

Interview with Jimmie Samuel

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Interviewers: Bryant Harden, Alyson Jenkins, Sarah Joyave, Stephen Kearsse, and Sarah Wood

FYS: Why did you choose Mercer?

Jimmie Samuel: Remember, if we put this thing in context, this is 1967, and you were not even conceived of in 1967. Your parents weren't even born! This is, uh, interesting. I was the first in my family to go to college. My plan was to go the military. I went to Josie High School in Augusta, which was all black at the time. It was a high school that was built in protest to school desegregation. It was built to siphon us off – it got me – so we wouldn't go to the previously all white school. It literally was built. Augusta was just one place, but all over the South school systems resisted school desegregation and did all kinds of things. Millions of dollars were spent all over the South in almost every community to resist doing this. Alternatives were created, so I went to an all black high school. There was a rumor that we had lemonade in the water fountains [laughs]. But of course, that wasn't true.

So a counselor said, "Hey, you might be our guy, you might go to school." So I started applying and everything. I got accepted to Paine College in Augusta, Mercer, and maybe some others. But Mercer offered me the money. I had no money. My family had zero money. Like I put it, we had negative money. I had to come and work to get to zero. It was serious business. So it was really kind of tough, but it was a good thing for me. I got a chance to come to Mercer in the fall of '67.

And to put that into a bigger context, obviously you've probably done a little bit of studying, so you know that Sam Oni came in '63 as the first black student. It's interesting that Mercer mercernar....missionaries. I started to say "mercenaries," but that wouldn't have been quite what they called themselves. Some considered them mercenaries because they brought the bible and took the land, but that's another conversation. So he came. It was interesting that they couldn't find anybody that was INDIGENOUS! But Mercer's intentions were good and positive because they did it when they didn't have to do it. Mercer wasn't forced to do it. They did it because it was really the right thing to do. Now, there was clearly opposition to it. Rufus Harris was the president of Mercer at the time. There were trustees that walked out and left Mercer. Rufus Harris was a character. I'm sure that he said, "Don't let the door hit ya'. Bye Bye." He was a decent guy.

Then a few months later, some more black students came that were residents of Macon. Then there was a little small group in '65. In '66 there may have been ten or twelve. In '67 there was a bigger group of about twenty of us. And so, when I got here, there may have been 35 or 40 of us altogether. We were a close knit group, after we got to know each other, because we were from all over. What Mercer did was go across the South--there were some key folks like Joe Hendricks, he was a great guy, and Johnny Mitchell, who worked in admissions, he was a character--in a plane owned by Johnny Mitchell, and they would fly around the state and other places, interviewing and identifying black students to come. They were looking for particular students. Obviously, they looked for people that could make it academically because they wanted it to work. They were a little picky in that regard. Plus, they knew that the social environment would be a bigger hurdle to overcome than the academic environment, which turned out to be true.

So I came in '67 because Paine couldn't give me enough money. I'm glad that I came. I was able to get grants and stuff to help me out. I was thinking about this as I walked across the campus, which is beautiful by the way. It was beautiful back then, but it is way more beautiful now that a lot more money has been put into it. A whole year on campus was \$1900. How much is it now?

FYS: \$40,000 a year.

Jimmie Samuel: Wow, of course back then that was like 40K. It could have been a million as far as I was concerned! We couldn't pay it, but with grants and work study and that kind of thing, we were able to cope. So that's why I came.

FYS: So how would you say race relations were during that period?

Jimmie Samuel: It was pretty tense. You have to put in all in context. Where was the nation in 1967? You had the cities burning. Detroit and other places were burning in '67. The Vietnam war was really developing. We were getting more and more entrenched under the Johnson administration. That was happening. And then there were student rebellions by black students and black folk in general. The issue of race was a big deal. President Johnson had declared the war on poverty.

