



photo: Faith Jones



Loyal Jones APPALACHIAN CENTER

Tradition. Diversity. Change.

Birmingham to Berea

by Chris Green & Lizbeth Saucedo Wilson

A 10- by 10½-foot map of Appalachia graces the wall of the gallery at the Loyal Jones Appalachian Center. Visitors trace the routes of the places they've been, or one might touch an exact place on the map's raised topography and explain, "That's where I grew up." Still, it's hard to say where exactly Appalachia begins or ends or what exactly Appalachia is even when you know you're smack dab in the middle of it.

This issue of the newsletter carries us into Birmingham, Alabama, a city three counties north of the Appalachian Regional Commission's

southernmost edge. Still, most of the city's residents don't consider Birmingham to be Appalachian. However, it developed as a city of coal and steel, like a Pittsburgh of the south, and part of our work at the Loyal Jones Appalachian Center is to understand how all the parts and peoples of Appalachia relate.

As a town of some prosperity with a history of inequality and interracial conflict, African American students from Birmingham didn't begin attending Berea until the 1950s. But today 65 students from Birmingham currently attend—the most for any city outside of Kentucky. Of those, 56 are part of Berea's

turn to page 6

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Berea College and the Appalachian Center are committed to the betterment of the peoples of Appalachia. The unique views and perspectives of individual authors in this newsletter, however, do not necessarily represent the views and policies of Berea College.

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Meeting the ...by way of Birmingham,

by **Lizbeth Saucedo Wilson**

Special to the LJAC Newsletter

As I think back to the years I spent in Birmingham, Alabama, I can honestly say that not only did I spend the roughest years of my life thus far, but also some of my best. I met the mountains for the first time in Birmingham as I visited Vulcan Park and went up on the observation tower. The view was magnificent: I never thought that I would appreciate the greenness of the trees and the chirpings of the birds as I was up about 100 feet from the ground. Sitting on top of Red Mountain, The Vulcan statue is the largest cast iron statue in the world. I had never gone hiking before June 8, 2007 so naturally I did not immediately enjoy hiking. I still don't love it, but it is slowly warming up to me. Having just moved from Chicago, I was terrified of the new state, new region, the new school I had to attend where I didn't know anybody. As a quiet person, I thought it was going to be difficult for me to make friends quickly; I wasn't sure I was able to do it. To my surprise I made friends quicker than I thought, but I made them only to lose them and start all over.

During my sophomore year of high school on September 5, 2008, I was diagnosed with leukemia and I began to hate everything, including moving to Birmingham. Towards the end of my treatment, I was able to meet new people, make friends at my new school, and was encouraged by one of my teachers to help her with starting a poetry club at school. Poetry became my outlet in life, which is how I crossed paths with the Real Life Poets, Inc. With their help I was able to open up and for the first time in my life, let my vulnerabilities become my strength. I gained confidence enough to compete in a spoken word competition which I never thought I could do in a million years. After going through hell and back, I made peace with the thought of life and death, and I decided that there was more to life than sulking about the obstacles it throws at you. Through this transition I discovered my love for service and what joy it brought me every time I was able to help someone. I volunteered at the Birmingham Zoo and helped with the annual food/toy drive that takes place in December. I did this as a part of a mentoring group for my high school which was called Girls in Action (GIA).

mountains...

Alabama

When I wasn't out trying to help make the world a better place, I spent time with some dear friends I made and whom I still have. We were just this group of outcasts, the nerds/geeks/losers if you follow that High School lingo. If we weren't on someone's porch just laughing and speaking our future into existence, we were hanging out at the Tarrant library checking out some books. That library felt too small for us and the collection wasn't up to our standards, so we went to the downtown Birmingham Public Library. We would spend hours and hours there looking for books, using our laptops, and playing hide and seek through the bookshelves. Each of us stayed in a different section of the library because we all had different interests; however, each time we united, we would come back together eager to show each other what we had found.

It wasn't always fun and games; we all had some pretty deep conversations, sometimes as we walked to the nearest Food Giant, a grocery store. We would walk from one of our friends' house to pick up some snacks for the night. The walk wasn't far: I remember the cracked sidewalk and noticing that, more often than not, the lawns on that neighborhood needed to be cut. I remember the hot sun with no wind, about which I complained about constantly. The things that stick out to me the most though are the hills. I hated those hills because some were so steep. Before the cancer I was active and loved walking around; however, my energy deteriorated and the hills did not help. I remember finding it odd that you didn't always get a white Christmas, or a white winter for that matter. As a Midwestern gal, I was used to brutal winters and having to walk in the snow to school no matter how high it got.

