

## **Interview with Dr. Peter Brown**

April 17, 2009

Interviewers: Mark Benfield, Sarah Clifton, Cameron Kunzelman, Krystle Waters, and Drew Wilson

Cameron: What were the racial relations like in 1971, when you came to Mercer?

Dr. Brown: The black students were very organized and very adamant about the curriculum beginning to reflect what was emerging as black studies and African-American Studies. One of the triumphs just before I got here was they had gotten agreement for a black studies program, but they didn't have any faculty that could teach it. So that was the next stage, the university investing resources. The student body, I think there was a lot of distrust and anxiety on both sides, about what this meant. This was black power ideology nationally and big afros. They were reading Malcolm X in the predecessor to FYS, at the time an alternative freshman program, and engaging those sorts of issues in the curriculum, but not in this dedicated black studies major in its type of program.

Cameron: More specifically, as far as the faculty is concerned, how do you think they split?

Dr. Brown: I think the faculty was very supportive, although this black studies program--there was a lot of suspicion that there wasn't an intellectual depth to that and it wasn't really a major, it really didn't belong in the curriculum. We had a very traditional faculty particularly in the history and the sciences who were not very open to that.

We had our very first African-American Faculty member, Gary Johnson in political science, who became a good friend of mine--we used to go over to the Air Force base and play squash--was one of our first faculty members. We had some of the first African Americans in staff positions: Jimmie Samuel in Student Affairs; Sam Hart, who is now the chairman of the county commission for Bibb County, had come into the Dean's office, we had a beginning Upward Bound program that was flourishing at that time and Sam was responsible for that; and Catherine Meeks who later had a very, very important role in all of this had come as Assistant Dean of Women at the time, not a Faculty member, from Pepperdine University. So we were beginning to integrate the faculty with young people. Jimmie was himself a graduate of Mercer and one of the first black students; he's the director of the HeadStart program now here in Bibb county. So the first black faculty and black staff had significant levels of leadership and appointment. Bobby Jones, who was a long time high school teacher, had been hired into the education department. Bobby was very respected throughout the community, really sort of idolized, one of the overpasses across the interstate is named for him. He had a great deal of influence in the community.

Of course this was matched by the fact that the school system was just in the process of integrating. There was the first black principal at a formerly all-white high school, Southwest High School, Carol Perdue. People were under a lot of scrutiny, felt a tremendous pressure as the first African Americans to serve in these roles they had to really perform and they knew they were being judged and they knew that some people didn't have the best will toward them, that many people expected they would fail or even hoped that they would fail in these positions. So it was time of extreme pressure for that bridge generation, those very first African-Americans, whether they were the first ones to be at a primarily white high school or school setting, whether they were still some of the first black students at Mercer or

whether they were the first staff or first faculty members a lot of pressure. Now they had excellent support from the president's office from the beginning, Joe Hendricks playing a tremendously important role in all of this and other people too, Mary Wilder in English, some very powerful leaders had thrown themselves, heart and soul, into this at the end of the 60s. So that was crucial support and certainly in terms of relationships with the community President Harris was absolutely a bulwark in protecting Mercer students and faculty and staff African-American from any type of overt discrimination and prejudice.

Cameron: You talk about overt discrimination. When black students came in and then black faculty members was there any sort of attitudinal backlash within the faculty its self or within the institution?

Dr. Brown: I'm sure there were a number of folks that were suspicious that we were compromising quality in favor of doing (the word politically correct was not part of the vocabulary back then) the politically correct thing. In many cases these people were not coming with the same credentials that other folks were because they hadn't had the same opportunities to get them, so there was, I guess, some objective evidence that we were struggling to find both African-American staff and faculty. So they were coming in not just under pressure but with a lot to prove to themselves as well as others. Some people did better at that than others. My friend Gary Johnson finally dropped out of academia altogether. He never finished, or at least not in the time span he was at Mercer, never finished his doctorate. He was a wonderful teacher, very creative, wonderful teacher, but for whatever set of reasons couldn't finish that and left the University. On the other hand someone like Catherine Meeks, who had come to Mercer with just a bachelor's degree and, as I said, Assistant Dean of Women. Mercer supported her in first getting a Master of Social Work from the University of Georgia, which is a professional level degree. Then supported her over a number of years in going back to school at Emory and getting a P.H.D. in African-American Studies, and she became the first director of Black Studies and then African-American studies at Mercer and held that position for twenty years. She then moved over to Wesleyan in an endowed chair professorship there, and she just retired last year from that position. So I think Mercer was supportive not everyone could manage to survive in that context or to flourish in it.