So a lot was going in the country and Mercer was a microcosm of the country. There was a cadre, of about 10-15 faculty members, that was much more liberal than the other faculty and MUCH more liberal than the student body. The student body was very, very conservative. I'm sure that there were students that chose not to come simply because Mercer allowed black students, even though we were a small group. Really, what were we gonna' do? But what we chose to do was to challenge the place, but in some ways not like others. We didn't brandish bullet belts like our counterparts at Cornell. If you go back in the archives, you'll see on the cover of Newsweek, brothers with big afros – I did have an afro – brandishing weapons and things. They brought the authorities in. We said that wasn't the way to go. You can't win that battle. If America was good at anything back then and even now it is...you can't "outweapon" America. We thought they were kind of stupid. Well, actually, just counterproductive. So, we went about it in another way and challenged the institution and the people here. We got some things accomplished. We got the African-American studies program created. All of that happened when we were here. I was actually on the committee to start the African American studies program.

FYS: How difficult was starting the African American studies program?

Jimmie Samuel: Pretty difficult. We proposed it. A core group consisting of Joe Hendricks, Dean Trimble, and Ted Nordenhaug, a philosophy professor, wanted this to happen, so they would listen. Mercer didn't have many black faculty, and they still don't today, but we did have adjunct faculty from Fort Valley State to come in. And there were some white faculty that could teach it as long as they didn't act like they were black. They weren't black. They may have been teaching the class, but they had to have some help, and we had some people that were willing to do that. But to get the faculty to approve it, we did a masterful job. We sat in at the music hall where the faculty meeting was held because we knew it was on the agenda. We didn't disrupt it. We just lined the halls and studied and stood outside. There were some people that got real pissed off about that. They didn't like that, but it eventually passed.

I'll never forget the Dean of the college at the time wanted us to remove ourselves from the building because he didn't want that pressure. I was the spokesperson because I was the president of the Black Student Alliance at the time. I think it's called OBS (Organization of Black Students) now. But yeah, it was called the Black Student Alliance then. He wanted me to get everyone to leave, but I couldn't do that. I was there speaking for the group, but the group was not willing to do that. They threatened to put us all out of school, but they were just blowing smoke. But we did that and it eventually passed.

FYS: How did the Black Student Alliance get started? Were you the founding president?

Jimmie Samuel: I was actually the second president. The first few students that were here, obviously Sam, the other students that came later that year didn't live on campus. So he was the only black student on campus. One is the loneliest number right? So he was here, and in '65 two or more folk, and in '66 like I said. So then there weren't really enough students to organize. They tried to communicate, compromise, organize, and challenge stereotypes and another group tried in '66 tried the same thing. In '67 things started changing when the numbers got a little bigger. What was happening in the country affected us. A lot of us read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Have you read it?

FYS: 1/5 of us had read it.

Jimmie Samuel: If you haven't read it, I encourage you to do it. It's pretty thick, but it's a telling story of one of the black "leaders" of the country. He and Dr. King framed the conversation about race at the time. Dr. King had a nonviolent strategy, and Malcolm was saying, "Ya' know, by any means necessary." And so they kind of framed it, and people started talking about these issues. They didn't really want Malcolm. I don't think they wanted Dr. King either, but they'd rather have Dr. King than Malcolm. The country was really dynamic at the time. That book helped shape a lot of us, most certainly me. It gave me a perspective on history and all of that. It came out long before *Roots*, the movie. That slapped America upside the head when that came out because it showed America the details of slavery and its impact and its legacy and all that. In '67 we started to do a bit more challenging. In '68 the crew that came in was a rowdy bunch and things really begin to change. It even trickled down into the high school level. So, about forty kids came in that year. Our numbers were growing. It was out of that group that we had an informal organization and then the formal organization came about. We then came up with the name. Some of us were in leadership positions, informally and it became much more formal. The first president, Robert Brown, is now the minority leader in the Georgia Senate if I remember correctly. He would be an interesting guy to talk to if you had the time. He was the first president and I was the second president.

FYS: What year was this?

Jimmie Samuel: 1968. So that's how it was formed. And then it became like any other organization, 'cause you know we got fraternal organizations, non-fraternal organizations etc. So we were an organized group like those, so they couldn't stop us from doing it because everybody else was doing it. I have an interesting aside about the yearbook because it became an issue. We just weren't in there for the most part.