To wrap things up, Birmingham I would say is what you make it to be. Everyone's perspective is different and some people love it, some people hate it, and others are in between. And you know what? That is completely okay. There are many aspects to Birmingham, whether you

grew up in Ensley, Crestwood, East Lake, or East Birmingham or any of the other

neighborhoods of Birmingham, there will always be a unique perspective. There is so much richness to the city that we may sometimes overlook or maybe even take for granted.

During my senior year at Berea College and after working the Appalachian Center for four years, I had the opportunity to co-edit this LJAC *Newsletter* with Chris Green, my Berea dad. I was excited that I was given such an opportunity. I did not, however, realize how difficult it was going to be. I actually learned so much and I think the most valuable lesson was that when I set my mind to something, there will always be someone there to help you along the way if you just ask.

I think one of the hardest parts about the editing process was trying to juggle school work, labor, and keeping up with the various versions of different drafts that transformed into the finished product you are now reading. Don't get me wrong, I had a lot of fun doing it and actually having a say to changes being made was really refreshing. And of course, one of my favorite parts about co-editing was getting the opportunity to read the stories from students and alumni about their experiences growing up in Birmingham and coming to Berea. This is an experience I will forever have with me. I hope you enjoy the issue as much as we enjoyed putting it together! ✨

Lizbeth Saucedo Wilson is a 2016 Berea graduate in Psychology and Women's and Gender Studies who is now an admissions counselor for Berea College.



Lizbeth Saucedo Wilson

A letter from

by Rev. Gail Bowman

Special to the LJAC Newsletter

So there we were in Kelly Ingram Park, Birmingham, Alabama in August, 2013, with an African American Berea College graduate telling us the story of her city. The park was lovely and quiet on that Sunday morning. However, the contrast between the placid pools and dappled shade of that moment, and the depictions of police dogs and firehouse water cannons unleashed on children, on that same ground, 50 years before, was eloquent. Church attendance across the street at 16th Street Baptist Church, where four little girls were killed by a Ku Klux Klan bombing on Sunday, September 15, 1963, awaited. Following worship, and additional significant conversations with Berea grads, we would cross another street in that same intersection, and head into the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. There, in one of the displays, we would find a summary of the legal battles of racial segregation that included a short account of *Berea College vs. Kentucky*—the “Day law.” It was the brand-new Carter G. Woodson Center’s First Annual *Civil Rights Tour*.

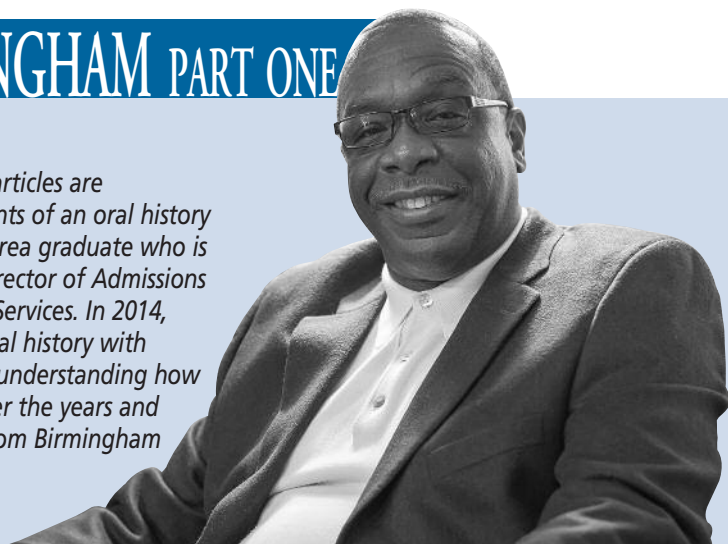
My first time to live in the deep South was in 1992 when I moved to Atlanta. I grew up in Iowa,

and had always wanted a southern experience. During six years in Atlanta, however, I never explored my way to Birmingham. Even the Alabama destinations on the highway signs for Interstate 20 west were painful to me. For me, Birmingham symbolized some of the worst that can happen to black people, and some of the worst that can happen when a community tries to take a “pass” on becoming fully itself. Nevertheless, at some point during that morning in Birmingham in 2013, with the big, blue-on-white *Berea College* bus at the curb and the 45 of us totally captured by the pictures our docent was word-painting onto the air, Birmingham claimed a place for itself within me.

