



Digging Up the Past

The lifelong educator behind Call Me MISTER has devoted years to chronicling South Carolina's part in the U.S. civil rights movement

When Call Me MISTER® was created more than 20 years ago to increase the pool of Black male educators in the teaching profession, Roy Jones expected that most of his work would take place in classrooms. He never thought that decades later he'd be spending so much time visiting crumbling homes, derelict former schools or churches that felt untouched by time.

But Jones is a student of history, and he has learned that in order to get to bottom of history a person has to go out and find it. Part of the reason Jones has succeeded so consistently as the head of this nationally recognized program is his ability to nurture Call Me MISTER's culture by tying almost every aspect of it to history.



The program is housed in the Clemson University College of Education and provides tuition assistance and academic support to its cohorts of students, but just as important is the way the program encourages students to support one another. It's why the program has expanded to nearly 30 other institutions across the country and is still growing.

The program clearly shows MISTERS that it is their duty to know their own story before they can become truly effective educators. To Jones, knowledge of self and history may be the most vital teaching tools for the educators he's devoted his life to preparing. This belief is why he has spent more of his time of late enriching the MISTER mission by learning from, digging up and chronicling the past. Specifically, Jones has set his sights on the role South Carolina played in school desegregation and the larger civil rights movement in the U.S.

Heading Down the Path

This drive to unearth the past is why Jones found himself not in a classroom but on a dirt road blocked by a fallen tree during one particularly fruitful trip to Summerton, South Carolina. That road led to the abandoned Elliott plantation, formerly owned by a family of slave owners whose descendants would go on to fight to keep schools segregated.

Vaulting over said tree — in a suit and tie, no less, as this was an unexpected detour on his visit — didn't give Jones pause as much as the possibility of venomous reptiles did.

"I am, let's say, averse to snakes," Jones says, his smile giving away the understatement. "So, I took a deep breath, I prayed and I headed down the path."

Shattered windows and warped, splintered wooden steps framed the home's front door, but to Jones, the surrounding landscape was just as intriguing. He saw a trench dug during the Civil War along the road leading to the former Elliott home. The story goes that the plantation owners had their enslaved workers dig the trench and then armed them to defend the home against Union troops that meant to burn it to the ground. The Union soldiers ended up being Black infantrymen, and when both sides recognized the situation, the battle was averted.



Jones wasn't in Summerton to study Civil War history but rather to get to the bottom of a conflict that would occur almost 100 years later in U.S. courtrooms. He wanted to tell the story of Summerton and Clarendon County in order to relay to future educators their importance in the historic fight to end school segregation.

Briggs v. Elliott (the defendant was a descendant of the same family that owned the plantation) originated in the town, and it was the first of five cases on the docket with the landmark Supreme Court

case *Brown v. the Board of Education*. Many don't realize that this South Carolina case preceded *Brown v. the Board of Education* by more than two years.

This trip and many others led to a MISTER leadership seminar in 2018 that featured descendants of people on both sides of the fight for desegregation appearing on one stage for peaceful reflection, all in service to a MISTER audience eager to absorb the past in order to effectively teach it in the present.

That session was a historic achievement for Clemson University and Call Me MISTER, but Jones didn't stop there.

Jones would continue making connections with people and partnering with historians who could shed light on events that changed our nation, events that prove the pivotal role that South Carolina played in civil rights history. He would partner with others at Clemson to preserve these materials for posterity and create an annual series designed to illuminate a corner of history that had dimmed nearly to the point of total darkness.

"This isn't just the MISTERS' story; it's everyone's story. But MISTERS in particular need to embrace it and understand it so that they can take it further and be about the business of changing lives," Jones says. "All of this effort is to ensure that this history isn't just retained but put to use, because a history unknown is a history repeated."

Collecting Artifacts

People use the word tsunami in two ways: to describe a violent sea wave or the arrival of something in overwhelming amounts. In both cases, a tsunami doesn't happen out of nowhere. Where the former example might stem from an earthquake or volcanic eruption, the tsunami that was the civil rights movement in the U.S. was a wave of change that was precipitated by numerous hardships and tragic events, many of which took place in South Carolina.

In 1946, white police officers in Aiken, South Carolina, blinded Isaac Woodard Jr., a Black, decorated World War II veteran and South Carolina native. The officers were acquitted, which sparked outrage a full decade before Martin Luther King Jr. rose to prominence as a civil rights leader. The removal of Sarah Mae Flemming Brown from a bus in Columbia, South Carolina, occurred 17 months before Rosa Parks refused to surrender her seat.

