

Emory Magazine

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Facing Race

A five-year, University-wide project on race has brought unlikely people together, with some remarkable results

By Stacey Jones

On a Saturday afternoon in mid-July, a caravan of automobiles filled with some of Atlanta's most illustrious citizens departed from the Masonic Temple on Peachtree Street to travel to the "country" home of A. L. Norris outside Chamblee, Georgia. Norris, founder of a candy company bearing his name, had invited some 250 members of the Kiwanis Club and their "wives, sweethearts, and families," according to a 1921 *Atlanta Constitution* article, out to his Sirron Farms to enjoy an annual barbeque.

On this languid summer day, guests milled around tables groaning with food and libation. Norris also saw fit to provide his guests with "novel" entertainment, the paper reported. "Amusement was given by some half dozen dusky darkies who vainly attempted to climb a greasy pole or to catch greasy pigs for which coins were offered them."

My grandfather was A. L. Norris's chauffeur. It's likely that he, and perhaps my grandmother and her parents, all renowned cooks, were in attendance that day at Sirron Farms. As a child, I heard many stories of my grandfather's employment with Norris, who sent him home on weekends with numerous boxes of candy carefully stacked on the back seat of the car that held his boss during the workweek. The Norrises' primary residence was in Druid Hills.

When I think back on how I first became involved in the Transforming Community Project, Emory's ambitious attempt to examine its racial history, I realize that it was A. L. Norris who drew me in. I

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wanted to know more about this man and his community, Druid Hills, a place formed by and with Emory. I wanted to understand the racial roles and experiences of whites and blacks in the University's surrounding communities of Decatur and Atlanta. In doing so, maybe I could uncover a bit of my family's history and understand the complexities of a relationship in which my grandfather was so clearly subservient to his employer, yet still honored Norris and his daughter by naming two of his children after them.

What I've come to realize about the Transforming Community Project, or TCP as it's called, is that its participants—regardless of their race, ethnicity, class, or gender—each have their own racial histories to sort through, and that, fundamentally, is what led some 1,500 Emory staff, faculty, and students to participate in this path-breaking program during the past four years. The program's founders and staff are no different. "I've taken an oath as a white, Southern woman that I'm behind people of color as leaders, I'm behind dealing with issues of race and ending racism. And even when I couldn't speak it, I've been acting it, because I learned how to act it before I learned how to speak it," says Jody Usher, who came out of semiretirement to join the program's founder, Leslie Harris, as codirector.

As with most examinations of race, TCP was born out of a particularly troublesome time. Emory President James Wagner had been on the job for only a few months when a white professor used a racial epithet for blacks at a departmental meeting. The ensuing controversy, as well as incidents in which two international students showed up in blackface at a campus party and a commencement speaker was criticized for what were seen as anti-Semitic views, led Wagner and other leaders to search for new ways in which to talk about race and difference at Emory.

In spring 2004, the now-defunct Violence Studies Program agreed to facilitate a series of conversations among members of the Emory community. In short, the participants expressed a great deal of concern about Emory's racial climate, specifying a "general lack of communication between the races on campus"; racially offensive language by supervisors and police officers, "including the use of the 'n' word"; and the prevalence of blacks in "lower-level positions, especially maintenance, food service, and custodial." One student participant mused, "Overall, I think Emory wants to have a conducive racial climate. All of the members of the community just haven't figured out how."

In Emory College, Leslie Harris, history professor in the Department of African American Studies, was developing a plan to bring together small groups of arts and sciences faculty to discuss race at Emory within the broader context of the country's, and the region's, racial history. Catherine Manegold, then the Cox Professor of Journalism, found herself interested in the strands blacks and whites wove separately around stories of race.

Together the historian and the journalist looked to models of racial healing and dialogue, most notably South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. "The South African process demonstrated that public acknowledgment of deep hurts and heinous crimes can go a long way toward healing community fissures that many had believed could never be resolved peacefully," says Harris, now director of the Transforming Community Project.