We've had trouble always and ever since in attracting qualified African-American faculty to Mercer. There have been several initiatives, attempts to do that including other cases where people were supported in finishing degrees. We have, I think, probably the highest percentage of African-American faculty now than we ever have, but it still doesn't reflect the percentage of the student body. Mercer is not alone in that struggle, for whatever set of reasons there's still an under-production of PhDs by African-Americans in the country and they tend to be clustered in a few fields and they don't always find Macon, Georgia, or Mercer as a place that they feel at home, though the evidence is that our African-American students do very much find Mercer as a welcome and supportive place.

Cameron: So Mercer was the first private school in Georgia to voluntarily integrate.

Dr. Brown: It was the first formerly all-white Baptist school in the country to integrate.

Cameron: Why do you think that was? Why do you think there was a voluntary integration?

Dr. Brown: Well, the folks that led that became my very close friends. Of course, that was almost a decade before I was here. The story is a familiar one of a Mercer graduate who was a missionary to Africa and encouraged Sam Oni to apply. He didn't just apply to Mercer; he applied to a number of Baptist schools, all of whom refused him admission except for Mercer. He didn't know, other than his contact with the graduate, what it was or where it was.

There had been leadership mainly out of the Christianity department all through the late 1950s as Civil Rights became an issue in the South, and in Macon they had been part of that leadership and had worked closely with community leaders—progressive community leaders—to try to both open up opportunities and prevent violence and backlash. There were some very strong alliances between traditional black community leaders and these Mercer leaders. It was still an era where the old patriarchs could sort of get together and decide how things were going to be, and they pretty much were, whether you were an elected official or not. If you were a black funeral home owner, for example, which is the one place that you know all families eventually intersect with that particular retail trade. Daddy [William] Randall and Joe Hendricks could get together and say “we need to do this,” and the word would go out, and it would get done. I've lost the train of your question. What was your question?

Cameron: Why do you think that Mercer was the first?

Dr. Brown: Oh, why was the school the first? Because there had been a prophetic kind of leading of the spirit, I guess you could say, in the Christianity department: Tom Holmes, who was the pastor of Tattnell Square Baptist Church, which was located where Newton Chapel is now. Some of it coming out of a long tradition of missionary work in Africa. I think a good deal of it was the ferment of the times, people realizing the time had come for change. And I think maybe there was something a little mysterious about it that some of these people became so connected to it.

Joe Hendricks a very, very unlikely leader of this having grown up in a very rural and racially backward part of Georgia. As he used to say, taking absolutely for granted those relationships. It wasn't even anything, as he was growing up, to question the fact that his playmates (black playmates) would be walking to school in the rain, and he would be riding the school bus. That was just the way it was.

I think it comes out of a reading of the Old Testament and the prophets there that called again and again for justice and were willing to stand against authorities and the structure of society. It was kind of a reading of the New Testament and taking very seriously Paul's claim that in Christ there is no male or female, Jew or gentile. That we are all equally sinners and equally brothers and sisters, and they thought that applied to black and white as well. Had the strong influence of Clarence Jordan, the founder of Koinonia. He was a Mercer graduate and friend of Joe Hendricks' family, grew up in Talbot County in that same setting, a New Testament and Greek scholar, who moved to Albany, Georgia and started an interracial communal farm and rewrote the Gospels in southern dialect, *The Cotton Patch Gospel*, which was turned into a Broadway musical. So there was a lot of contact, at that time, between Koinonia and the folks that were attracted there from around the whole country and world to being part of that kind of attempt to be a first-century Christian community where everything was held in common. So they were up here, we were down there, there was a lot of back and forth. And so here you had a radical

experiment in Christian love and brotherhood right down the road with a Mercer graduate having done it, coming like Joe out of that very limited setting and yet somehow something in the Baptist tradition and Christian tradition speaking to them and pulling them out of that and putting them in front.