A 1947 request by Clarendon County officials to provide bus transportation to Black students led to the 1949 *Briggs v. Elliott* case, which preceded all the cases that combined to form *Brown v. the Board of*



Education. No one event or group of people or place or case started the civil rights movement, and that landmark Supreme Court case didn't occur in a vacuum.

However, when events are plotted on a timeline in this way, South Carolina begins to look less like a footnote and more like an early and major player in the civil rights movement.

This was not lost on Cecil J. Williams, an award-winning photographer best known for his work documenting the civil rights movement in South Carolina. The events that he witnessed from behind a camera have become increasingly lost to time; they have also been watered down by history books concerned with brevity over breadth of facts and the mixture of shame and embarrassment that comes from being associated with this history.

"Our state played a major role — some would say was the catalyst — for the civil rights movement," Williams says. "Events in this state changed America forever; I saw it happening and just felt called at the time to document and save as much as I could."

For decades, Williams retained all of his own photography but also collected any artifacts he could in the hopes of starting a museum dedicated to the state's role in the civil rights movement. In 2019, he opened the doors of the 3,500-square-foot Cecil Williams South Carolina Civil Rights Museum located in Orangeburg.



The museum brings this corner of state history to life through photography, correspondence and family heirlooms from individuals directly involved in civil rights history. The crown jewel is the Briggs family bible, a massive book that was donated by Nathaniel Briggs and Catherine Eliza Briggs Smith, son and daughter of Harry Briggs Sr., the original petitioner in the Briggs v. Elliott case. In the next room are shell casings from the Orangeburg Massacre, the 1968 shooting of protestors by highway patrol officers on the South Carolina State University campus, which took place minutes from Williams' museum.

After partnering with Williams, Jones pulled in Clemson University Libraries to aid in the preservation and archiving of the museum's collections. Clemson Libraries is in the process of developing an online

searchable database of the historical resources related to the South Carolina civil rights movement and host all instructional materials.

Call Me MISTER will help develop those materials and offer professional development summer sessions for educators interested in delivering instruction across a variety of focus areas. The museum will share its physical location with Clemson for presentations, workshops and seminars and participate in any mutually beneficial grant opportunities with MISTER.

Williams was one of the many journalists on hand to document Harvey Gantt's arrival as the first Black student admitted to Clemson University in 1963. He said Clemson has made serious strides over the following decades to make inclusion and equity a major priority in its mission. That work makes the University a natural choice as a partner in preserving the history he has spent over half a century documenting and collecting.

"The outreach and programs that Clemson brings to South Carolina make our state shine nationally," Williams says. "I was there when Clemson achieved peaceful integration with dignity, which contrasted with much of the violence that occurred in other places. That speaks to Clemson, its leadership at the time and their entire philosophy, and I can see that this philosophy hasn't changed since then."

Chronicling Voices

The interstates and highways that serve as the connective tissue between the Upstate and the Lowcountry have become a second home to Jones and Mark Joseph, program coordinator for Call Me MISTER. Their documented interviews with individuals involved in the fight for desegregation are a major part of the material being archived at Clemson.

Much of the footage of these oral histories are what was shown in Clemson at the inaugural Joseph and Mattie De Laine Lecture Series in October. Jones realizes that those names are largely unknown except to those intimately familiar with South Carolina civil rights history, but he hopes the series and archive will change that.

Joseph De Laine was born in Manning, South Carolina, and became the pastor of Liberty Hill A.M.E. Church in Summerton. He encouraged a group of citizens, including Levi Pearson and Harry Briggs (for whom the Briggs v. Elliott suit is named), to file the original suit in 1948 after being denied transportation for Black children who walked nine miles to schools designated for them. De Laine and his wife, Mattie, worked with then-chief legal counsel to the NAACP, Thurgood Marshall, who would go on to become the first Black U.S. Supreme Court justice.



"Who knows what would have happened if Joseph and Mattie De Laine weren't there in Summerton, pushing and leading the way," Jones says, "but they paid for it. Their family was threatened with violence, their house and parsonage were burned down by night riders and they were eventually run out of the state."

Jones and Joseph heard these stories directly from De Laine's two surviving children, Joseph Jr. and Ophelia. The night their father returned gunfire during a 1955 attack on their home. The moment they learned the attackers were a mix of police officers and Klansmen. The day their father had to escape to New York.

Jones and Joseph dug deeper into the petition's origin. They learned of Reverdy Wells, then the senior class president at Scott's Branch High School, whose frustration with the school's conditions motivated him to organize a group of students to present their concerns to De Laine and a group of parents and citizens that would go on to create the original petition.

Wells' story served as proof to Jones and Joseph that more often than not, the drivers of change were youth such as Wells pushing elders to, in turn, push for real change. This fact is something that Jones feels MISTERS should recognize above all else as they themselves become agents of change inspiring youth in schools across the nation.