FYS: In one of the year books you guys only have one page.

Jimmie Samuel: Before that, there was nothing! So what we did was – this REALLY pissed people off – burn the book outside the building. We did it outside because if we did it inside it could have been a fire hazard, and they would have arrested us and locked us up. Then we took it in the building and put it on a table. People got upset about that, but it created a conversation. It made the point. And so, we did things like that. We challenged this place a good bit. I felt good about being apart of that now as I reflect on it. That changed that whole thing. Our involvement in student activities and leadership roles wasn't in there [the yearbook]. That was the conservative side, the student side of this thing. And there was always tension when you talk about the environment on campus. I'll never forget, and I can't forget this. Black students were very successful academically even though we did some things--very few folk flunked out or got put out. That's partly because of the recruitment process that went on, and we also worked together and got serious and everything. When you compared black students and white students at the point, we were a little bit better. That challenged the stereotype, ya' know, because we weren't supposed to make it. The whole inferiority thing was heavy during that period. We weren't supposed to make it, but we shattered the glass ceiling in that regard.

FYS: You wrote an article for *The Cluster* that seemed to spark a lot of-- controversy.

Jimmie Samuel: Did ya'll see that article? About the Vietnam War? Me, a guy named Laronce Beard, and Tim Marshall put together an article about why black folks should not serve in Vietnam. In hindsight, I think none of us should have been in Vietnam. America shouldn't have been in Vietnam and we challenged it. What was happening was that the racism in America was manifesting itself on the battlefield in Vietnam. Who was on the front line? Black folk and southerners, even southern white folks. The first voice I heard in that secret war in Cambodia--that Nixon said we weren't in--was a southern boy from Alabama, a white guy. We were dying in much bigger proportions than other folk. Black folk, poor folk, and southerners. So there was elitism and racism all wrapped up together in this thing.

So we wrote an article, and it enflamed this place. It created a tremendous dialogue. I had an ROTC scholarship, and I was in the Marauders .That doesn't exist anymore. It was like the Marines with black berets and stuff. When I got to the upper division level, they tried to take away some of my grants, and I would have had to get loans. I decided that something wasn't right with this picture, so I rejected it. I wrote that article and rejected the scholarship. They got real upset about that. HEW (Health Education and Welfare), currently HHS (Human Health Services), came down to look at Mercer, and what it was doing--and I don't know whether it is true or not--but I got credited with destroying the ROTC department because we challenged it. I actually had to go get a pro bono lawyer from the law school because they were going to draft me into the military. When you're in the upper division in ROTC you're on active duty. You were an "active reserve," they called it. If they chose to, they could draft you whenever.

Because of that controversy, I refused to shave. I still have a little beard now. They told me to never put that uniform on unless I shaved. When I graduated though, I had a high lottery number so I was drafted

immediately into the military, but I refused. So I resisted. I became a conscientious objector. I refused to go to Vietnam. In order to be one, you had write and explain why you felt that way, so I put together a piece. It [conscientious objection] could go either two ways, based on religion or a long-held belief or a combination of the two. They made it difficult to get a conscientious objector status. If you did get it, then they made you clean up hospitals and do other grunt work. That's why a lot of people went to Canada and other places during that period. But I refused to go. I told my mom, "I don't want to go, but I might end up in jail." It was a serious time. So I wrote a piece about my beliefs based on Gandhi's, Malcolm X's, and Martin Luther King's beliefs. And I haven't heard from them to this day. They must have decided there was something wrong with me.