But there were kind of two phases to this thing, the way I understand it. President Harris was convinced that this was the right thing to do, personalities in this were so important. Harris, who was from Monroe County right up the way here originally, was an absolute patrician. He knew who he was, and it was superior to everyone else. He had been the president of Tulane for twenty years, retired, and came back here to his alma mater to become president for another twenty years. But he was also on the Federal Reserve Board. At one point he and Father Hesburgh at Notre Dame were the two longest serving University Presidents in the country. You couldn't put pressure on him, you couldn't put fundamentalist Baptist pressure on him, you couldn't put community pressure on him. A famous story--you may have read it or heard it already--that when he was president of Tulane in the early 50s there was tremendous pressure on him to fight communism and to question the loyalty of all sorts of intellectuals and artists. It was black list time in Hollywood, and Senator McCarthy claimed to know that there were all these communists in the department of armament. So there was pressure brought to bear to get Tulane faculty to sign a loyalty oath, and President Harris said that he would be very glad to do that, in fact he would bring them all into Tulane football stadium and line them up to sign that after every butcher and baker and candle stick maker in New Orleans had signed one. So a sort of, you know, up yours essentially. So, you know if Harris thought it was the right thing to do then he had no trouble doing it.

But it's one thing to admit one African, missionary-raised Baptist to your school, and it's another to aggressively integrate the school and go after prospective African-American students, bring them here and give them the support to flourish. It was Joe Hendricks, as much as anyone, that pushed it to that next phase. Joe said, "You know I think if we are going to do this," Dr. Harris, "then we need to see if can't get some foundation help to pay the tuition and whatever for these students." The way I understand the story, Harris thinking that would come not too very much, because he was also a very conservative person and certainly not himself, President Harris, a leadership in civil rights movement, said "Ok Joe." Joe went up to the Ford Foundation and got the money and now they had to do it. They had the support, and they went all over Georgia and Florida into the high schools looking for students that they thought could succeed and paying their way to come to Mercer.

So Mercer for a long time, and maybe it's still true, has the highest percentage of African-American students of any formerly all-white school in Georgia. So it wasn't just a kind of token integration, which is what happened at many schools, two students or whatever. It was a real effort at a transformational change as part of a larger transformation going on in society. It ruptured relationships between Mercer and the community for years and years and years and years and years there were a lot of people that resented that aggressive, progressive opening.

Cameron: Can you talk a bit about that, about how it changed Mercer's relationship with the Macon area?

Dr. Brown: Well, T. Baldwin Martin, one of the longtime trustees and supporters of Mercer, had a cross burned in his yard here in Macon. I've always wondered at the fact that the majority of public housing in Macon, GA is ringed around Mercer, there's very little East and there's nothing North, nothing West its all right here. That goes back all the way to the forties and fifties. I think there was a town/gown thing well before this point. Mercer was considered liberal in this kind of setting, and there was a kind of resentment. This is a very conservative part of the country and still is in many respects, still like a big country town in many ways.

I grew up in other parts of the country, I must have seen African-Americans in Minneapolis when I was seven or eight and we took a trip there, but I grew up in parts of the country where there simply were no African-Americans. Missouri, New Mexico, western South Dakota there were lots of Indians and tremendous prejudice against Native Americans everywhere I lived, upstate New York. But there just weren't any African-Americans. I went to high school in a little town where there was one African-American family in the whole town. They were the housekeeper and chauffeur for the wealthiest family in town that lived in New York City but kept the family home up in Messina, and the family kept it ready for them anytime they would come up to it. Because it was just one family there couldn't possibly be any separate anything. They were part of our Methodist church and went to school and whatever. And I never even thought about they were just different. So were the Jews in our community different an Italian, Polish, Czech mill town.