Because it was Berea College that gave me Birmingham, I perceive it through a different lens than I would otherwise. Whether Birmingham is truly part of Appalachia is sometimes a subject for lively debate at Berea College, and I find myself musing on that question here. Actually, the Appalachian Regional Commission includes all of the top half of Alabama, including Birmingham, in its territory. Or, if you prefer to find Appalachia by “following the spine of the Appalachian Mountains,” you will land on Red Mountain. Red Mountain is the high lookout for Birmingham and is the spot from which Vulcan—the cast-iron 56-foot-high Roman god of fire and forge,

CARL'S BIRMINGHAM PART ONE

Throughout this issue, many articles are accompanied by these segments of an oral history with **Carl Thomas**, a 1978 Berea graduate who is currently Berea's Associate Director of Admissions and Coordinator of Minority Services. In 2014, Chris Green conducted this oral history with Mr. Thomas with the goal of understanding how Birmingham had changed over the years and what it means for students from Birmingham to be attending Berea.



“We went to an A.M.E. Zion church called Trinity African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. There was also a Baptist church that was a block down from where I attended, and that’s the church that A. D. King, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s brother, was the pastor of in the ‘60s. And, as I mentioned in another instance when we were

Birmingham

winner of the grand prize for displays at the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis—presides over the city in near-naked statuary dignity. Geographically, Birmingham is clearly part of Appalachia.

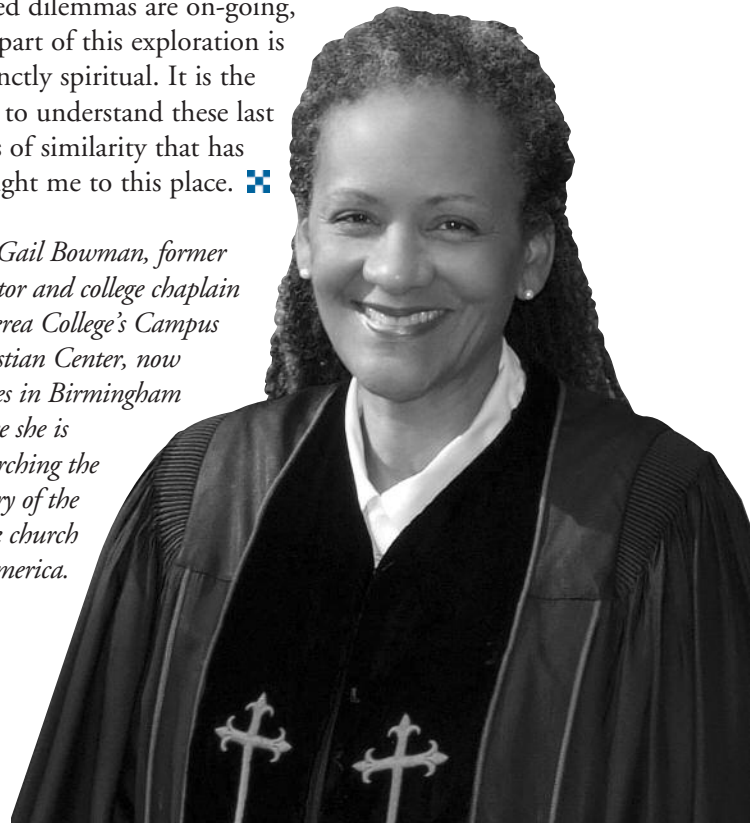
But is there a relationship between Berea and Birmingham? Is Birmingham part of the Appalachian story? Thus far, I think it is. Here is my just-two-months-a-resident list of Berea and Birmingham differences and similarities.

Unlike Berea, the Birmingham District was industrial—mines, furnaces and forges—even before it became a city in 1871. Consequently, it has an urban sense while Berea has a rural sense. In fact, Birmingham was so intensely industrialized that it encountered its health and economic issues with coal earlier than Kentucky. Also, since Alabama developed from the Gulf of Mexico up, the people here are not as long on this land as those in Kentucky and many other parts of Appalachia. There is less of a carryover of Native American culture and First People bloodlines.

