

SEWANEE LITERARY SOCIETY

213-A Leaders Program *at the University of the South*

SEPTEMBER 22, 2020

Dear Ms. Minnijean Brown-Trickey,

We, the Brother and Sister authors of the Sewanee Literary Society, are privileged and empowered by your legacy. You who went before us to integrate and assert the dignity of your humanity and the brilliance of your intellect, and ours too.

We are a group of lifelong learners from different walks of life who have come together to advance our writing and leadership skills in the context of social justice. We have begun our journeys under the attentive guidance of Karen Proctor and Nicky Hamilton, University of the South staff and social justice leaders who have taken up the charge of Dr. Houston Bryan Roberson—the late professor of history and our university’s first tenured African American faculty member—“to gather and give a more complete historical account of this university, the town of Sewanee, and all its people.” Each of us is walking in purpose, clearing the path for each other and for those who are coming up behind us. In a significant way, our educational experiences dawned with you and the Little Rock Nine.

When you and your peers faced the Arkansas National Guard on September 3, 1957—three years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, we instinctively feel that you were each dissatisfied by the slow grind of change, by the vague promises of the Little Rock school board to voluntarily desegregate schools. So, you enrolled in Central High, but that first day you didn’t even make it inside; still, you persisted and sixteen days later a federal judge ordered that the National Guard be removed, and on September 23, you attended class for three hours before being sent home out of concern for your safety. Then on September 25, President Eisenhower mobilized U.S. Army’s 101st Airborne troops to guard you to attend school.

We know this is not news to you, and we know that what we have to tell you about our institution will not surprise you. Still, we say all of that to say: what you and your classmates did radically bent the arc of the moral universe towards justice and that change reverberated in schools across this troubled country.

The University of the South (colloquially known as Sewanee), was founded in 1856 with the distinct purpose of protecting and promoting the moral aptitude and rectitude of a slaveholding society. Sewanee opened its doors to students, purpose unchanged, in 1868 (three years after the

end of the Civil War). The institution of slavery placed white men of this region in a position to advance their education while building capital. Sewanee acted as a vehicle to reconfirm white authority. It operated to solidify elite white men's access to wealth, privilege, and security at the expense of others, particularly people of color.

Desegregation at Sewanee has a turbulent history that began in 1851 at the esteemed School of Theology. Efforts to desegregate the School of Theology led by nine faculty members were met with resistance, and ultimately, the faculty members resigned in protest and in the hopes of catalyzing the pace of change. In 1953 the School of Theology was formally segregated, but the path to fulfillment was long; it was not until 1965 that Rev. John M. Moncrief became the first African American graduate of the School of Theology, and 1970 that the Honorable Nathaniel Owens became the first African American graduate of the College of Arts and Sciences.

As students of the University, we decided to pursue higher education at this institution in order to discover what we shall make of our lives and how we will advance the well-being, wealth, and security for our historically abused and disposed communities. As individuals from racial and ethnic minorities, we are doing what the founders of this institution would find unthinkable. We are excelling academically, and we are in leadership, leveraging our positions to advocate for and bring about change.

We are an instrumental part of radically transforming the narrative and stereotype of the so-called Sewanee Student—the heterosexual, privileged, white southern Episcopalian; the student who breaks the Honor Code but faces no consequences because of their pedigree. Our presence insists that this “student” is not an exemplar of an institution of higher education. Our presence demands that as an institution we move to change our campus culture not only to stop enabling such a student but also to work at an inclusive campus that nurtures the religious, racial, sexual, financial, and cultural diversity of the student body.

As student leaders, we have been fortunate to have mentors before us—mentors who have paved the way for us to thrive and succeed. Long before we matriculated, Dr. Houston Roberson mentored leaders by teaching classes like Civil Rights Movement and African American Intellectual History. In these classes, many encountered for the first the story of the Little Rock Nine. It is fitting that this collective, the Sewanee Literary Society, is part of the 213-A Leaders Program, which bears Dr. Roberson's office number. His office was a solid and sure place: a place from which he wrote and reexamined history, and where students came to ask questions, to seek answers, and left equipped to raise their voices in service of inspiring a new generation of scholars and social justice leaders.

We know that in November of 2011 Dr. Roberson had the thrill of his life in 213-A : While grading papers from his civil rights class, his phone rang and from the other end of the line he heard your voice. You thanked him for teaching about the movement and for teaching young leaders about the movement. He commented at the time that this was one of the best gifts that he had ever received as an educator. Your generous words of gratitude and encouragement inspired him to keep his “march” going in the classroom and in the challenging realm of higher education. It is his legacy and yours that we hope to carry forward as we grow together in the Sewanee community.

The different affinity groups on campus—Black Student Union, Hispanic Organization for Latino Awareness, NAACP, African Caribbean Student Association, BlacQueen —attest to how far we have come. There are more students of color on campus than there were when you were in school, when groups like ours weren't even possible. We have a clearer path to purpose: to ministry like Rev. Moncrief and justice like the Honorable Owens, to tenured legacy like Dr. Roberson and to lifelong advocacy and antiracism activism like you. This is possible because you are trailblazer, and you continue to light the way.

We say unequivocally that our education is not just about us. It's about the people we have met along the way and the discoveries we have made about who we are and who will become. It's about the impact we will have. We carry the words of wisdom of changemakers like Marcus Garvey who said, "A people who don't know their origins are like a tree without roots"; and Assata Shakur, "No one is going to give you the education you need to overthrow them. Nobody is going to teach you your true history, your true heroes; if they know that knowledge will help set you free." And more importantly, we write our own: "We, the Brother and Sister Authors, write to liberate our souls. We write so we can speak power into existence." We conclude that "we are the voice to move mountains, for we stand on the shoulders of giants."

As we fulfill the dreams of our ancestors—who had fervent faith in the things to come that they risked their lives—we say, too, thank you. Thank you for your resilience; for giving us hope; for leading by example; and for being an exemplar student and teacher. Thank you for the sacrifices, for bearing the weight of our futures before we arrived, and for saying courageously and loudly, "I belong."

With gratitude,

Sewanee Literary Society

Angela Barbosa, C'22

Laura Botros, C'24

Rachel Fredericks

Nicky Hamilton, C'99

Jasmine Huang, C'21

Edgar Huerta, C'21

Abdul Labi, C'23

Bernice Leveque, C'21

Olivier Mbabazi, C'22

LaToya McIntyre, C'20

Tija Odoms, C'21

Karen Proctor

Klarke Stricklen, C'22

Hellen Wainaina, C'18

Brionna-Joy Wiggins, C'23

Athena Wilkerson, C'21