With the encouragement and financial backing of Provost Earl Lewis, who believed the program should include not just Emory College but the entire University, Harris and Manegold proposed a five-year examination of race—long enough to span an entire undergraduate class but short

enough to create some sense of urgency in its participants. A group of forty faculty, staff, students, administrators, and alumni gathered at Callaway Gardens in spring 2005 to cement the details of the project. They decided first to institute a series of Community Dialogues in which the Emory community could engage in frank yet civil discussions around the history of race at Emory and “begin to envision concrete ways in which the Emory community could act to create a new future around race,” says Harris. In a second phase, *Gathering the Tools*, members of the Emory community would work together to uncover the institution’s racial history. Since then, TCP has received funding from the Ford Foundation under its Difficult Dialogues initiative, a program that promotes academic freedom and pluralism on college and university campuses. The foundation has also funded TCP’s Faculty Pedagogy Seminars, two-week summer sessions that share Emory’s racial history and encourage faculty to incorporate what they’ve learned into their courses.

History’s Deafening Silence

In his 1999 history of Emory, **Gary Hauk 91PhD** recounts Emory’s pivotal role in the split of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Bishop James O. Andrew, president of the Board of Trustees, traveled with Emory President Augustus Longstreet to the church’s 1844 General Convention. What ensued was a battle over the bishop’s ownership of two slaves, whom he claimed had been bequeathed to him and whom Georgia law made impossible to free. Given the choice to earn her freedom by migrating to Liberia, one of the slaves, Kitty, refused. When the issue of the church’s bishops being allowed to own slaves was brought to a vote, its Southern delegates balked and decided to form their own denomination.

The story of the reluctant slaveholder-bishop stood as certifiable history for more than 150 years. The white citizens of Oxford venerated the loyal Kitty, even lovingly tending a monument to her in the “white section” of the town’s segregated cemetery. Blacks, many of whom had roots in Oxford dating back to slavery and, like whites, had heard stories passed down through the generations, recoiled at what they saw as this stereotypical narrative of the happy slave. Black and white citizens of Oxford had framed competing historical narratives around their respective racial memories of this enslaved woman. “Thanks to [former Oxford College professor] Mark Auslander’s good digging into the documentary evidence and oral histories, we all know a lot more about Kitty and the circumstances of her enslavement than I knew ten years ago,” says Hauk, who has served as an interim codirector of TCP and plans to update Kitty’s history in an upcoming book. “If the aim of a university is to pursue truth, then we’re a bit closer than we were. This is always a good thing.”

But Emory’s story does not just include the black-white racial paradigm. Early on, Jews, Asians, and Latinos all factored into the diverse tapestry of Emory and the South. “TCP, as it was conceived, was concerned about the dynamics between blacks and whites,” says Vialla Hartfield-Mendez, senior lecturer in Spanish, who helped revise the project’s original curriculum three years after it began to include the South’s other racial and ethnic stories. “If you’re looking at the history of race at Emory, you are actually looking at a history that is multicultural, with students from Asia and even students from Latin America here early on,” says Hartfield-Mendez. “Starting in the late 1800s, you run into elements that don’t fit within the black-white dichotomy.” The exceptionalism of the Jim Crow South in terms of who could matriculate at Emory and where they could come from “points to a kind of racism that is even more complicated than just a racism that grew from a history of slavery,” says Hartfield-Mendez.

Talking about Race

The linchpin of TCP remains the Community Dialogues, or CDs. These small, diverse groups meet over breakfast, lunch, or dinner with a pair of facilitators to discuss readings or documentary films about race. Many former group participants later sign on to be facilitators, who undergo training before assuming their roles. "I think it was a good thing that the dialogues were facilitated by people who were internal and who were also in their own growing process," says Matt Engelhardt, current president of the Employee Council and a development officer. "We were all on a learning path."

The dialogues work, thinks Richard Doner, a political science professor who had a hand in developing them, because the curriculum that undergirds the process "has built-in contention and arguments that make it safe, so that the whole thing doesn't blow up." **Mary Parker 07C**, who as a student facilitated several community dialogues, says "TCP takes Emory as a whole, including graduate and undergraduate students, faculty, and staff and has the same conversation, as opposed to different conversations among these groups. It's the only organization that encompasses all aspects of the University in a difficult dialogue, talking as a community as opposed to separate organizations."

Outside of the Community Dialogues, TCP has partnered with Emory College's Scholarly Inquiry and Research Experience (SIRE) program to fund students researching Emory's racial history. One of Hartfield-Mendez's students, **Meg McDermott 08C**, unearthed the history of Latino students at Emory. Her paper is now part of the TCP Community Dialogues syllabus. Another student, **Ilyse Fishman 07C**, worked with history professor Eric Goldstein to complete research for "Jews at Emory: Faces of a Changing University," an exhibit that debuted at the Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library in fall 2006.