There's not nearly enough bluegrass music here. Fortunately, I brought my Bluegrass Ensemble CDs with me. Unlike Berea (which doesn't really "do flat") Birmingham's center (downtown) is a valley, and is fairly level. In some of its areas, though, the city has that undulating, tree-covered, songbird-busy feel that Berea has.

Speaking of similarities, Birmingham is shaped by race and the war that was about race, by mining, labor issues and union prohibitions. Both cities are places where great human events were played out and still pull our attention, and where questions relating to the color line, fairness, and community are still in active discussion. In both places, searches for answers to our shared dilemmas are on-going, and part of this exploration is distinctly spiritual. It is the urge to understand these last areas of similarity that has brought me to this place. ❖

Gail Bowman, former director and college chaplain at Berea College's Campus Christian Center, now resides in Birmingham where she is researching the history of the black church in America.



Rev. Gail Bowman

talking, the parsonage was about three blocks from my home, and that was the home that was pipe-bombed, where they throw the bombs out into the home. But at any rate, church was a central part of our lives. As long as I can remember, we always went to church, and there was not an option. No matter what you would do, even as a teenager growing

up, you could go out and do things on Saturday, but you would make sure that you were going to go to church on Sunday; that would of course include Sunday school and going to church service. My mother had various positions and was well-respected in the church. Now my mom and dad attended two different churches. My mother was

A.M.E. Zion; my father was Baptist, and his church was around the corner from us about a block away. All of us went to church with my mother. My dad went to church probably not as much as my mom and the rest of us, and a lot of that had to do with his work schedule because he had to be working those swing shifts at US Steel."
—Carl Thomas



Downtown Birmingham.

photo: © James Willamor / CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

A place Taking a view

Somehow there has always been a synonymous understanding of the phrases “making it” and “getting out of your hometown.” I saw that, in some ways, to make it you must be willing to get out, but I have been conflicted by the notion ... My pairing of these phrases is not because Birmingham is a “one town”—a place with one Walmart, one restaurant, one gas station, and one stop light—but because I think that my chances of success will be higher if I can get away and because I have always had a desire to be able to go to many places and eventually settle outside of Birmingham. Birmingham is not one of those places where you truly have to leave because there is nothing there. It is actually the opposite of that. I have visited many of the attractions and activities it has to offer. There is the newly-built Railroad Park

Birmingham to Berea

continued from page 3

cohort of African-American students, nine identify as Hispanic/Latino, five are European American, and one is Asian American.

Skipping the question of how the city is or is not Appalachian, Liz Saucedo Wilson—who came to Berea from Birmingham and worked four years in the Appalachian Center—reached out to and worked with Berea students and alumni to write pieces about the Birmingham they know or knew and how that relates to their experience at Berea. Their answers reveal important connections between Berea and Birmingham, on two different edges of Appalachia.

Their essays are framed by the work, lives, and words of elders from or recently moved to Birmingham. These include “A Letter from Birmingham” by Rev. Gail Bowman (who served as director of Berea’s Campus Christian Center from 2012 to 2016), biographical portraits of Lynda Whitt and Odessa Woolfolk (recipients of Berea College’s 2017 Service Award), and parts of an oral history with Carl Thomas (a 1978 Berea graduate and currently Berea’s Associate Director of Admissions and Coordinator of Minority Services) which was conducted by Chris Green. We hope this intergenerational mix will help us see not only through space but through time into the past and the future.

But we (Liz and Chris) know these are just a few of the many stories that need to be told, so we look forward to hearing from you about how Birmingham and Berea unite in your lives and hearts. Please write us at appalachiancenter@berea.edu or post your story at [facebook.com/LJAppCtr](https://www.facebook.com/LJAppCtr).

Lizbeth Saucedo Wilson is a 2016 Berea graduate in Psychology and Women’s and Gender Studies who is now an admissions counselor for Berea College.

CARL’S BIRMINGHAM PART

“But **my** story about Berea starts when I was in high school, and me and a friend of mine were trying to decide whether or not we were going to cut class, and we knew we wanted to leave school and take a break but we hadn’t decided where we were going to do it. We were out in the hall trying to decide in between classes, and there was this rule that anyone caught loitering in the hall after the

in my heart through a different lens

which has become a frequently visited site for locals because of its beauty and cleanliness. There is also the Regions Ballpark just across from it.