Have you guys ever heard of H. Rap Brown? He was one of the people with Stokely Carmichael and that crew. When Rap Brown was drafted – its pretty humorous now, but they couldn't take chances then – he said, "I'm ready to go fight. I want the biggest gun because once I learn how to shoot it, I'm going to shoot as many white folks as I can find." And he was excused. But only one person could use that as an excuse. That was a unique one. He got away with it, but no one else could. So I refused to go, and they put me in administrative holding pattern called 1-H. All it was was for folk like me that they didn't want to deal with, so I didn't go. So I went off to grad school at the Medical College of Georgia, and me and another guy were the first black folk in the graduate school there. I spent a year there, then left there and went to work in Atlanta for the Southern Regional Council working on school desegregation for about three years. Then I came back here [Mercer] to work in Upward Bound Trio programs. I also taught in the freshman seminar, which I'm not sure still exists.

FYS: That's what this is.

Jimmie Samuel: Okay, so yeah, I got a chance to teach in that.

FYS: During our research we discovered you are a Black Panther. What made you choose the Black Panther Party rather than the NACCP or SNCC?

Jimmie Samuel: I never really was apart of the Black Panther Party. Back then we had intramural sports, we still do. And in our time everything was [de facto] segregated here, for the most part. So all of the intramural teams were white. The fraternities played each other and some non-fraternal organizations played, too. So we created an intramural group consisting of blacks and whites. In fact, our quarterback was white. Man, that boy could throw the ball. So we created a team and named it "The Panthers," after the black Panthers. We didn't say black panthers because you didn't have to do that. Panthers are black. Right? In nature. For about three years in a row, we were champs of the whole thing. We just messed people up. I don't know if ATO is still a fraternity here but they're the jocks right?

FYS: Meh...

Jimmie Samuel: Well, they used to be. When we took that over that upset them big time. The law school used to have a good team, too, but we just put a hurtin' on them. There were just opportunities all over the place to shatter stereotypes and to make things happen. Where did you find information about me being in the Panther Party?

FYS: We just asked around and stuff.

Jimmie Samuel: People thought that. Now we had leanings in that regard and I certainly took an interest. There was an active Black Panther Party in Augusta, and I'm sure there is a record of me going to some of the rallies back home, but I never was officially a member of the group. That arms struggle thing just didn't...eh...That's just a good way to die!

The question is whether or not it was worth doing that. Obviously some people did think that, but that didn't make much sense to me. Dr. King's nonviolent approach, for the most part, was the way I thought to go. He [Dr. King] learned that from Gandhi, so I did some independent reading of Gandhi and his beliefs and what he did. The culture in which he did it in was different from here [America]. Fasting meant a lot in India. People stopped and paid attention. Boom, boom! Here, it doesn't have the same impact. A lot of people fast, but it's more of an individual thing. Most people ain't gone give a damn about you fasting unless you die, and then they might pay attention for a few minutes. This is because the cultural context in which it occurs makes a difference.

So what we tried to do was eclectically get the best from all of it. I think we had some of the analysis of the Black Panther party. There's actually a new Black Panther Party that exists right now. I think there's less [rhetoric] on arms struggle but there's still some there. I haven't followed it as closely as I did the original group. But yes, we tried to pick the best from all of it. That's why we didn't have to have the police running on the campus. We weren't really engaging the institution like that. We took Connell Student Center over one time. We grilled one of the vice presidents. He'll never forget that. He never forgot that. When I came back here to work, he asked that guy that was trying to bring me back "Do you know who you're bringing back here? I don't know if you want to do that."

FYS: So you kept people in Connell Student Center?

Jimmie Samuel: We didn't kidnap them. There were a lot of black students and some white students. The white students were free to come and go. Some of them supported us. It used to close very early and for a lot of [black] students, there weren't many places to go around here. We didn't have cars and certain amenities. The student center really wasn't geared towards staying open late and accommodating anyone so we just "took it over," and decided we were going to change that thing.

FYS: So how do you feel about Mercer today? Is it thoroughly integrated? Or could it do better?

Jimmie Samuel: Oh, it could do better. No questions. But it has a long history, and I haven't followed it as closely. You may know more about it. I encourage you to know more about it and get in depth with it. Its historically tried to bring black faculty here and tried to diversify [the faculty]. I don't know how many black faculty are here now. It never got very many, even when we [BSA] were in the height of what we were trying to do. Do you know how many black faculty are here?