Documenting so much history, Joseph compares his experiences on the road to how clarifying it was for him to finally dig into the details of the *Brown v. the Board of Education* case upon its 50th anniversary. That was 2004, when Joseph was completing college as a MISTER at Claflin University. He said the experiences have enriched him personally and as an educator of educators.



"It's astounding to think that 15 years after I learned about school desegregation, I was a Black man working in education who was just learning details about the Briggs case," Joseph says. "If Dr. Jones and I didn't know much about it and if most of the people living in the towns where these events happened don't know about it, why should I expect the average South Carolinian to know about it? And it's our history!"

Subsequent interviews further motivated Jones and Joseph to establish an annual event along with a concrete way of archiving materials that were fast degrading. They wanted Clemson to become the "go-to place" for knowledge on the subject, and they set about naming scholarships for Joseph De Laine, Mattie De Laine and Reverdy Wells that would assist students from Clarendon and Fairfield Counties who seek careers in education.

For Jones and Joseph, this work is bigger than MISTER or even the field of education. They want this history consumed by anyone and everyone. As Jones says: Any "thinking person" can gain insight and make connections to their own day-to-day lives.

“We’re not as far removed from those times as we think, and any thinking person from any background can gain insight from these materials,” Jones says, “but it is there to especially influence those who have influence: teachers, parents, policy makers and leaders.”

Pushing Knowledge Forward

Over the 20-plus-year history of Call Me MISTER, Roy Jones has given countless speeches to rooms full of young, aspiring educators from diverse backgrounds. He has talked about the importance of the program and how it is designed to more accurately mirror in the teaching population what exists in the state’s population of students.

With every speech to MISTERS, Jones always rises to the occasion. He knows he must use those moments to inspire not just MISTERS, but the MISTER leadership that might also be present. The feeling in the room is electric during a Call Me MISTER investiture ceremony. Graduating MISTERS receive the program’s signature blazer. People talk about being agents of change, and they provide proof of that change.

That electricity wouldn’t exist without Jones setting the stage for it. He has a gift for providing context for an auditorium full of people or a single person sitting across from him. In both cases, he puts the same amount of effort into getting his point across.

But during Jones’ first visit to the Cecil J. Williams South Carolina Civil Rights Museum, he addressed a room full of MISTERS from Claflin University, and something was different. The same off-the-cuff, conversational approach to this audience was there, but every statement was marked with a need — a desperation — for those in attendance to understand the importance of the subject at hand.

“I remember turning to the person next to me that day and saying ‘Look in his eyes. Something else is driving,’” Joseph says. “There’s no question in my mind that once Dr. Jones got started on this work, he found a different gear.”

Jones admits that the 2018 Summerton leadership seminar profoundly impacted him, but it was the loss of one of its speakers, Joseph C. Elliott Sr., mere months after he presented to MISTERS that truly helped him find that “gear.” Elliott was a historian, teacher, writer and grandson to Roderick W. Elliott, who served as chairman of the Summerton school board named in the Briggs v. Elliott lawsuit.

Elliott recognized that his grandfather was on the wrong side of history, but that’s a fact he could have kept to himself and never discussed. Instead, Elliott would in 2017 petition for a statue honoring not his grandfather, but Joseph De Laine. No one forced him to push for that, just as no one forced him to appear on stage to talk about it; he spoke and laid it all bare in order to educate and help others learn from his experience, his perspective and his grandfather’s mistakes. Just months later, that life and all the perspective that went with it were gone.

After Elliott’s passing, Jones began to feel real pressure to move faster.

“When people go, history goes with them, and I know I’m not immune to that clock; it’s ticking above my head, too,” Jones says. “If I’m a gambler, I’m not going to leave the table until I’m totally spent; I’ll stay as long as I’m able, and that all by itself keeps me going.”

When Jones travels to certain parts of the state, he sees people still struggling with a lack of resources and often a lack of teachers in classrooms. The problems facing these communities are complex and

multifaceted. A big part of the solution is education, and an integral piece of education is understanding a place, a people and all the history that go with them.

When Jones visits Summerton, he sees people who don't realize they've been living their lives at ground zero. They don't even know they live at the site where something big started. When he says "De Laine" or "Briggs" in casual conversation with a fellow educator, he wants them to be recognized. For MISTERS, he wants those names to be known.

Jones stays on the journey to institutionalize this knowledge at Clemson University so it can be a place where anyone, anywhere can access and learn from it.



Roy Jones kicks off the inaugural Joseph and Mattie De Laine Lecture Series in October 2021. The annual event further explores the lives and legacy of SC civil rights heroes.

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