Birmingham is the home of several museums including the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, the Alabama Jazz Hall of Fame, the Southern Museum of Flight, the Alabama Sports Hall of Fame, and the Birmingham Museum of Art which hosted BC Speaks, an event for local poets where I was able to perform poetry. There are many aspects about Birmingham that I would love to have for the rest of my life such as the ones I mentioned, but it is hard to imagine myself growing old there. It was this thinking that led me to Berea College. There were some hesitations in that decision, not

because of the College but because of the location. I could not easily see myself, an African American from a semi-big city, transitioning to a small town in Kentucky of all places. I wondered how it would work, and it has been a pretty easy transition. Fueled by my initial desire to leave Birmingham, Berea was the first step away and it has spiraled out and become a springboard for other pursuits and goals of travel, including studying abroad in South Africa.

I can see where there are needs for improvement in Birmingham, but my experience has been wrapped up mostly with friends and family. The separation I've had from them has taught me to be tough because I don't have them as an immediate backbone, and I appreciate that experience.

Because my view of Birmingham is shaped through my family, the changes I've noted have been few in number. It has been me that has changed the most, and I have been given an opportunity to see Birmingham through a different lens. The new lens allows me to see my hometown as a place of possibility and improvement. I have high hopes for Birmingham and have seen that it has come pretty far. The Magic City, as it is known, will always have a place in my heart no matter how far away I am. ✕

Sydney Henderson is a 2016 Berea College Graduate with a degree in Psychology.

WHAT I'VE LEARNED

**Sydney
Henderson**



TWO

tardy bell had rung would get a day or two suspension.

There was no way I could go home and tell Mrs. Sallie Mae and Mr. John L. I got put out of school for any reason. So my friend and I we were caught in no man's land, the bell had rung, and we were still just standing out here. We didn't realize what was going on, but the

boy's advisor was coming down the hall and he called out to us and we did what any normal person would do: we ran. I happened to run into the auditorium, and there was a small group of students talking to a Berea College representative, so I just slowed down and tried to act natural. I went and sat down, and the guy thought I was just a

late arrival, but the more he talked the more I realized, hey, that sounds like me. Here's a place where you go to school; you can work your way through because there's a work program here; the cost is minimal, but [they're] looking for students who are academically capable. Well I fit into that description."

—Carl Thomas

Poetry is power

The 'Real Life Poets' through the eyes of a youth

by **Kameron Robinson**

Special to the LJAC Newsletter

Real Life Poets (RLP) is a Birmingham, Alabama non-profit organization that uses the arts—specifically spoken word—to support and develop the minds of local youth. Among the myriad devices and programs used for this purpose are workshops, writing exercises, open mics, and community service. The purpose of these range from improving literacy to building self-esteem as well as everything in between, above, and beyond. The origins of the organization are as organic as its actions within the community. This living dream of a trio all started with the introduction of two men: John Paul “JP” Taylor and Obeah Zodoc who prefer to go by their respective handles JP and Obeah. This connection was facilitated by the likes of a mutual friend, David “Quick” Hawthorne around 2004. The local poetry scene was not very large, but the two hadn’t quite met in person despite having heard of one another. Quick was a sort of mediator who brought two men in whom he saw purpose and drive together and created a bond that still holds to this day, but it wasn’t just Quick who saw the potential at hand.

The three of them had come together after some deliberation and decided to take their art to a level outside of the limelight of the open mic scene, and with this they decided to use their power as poets to grow as artists, as individuals, and as family men. However, before the dream was realized, Quick committed suicide. The impact that event had on John



Kameron Robinson

Paul and Obeah was pivotal in building RLP. Quite simply John Paul stated in regards to his dear friend and comrade’s passing, “It made every- stood in his kitchen and committ had birthed within their barbersh hangout as well. Quick was a mar question of “Why isn’t it done ye speaks volumes of his keen and ol

John Paul especially was expe was in great turmoil. But he had with guidance. Quick believed th greater mission than just getting o

RLP began at Quick’s memo (community) as the moniker JP an or so, John Paul began an open n As an entry fee they charged not items to be given back to the com their voices and the truth that the people of the local community. T 2008 RLP became an official 501 aforementioned donating of cloth once a month the people from th Food Café for a free meal (usually sort). Shortly thereafter RLP orga providing coats and other clothin contracts with Better Basics after-



CARL'S BIRMINGHAM PART THREE

“Now when I talk to students, I am seeing more and more students who will need that kind of mentoring [that my father offered] from our environment because it doesn’t exist in their community. There are some programs

out there that capture some of the kids but there are still a number of them out there who just don’t have that connectivity to that sense of purpose, which comes from a sense of family, from an extension of other supports

within a community, a church, for us. They just don’t have that.