FYS: Not really. Probably more than when you were a student here.

Jimmie Samuel: It would be interesting to find out for your project. I know the guy that's the head of English department is black right? Is he still here?

FYS: Not currently. No idea.

Jimmie Samuel: Anyway, I think that's its important to have a diverse faculty. It's important not only for black students, but equally for white students. College oughta be a place where all of your values that you got from your parents and grandparents are challenged. They shouldn't be discarded, but you should see if they make sense. Are they strong? Are they deep? Do they have lasting roots? Some of what you've gotten is nonsense. Bullshit might be a better way to put it. What I did was develop a very good "crap detector." That's what I did when I was teaching Freshman Seminar. If could help you build a good crap detector, then I had done my job. 'Cause what that does is allow you to check out what people are bringing you. Does it have an inkling of truth to it? Can they prove it? Does it make any sense? Is it the right thing to do? It may be illegal, just like the whole thing that's going on with gay marriage. In the last election and especially the one before that it was a fringe issue to get people off task from looking at the real issues of the country. And too often that happens. So if you do nothing else while you're here, develop yourself a good crap detector so that you can catch that bull that's coming at you from left and right and every other direction. 'Cause what folk would prefer is that they get you in here – most people, not all – and they open you up like a cartoon character and pour stuff in you and make you into little "autotrons" that support the prevailing view.

Now has the country changed with the election of Barack Obama? We've turned a corner. Are we post-racial? No. Absolutely not. And if you think so, then you need to work on your crap detector a little bit because it's not true. Things are getting better though. Much better. They're better than when I was a student here. The country is better. But I always look at progress in two directions. Maybe even three. You look at how far you've come and how far you have to go. Where are we in relationship to the whole thing? You have to look at more than the current environment. You gotta look at how much more we gotta do. And no matter what you think, the last president and his crew damn near bankrupt the country. We're in pretty bad shape. I think we have the right guy in their now. But he's going to have to work with resistance from every direction. No Republicans in the House of Representatives voted for the stimulus package. I challenge you to check this out and be on top of that because all of you are old enough. Did ya'll vote in the last election?

FYS: [Unanimously] Yes.

Jimmie Samuel: I'll ask you. Who voted for Barack?

FYS: 1/5

Jimmie Samuel: Not everybody voted for him. Just one at this table. That's alright though. This was not an issue in my class. You didn't have to agree with me. But if you were going to challenge what I'm saying, you had to do more than just look at me funny. You had to say why [you believed] something wasn't the right position. What do you guys think so far about what's happening with Barack?

FYS: Some good and some bad.

Jimmie Samuel: Well, the point is that you ought to be engaged. One of the things we did--and I feel good about this--was that we challenged this place. We got better, and we think it got better. So we helped it be a better place for students that came after us and eventually for you. Dr. Godsey, who was here for a long time, came as the Dean of the Liberal Arts College when I was working here. Him and a small group of faculty and staff, we're friends. We helped. I liked to say that I helped raise Dr. Godsey because we brought some different perspectives to him. He eventually became the provost and then the president of the institution. He's a great guy. He's still around, as chancellor of something.

FYS: Here's our last question. A lot of people think that the civil rights movement is over. How do you feel about civil rights today? Are there still things that need to be addressed?

Jimmie Samuel: Yeah, a lot of gains have been made. You know about this. Rosa Parks had to sit at the back of the bus. They still have, at the terminal station in downtown Macon -- and I support not taking it down -- colored water fountain. They have a sign that says colored here and white folks here. We should never take those things down because we need to have a memory of those things. That's why the concentration camps in Germany should never be torn down. We should keep that because every 2 or 3 generations, if you don't have that information, then it's not apart of who you are.