Until recently, TCP tinkered little with the main formula for its CDs during the past four years. "We've been experimenting with different formats and different ways of delivering the same kind of message, that it's okay to talk about race, to find your voice around race," says Leslie Harris. A pair of student facilitators created Dooley's Dialogues for undergraduate participants, and there have been CDs held specifically for the Oxford College and law, business, and theology school communities.

But although the dialogues are diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, age, and sexual orientation, there seems to be a dearth of students and men represented, especially white men. Doner and Ozzie Harris, senior vice provost for community and diversity, led a men's group last fall. Harris believes that it's helpful for men to look critically at the world they created, in terms of race. "I think racism has a particular masculine edge, particularly in black-white relations with respect to slavery and Jim Crow because of how the borders were enforced and who had primary responsibility for enforcing those borders," he says. "It was men, because of the roles that men frequently had, whether as town fathers, judges, or police officers."

The men's group has chosen to lay the groundwork for a mentoring program for students of color, particularly males, who at times struggle to fit in at Emory. "I wasn't expecting to encounter an academic setting that didn't really prepare people for dealing with differences, for having people say to you that they really didn't know how to talk to me because they hadn't been around blacks," says Parker, who grew up in Stone Mountain, Georgia. She added that although she graduated at

the top of her class, she felt ill prepared by her public high school and says she studied twice as hard just to keep up.

"We need to do a better job of factoring in the economic backgrounds of Emory parents to level the playing field," says Doner. While African American students are certainly not the only students who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, less well-off students are well represented among them. "The issue that people raised in the men's group was how to change the incentives and resources of the institution to expand and deepen the role and performance of African American students within it, and in doing so, empower the students in a good way," says Doner.

"The University makes a verbal commitment to diversity and wanting to bring students of color here, but once we get them here, I feel that we have a responsibility to make sure they succeed," says Nick Fabian, another member of the men's group and an administrator in Middle Eastern Studies, "not just that they graduate, but that they graduate with a high GPA, so that they can go on to graduate school or get into honors programs."

Living Race at Emory

The thorny issues of race as it's lived at Emory and elsewhere will not magically disappear simply because of TCP, which ends in its current form at the end of 2010. Ozzie Harris, a fairly recent transplant to the South, initially believed the close proximity of the region's racial groups might have helped facilitate better recent race relations. He has been disappointed to find that's not the case. "The racial boundaries are so fixed. I think I'm surprised that in 2009 it's still as rigid as it is, because many of the generation that had the most at stake in maintaining these boundaries aren't even with us anymore." Still, Harris says, he's a proponent of dialogue projects for just those reasons. "They break down the boundaries that keep people apart."

Those tasked with managing TCP are uniformly enthusiastic about the program's broad appeal and scope. "It's been an eye-opener to see how many people are interested in talking about race, how people want to come to the table to talk about their experiences of race at Emory, in their workplaces, and personally," says Arlene Robie, the program's administrative assistant. Adds Jyotsna Vanapalli, TCP research coordinator and once Robie's CD facilitator, "The best thing we have done is hold out a hope and create a space where it is possible for an individual in the place in which they work to share a hurt and make it better. When we're healed and we're whole we make a better life all around."

Robie, Vanapalli, and Usher all praise their colleague, Leslie Harris, calling her a visionary. "It's pretty amazing, actually, but Leslie and maybe a graduate student and a half and a staff member were running African American Studies and developing and birthing this TCP, which in many ways was as visible in year one as it is today," says Usher.

I first met Leslie Harris as a Gathering the Tools participant, where experienced researchers Harris and Saralyn Chesnut, former director of the Office of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Life, patiently led a small group of faculty, staff, and alumni through readings about Emory's racial history and the mechanics of research and oral history. Using my newly minted skills in archival study, I gamely attempted to uncover new facts about Emory's early racial history, so that I could tell more fully the story of Kitty, perhaps in a play. I wanted to give her the voice she's never had.

I've found the task tremendously difficult, both because of the scarcity of additional historical information about her and because the realities of full-time employment make hours spent in the library or combing courthouse records quite a luxury. I console myself in believing that I, and the 1,500 other members of the Emory community who've participated in the Transforming Community Project, carry a truer version of Kitty's story with us.

It remains our responsibility and privilege now to sow it across this place, like the scattered cottonseeds on which Emory and its native South grew to prominence.

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