You wonder why things stand out, like money as the focus. As for me, learning was the focus because of encyclopedias, my father, that structure



2015 kNOW Disclaimer Slam Team (left to right): Jeralyn Langford, Asherah Jackson, Eboni Wallace, Miaya Ree Webster, and Whitney McWilliams.

thing get real.” After his funeral the two ed to keeping the dream alive that the trio op that functioned as a studio and n who would always ask the very poignant t?” in regards to any ideas put forth. This bservant nature.

riencing a low within his personal life and untapped potential that could be realized at both John Paul and Obeah had a on a microphone.

erial (organized by the local art and Obeah performed under. Around 2006 nic in Eastlake at Sistah’s Soul Food Café. money but canned goods and clothing munity at a later date. Armed only with ey spoke, they uplifted and rallied the his continued for a couple of years, and in (c)(3) non-profit organization. The es was the first project RLP undertook: e community could come to Sistah’s Soul y a spaghetti dinner or something of the nized a “Coats for Cold” clothing drive g for those in need. RLP obtained school programs at their Hope Centers in



John Paul Taylor, Michael Littig, and Ojullu Opiew from 2015 trip to Kenya, a project formed to connect Alabama youth poets with Kenyan youth poets in a collaboration between the Dadaab Theater Project and Real Life Poets.

photos (2) by Kameron Robinson

Fairfield and began their first official workshops. In later years, RLP began working with the Birmingham Public Library and the *Word Up!* committee and began holding free teen poetry workshops for several years there.

Currently, RLP is an official cultural arts vendor for Jefferson County Department of Human Resources. RLP has done teen poetry workshops throughout Alabama, from Huntsville to Mobile. In 2014 RLP took its first team to the Brave New Voices International Teen Poetry Slam. RLP’s team kNOW Disclaimer were the first team from Alabama to compete in the international teen poetry competition and finished in the semi-finals. RLP represented Birmingham at Brave New Voices once more in 2015. Also in 2015 RLP visited Abu Dhabi and Dubai for a series of workshops and cultural experiences. The same year RLP visited Kenya and trained workshop facilitators there for an Alabama-Kenya International Poetry Exchange Project that launched in 2016. RLP is currently working once again in Eastlake doing an after-school program with Eastlake Methodist Church and has, in a sense, gone full circle. The trio of JP, Obeah, and Quick—who lives within the spirit of RLP—once again seeks to go forth and heal the community after having gained a large body of knowledge and experience in the last decade or so of work both before and after its inception.

turn to page 12

he provided for me. It didn’t matter to me how much money I was going to make because I worked seven jobs. I knew how to make money, and I knew I could always make money because of the skills my dad also helped me with. In

addition to those jobs I always knew I would be able to do that so for me it was more intrinsic self-enrichment, but that’s not the case with a lot of people. We have to understand that they don’t have the ability to get to that place. We

got to take them from where they are right now and look at whatever challenges they are confronted with and try to help them work through those challenges.”

—Carl Thomas

What Birmingham + Berea

I am originally from Birmingham, Alabama, and I had never heard of Berea until my senior year in high school. My twelfth grade guidance counselor called me in to her office one day and said, “Hey, I think you should apply to this school in Kentucky called Berea College.” My response was, “Why would I want to go to a school so far away from home? There are schools right here that I like.” She explained to me that Berea was not like the other schools that I was applying to, and it offered a unique scholarship that covered the cost of tuition for all of its students. My first thoughts were that this school was too good to be true, and there must be a catch to this tuition thing—especially since they were recruiting from two states away and no one in my family had ever heard of this school. My counselor still recommended that I apply for this school because I wouldn’t be losing anything by applying. I decided to take her advice, and it turned out to be one of the best decisions of my life.

