professor Edward Schauer, a two-time veteran of the marches,

once said that our role as teachers is more than just ensuring that students have a basic knowledge of the subject matter. "We are in the business of creating 'change agents' whose task is to question and in some cases, challenge the status quo, when an injustice is perceived," Schauer explains. Students take with them the experiences of marching for justice back to their hometowns and communities. Craig Watkins, the current Dallas County district attorney and a PV graduate and marcher, recently made national news when he opened the district attorney's files to the Innocence Project, a national litigation and public policy organization dedicated to exonerating wrongfully convicted people. This examination of prior criminal convictions resulted in twelve men being released from prison after they had been wrongfully convicted. Watkins learned an important lesson in his tenure at Prairie View—that it is not always politically advantageous to challenge the status quo, but sometimes you have to "take it to the streets."

Like Watkins, today's Prairie View students have learned much about the value of political engagement through marching for their right to vote. After graduation, along with their degrees, those Prairie View students will take with them a sense of how their actions can make a difference as they remain ever vigilant in guarding their rights as citizens of this country. ■

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