Now, all of this baggage--I have grown kids now, my youngest is 26--but yeah, we were very careful not to teach our prejudices. When I was growing up, the only white folks I knew ran a store on the corner from where I lived. I lived in the center of Augusta, and there weren't any white people there. These people ran their store, sold us high-priced goods, took the money out of the community and went home at night. I didn't know anything about white people. There was a guy that came to sell whole life insurance, little weekly policies. I decided then that nobody was going to come to my house selling some damn insurance. That never happened in my house. He called my mama by her first name like he knew her. He didn't know my mama. But that's the [typical] kind of level of disrespect that occurred.

So civil rights is not over. We've made a lot of progress, but now we've got to make sure that we don't lose the gain. The whole issue of voting rights comes up every few years. There's a debate right now in the South, especially in Georgia, about whether we need the Voting Rights Act provisions. This means that any changes that are made in the states that were affected have to be ran through the Justice Department to make sure that folks aren't reverting back to poll taxes and (in reference to tests that required obscure knowledge) asking how many soap bubbles are on the head of a pin. So, I think it's still needed. In Georgia, we do not have much voting fraud. It was another Republican sham, and it passed, and I opposed it. It said that you had to have a government ID in order to vote. That's an imposition to voting. Voting oughta be as free as possible. The real abuse is in absentee balloting. There have been no laws passed to change that because the guys who implemented that, particularly Republicans, know that they get a lot of votes from absentee balloting. Politics is everywhere ya'll. Don't ever think you can be beyond politics. You need to understand it, try to work with it and be engaged with it. You don't have to be a politician. Just be engaged in your community, in your school and in life. Just try to figure out what's right and what's wrong and that will keep civil rights moving in the right direction.

The whole issue of human rights is much broader now. Malcolm X back in the '60's was talking about human rights, which is an umbrella for civil rights. I encourage you to read Thomas Freidman's *Hot, Flat and Crowded*. If you haven't read that, you oughta run and get that today. He's talking about technology, overcrowding, and global warming. It will certainly affect you and your children much more than me and mine. We gotta do things differently. We have to change the way we operate. That's why Obama is a breath of fresh air. In that regard, he's talking about all of those issues that are gonna be affecting the country. We have to get on them now. We can't wait. If we do, things will be too far gone for us to do anything about them. I encourage you to read that. It was fascinating to me. We're running out of time ya'll. You need to be apart of that solution so that the decisions you make individually and collectively will make a difference. That's where the crap detector comes in. You have to keep feeding that crap detector. You can't get a little sense about what's going on and then drop it. You have to be engaged. How many of you watch the news or read newspapers everyday?

FYS: Various responses

Jimmie Samuel: You ought to read headlines everyday. I had to get onto my daughter about that. She said "Daddy, did you know....?" I would say, "Yeah that was three weeks ago." She was letting her old man stay abreast of her. There's a lot of negative out there. This 24 hours news cycle has its ups and downs. But it's important to know what's going on. You owe it to yourselves and your children. If your children ask you, "What did you do?," you need to have an answer for them. I used to ask my children, "What kind of world do you want to live in?" And to quote Gandhi – you may have heard India Arie in one of her songs – "Be the change that you want to see in the world." You can't just leave it to somebody else. You can't just decide what oughta happen. You've gotta do something with that. And that's the position I've taken since I was a student here, and I've been doing it ever since.

And I direct a human service agency here in town. It's a community action agency. We operate Headstart, the preschool program. We work with the homeless. We're dealing with foreclosures right now. We deal with first-time home buyers and a whole range of things. What I was doing here kind of helped me get prepared for what I do now and have been doing for awhile. I strongly encourage you to read that book. You will certainly see how the issue of human rights and civil rights comes into play in this global economy that we have. In parts of the world, we have dire poverty. We have poverty in America, but it's not dire poverty where your existence is at stake. There are people with an annual per capita income of \$100. You splurge that or more on the weekend on some shoes or one of those bags. This whole thing we're talking about has an impact on all of that. If you watch MSNBC, FOX – I don't watch FOX, it lies way too far to the right. Do you watch MSNBC? Those of you that didn't vote for Barack, you may not like it at all. But at least watch it sometimes. CNN is probably between the two of those. I encourage you to get all perspectives and see what makes sense to you.