Then when I went off to school, I went to an all white school, Rice University in Houston, TX, integrated in 64 year before my senior year at Rice. Had to go to court to break the will that had established the university, to change the charter of the University, was sued by alumni who fought it all the way up to the US Supreme court to prevent changing that. Rice had been founded for the education of white male Texans was the purpose. Of course, they had brought the first women in 1958, and they had been bringing in non-Texans for a long time but nobody made a big fuss about that. But the first black folks was a big fuss. So it wasn't just po-dunk schools like Mercer; Rice is a major research Institution. I just can't tell you how taken for granted segregation was. I know it's hard for people your age to grasp how people could have just not noticed and not made a thing out of it, but in the South and in rural areas of the country it was just like cats and dogs, just different and no one supposed there were similarities.

Cameron: You talked a little about Joe Hendricks earlier. Could you just tell us a little more about your relationship with Joe Hendricks and about his involvement?

Dr. Brown: Joe Hendricks was just an absolutely astonishing person, and his sister Jean who was very much part of this. Joe's mother died when he was young, and Jean was a much older sister who pretty much raised him. She preceded him here at Mercer. She's a graduate of Tift, which merged with Mercer and is now Tift College of Education, was a Baptist school for women at the time. She was the long time chair of the Psychology Department here and went to be Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Mercer in Atlanta. She was a crusader, never married. She took on the whole mental health system in the state of Georgia, which at that time was probably the worst in the country, just sticking people in the back ward and leaving them there for forty years or whatever. She exposed that, and her students were instrumental in bringing that system down and bringing services and getting people out of those

conditions and back in community settings. Tremendous crusader, and Joe was very much shaped by his sister in that respect.

Joe was just a force of nature, for one thing an immensely powerful, strong man, who never neglected human relationships. Physical presence is part of what shapes responses, directions, and opinions. I mean immensely powerful man, a consummate politician. Joe never wanted to be out front, he never wanted his name on it or his face on it, but he would spend countless hours in people's offices, over a cup of coffee, out in the quadrangle, and he was relentless. I mean called it Chinese water torture. If he told you something once he told you a hundred times. I kept trying to say, "Joe, I got it the first time," but the truth was by about the fiftieth time you start to sort of think that way yourself. It becomes common sense, its no longer a proposition you have to debate, its become part and parcel of your thinking.

I'm not a Baptist, I'm not a Christian, and I'm not a southerner, so I was definitely an exotic item. When I arrived here I had a beard down to here and hair down to there. I rode a motorcycle, whatever. They had trouble making any sense out of me, but Joe, Tom Trimble, Ray Brewster, Ted Nordenhaug--all of them very strong Baptists--became real teachers of mine and Joe in particular. He and Jean had started what became the program you're in now, first year seminar, in 68 and 69. 1970 was actually the first year it was offered, and 71, the year I came, was the second year it was offered. And so I became connected through that program and eventually became very much a part of it and then chaired Interdisciplinary Studies, in which that program is located. Originally it was run out of the president's office--didn't even have an academic home or academic standing. It was strictly a kind of rump operation. So that was my original contact with Joe.

Joe was always in the classroom, but he didn't have a faculty position until the 80s. He was general assistant to the president; as he liked to put it, he was general ass to the president. So I didn't have much contact with him there, but in the contacts with the freshman seminar program, I did get to know him very well and respect him enormously. I became a hunting buddy of those guys. We would go deer hunting and go out to Joe's place. You know you get to know people on a different basis after the hunt. Drink bourbon in front of the fireplace, that's a little different than a faculty meeting. But I was Joe's last mentee you might say. He had a lot of folks he influenced enormously, students and colleagues. We sort of became close, close partners in trying to manipulate Mercer toward a more transformative approach to education.

When Bob Hargrove, who is retiring this year, was serving as interim dean, he formed the department of Interdisciplinary Studies because we had all these, at the time, radical programs like freshman program, great books was just being born, senior capstone was just coming into existence, African-American studies was sort of floating out there in never-never land nobody quite owning it. And so Bob Hargrove said if these are going to survive, they are going to need to have departmental status because you are only real in the academy if you have a budget and you are a department, otherwise you'll go away real quick. Harris had been very supportive of this, but he was now very elderly and this was all switching over.

Kirby Godsey had come in as Dean and gone into the presidency. So he asked Joe Hendricks to chair that new department. As I said, Joe never liked to be in front, he never wanted to be the whatever, and he also didn't necessarily have many administrative gifts, so he sort of drafted me to join the crew. And the next year I became chair of the department and chaired it for ten years. I'm going to add another little piece to this. You guys haven't read any Machiavelli yet, right? In great books at all? The great Italian critical theorist from the renaissance that sort of wrote the manual for princes on how to get and keep power. The first rule he said is, "The people that brought you to power must be eliminated," because if they have the power to bring you to power than they have the power, perhaps, to take you out of power, right? That happened to Joe, he and his sister had been the people that had identified Kirby Godsey as someone to bring to Mercer, and they agitated very, very strongly behind the scenes to get him here and then to move him into the presidency as Harris stepped down. I was on the search committee that brought Godsey here as Dean, and it was a six person search committee split right down the middle, three very much for him and three very much against him. It was Joe and Jean that broke the log jam and got him here. But when Kirby became president he moved Joe out of the president's office, briefly Joe was provost actually, which is the chief academic officer, but moved him out of there. The Dean that succeeded Kirby went to Joe, Joe went into the faculty, went to Joe--and Joe had no advanced degrees, simply an undergraduate degree from Mercer--went to Joe and said, "if you are going to stay in the faculty, then you are going to have to go get an academic advanced degree, going to have to go get a master's degree in something."

I think the presumption was since Joe really wasn't an academic, very gifted, enormously gifted teacher, but not an academic that Joe would hang it up, retire, go somewhere else. Of course, that's not Joe's style. Joe got into Emory and got a P.H.D., not just a master's degree, and it was enormously going against the grain. He had some wonderful people up there who supported him and admired him very much. And he came back and became Mercer's most legendary teacher of the last twenty years. The best possible revenge you could say. But Joe was under tremendous pressure all through the 80s. He was teaching here full time, and he was up there at Emory trying to do this degree, and he and I became very, very close in that process. I sort of held things together down here while he got done what he needed to do up there.

Remarkable, remarkable, remarkable man, and nobody ever worked as hard at teaching as Joe Hendricks did. He was the very best first year seminar teacher we've ever had, yet he would say that he would get butterflies in his stomach before every class. Will we be able to pull it off today, make something happen? He would work endlessly to move students ahead in leadership positions; he had been president of student government when he was a student at Mercer. He would work endlessly to get them into graduate schools and professional schools, tremendously supportive of students. He lived here on campus for years, and his house always had students in it. He had a vision that every class should change something in the student, and there was tremendous pressure he put on himself to do that and pressure on the student.

Many famous stories, I know you've heard some of them already. When he was Dean of Students in the early 70s there was a fad that went across campus called streaking, at night you would go out and run naked across campus. And so it got to Mercer, and a couple of nights kids went out and each night there

were more of them out doing that. So the third night they went streaking, Joe was standing out there, and the kids went by, and Joe ran down one of these kids, and grabbed him around the waist, picked him up and took him to his office. For the next four hours, as the kid sat there naked, they discussed why this might not be the best thing to do. That was the end of streaking at Mercer. You did not miss Joe's class. If you weren't there the whole class went over to your dorm room and got you and, once again, that only has to happen a couple of times and you don't miss class any more. Really, really fabulous, fabulous person to know.