I got accepted to Berea College, as well as a few other schools. The hard part was deciding what school I would be attending in the fall. I did a few college visits with my high school, but really didn’t find what I was looking for in the schools that we visited. I didn’t quite know what I was looking for at the time, but I knew that it would hit me when I saw it. Later on in my senior year, I was invited to the Carter G. Woodson Diversity Weekend at Berea College. I decided to attend because I had never been to Kentucky before and I was curious to see what Berea really

looked like. When I arrived, I noticed that the community was nothing like my hometown; it was small, had a lot of mom-and-pop shops, and a predominantly Caucasian community surrounded the College. I felt uncomfortable and out of place at first because I had never been in a community where I was the minority. I had always lived in a predominantly African American community, so coming to Berea was a culture shock for me. They placed me with a Caucasian host while I was here, and we had a meaningful conversation about the mission of Berea and how it has been helpful for a lot of students. We discussed the small classes, the labor program, and most importantly how diverse the campus was. Then it dawned on me what was missing from the colleges that I visited with my high school. The schools that we toured were all large universities, but they had no strong support systems for their students, and they had very limited diversity on campus. Berea was different because it concentrated on creating the best learning environment for its students based off its Great Commitments. This was meaningful to me because it focused on coeducation, interracial education, financial need, academic promise, service, and equality for all. That Sunday, when we were leaving from the Carter G. Woodson event, I made up my mind that I would be attending Berea in the fall.

Fall arrived, and I was finally on campus as a Berea College student. I knew only a few other people that were coming from Birmingham when I first arrived. However,

CARL'S BIRMINGHAM PART FOUR



“I came up the summer after I was admitted, and I got on a greyhound bus by myself and rode 24 hours to Berea, and that was before the Interstate was complete, so I took all the backroads coming up to Knoxville and then coming

up through the gap and coming to Berea, coming through Corbin and all of that. Coming from Knoxville you didn’t just come straight up as you do now.

So its 24 hours, and I get off here [Berea] at a bus stop right out front. I

guess people knew that I was kind of wandering because I stood out and didn’t know where to go.

I just sat and talked to people about coming up to visit campus and told them that I needed to find [the]

means to me

after a month of being a student on Berea's campus, I noticed that there were a lot of students from my home state here. I remember wondering, "Why are there so many students from Alabama?" At first I concluded that it was an attempt to diversify the student body at Berea; however, later on I found out that it was related heavily to Berea's Great Commitments. For example, Berea commits itself to offering educational opportunities to "primarily students from Appalachia, Black or White."

Most students, including myself at the time, didn't think of Birmingham as being a part the Appalachian region, mainly because our environment and culture were so different. For instance, Berea had a mountainous rural environment, and the people here had a different dialect than what we were accustomed to back home. Birmingham, on the other hand, was a large city with very few mountainous areas, and we also had a different dialect that was unique to our area. This is what makes Berea great; it offers a chance for people to work and live together with different backgrounds to break the stereotypes and prejudgments that we all might have. It also promotes kinship of all people which is another Great Commitment of the school. These simple facts led to me making friends with people that I normally wouldn't have associated with because they were people outside of my own cultural background. For me this was really big because I wanted to be in a place that promoted understanding and growth for all people.

I graduated from Berea in 2011 and returned in 2014 to work as an admissions counselor over the areas of Alabama, Georgia, and parts of Tennessee. One of the main reasons that I decided to take this position was that it offered me a chance to serve my community back home. I am now able to travel to different schools in Birmingham and speak with students about the mission of Berea. This is something that I really enjoy doing because the students still looked at me with the same skepticism that I had when my counselor first told me about Berea College.

I now have the chance to explain what Berea means to students in Birmingham. It is a chance of a lifetime for them to experience a new level of diversity and interracial education, a chance to build leadership skills through our labor program, and most of all a chance for them to get a high quality education that is affordable. This work has been a service that I have enjoyed doing, and I plan to continue to do this work to serve my community back home. ❖

Sylvester Lynn III is a 2011 Berea College graduate with a degree in Physical Education. He is currently an Admissions Counselor for Berea College.



WHAT I'VE LEARNED

**Sylvester
Lynn III**

admissions office and was supposed to just stay overnight ... and I met some guys here who were from Birmingham and oddly enough these guys lived within blocks of me. I knew them, but I didn't know they were at Berea

because they graduated two years before me. Larry Lewis, Larry Penick, Douglas Jackson, Michael Cannon, Jerome Austin, Phyllis West, were all people from my high school who were here at Berea, and there was a guy by

the name of Richie Grissett who didn't go to my high school. These guys took me in, and I ended up staying here for almost a week. That sealed the deal for me."

—Carl Thomas

Into the heartland

I was born in the slums of Kingston, a neighborhood in eastern Birmingham, Alabama. It was a place where the villains and creeps hung out in alleyways and in front of houses talking gossip or gathering for parties. I've seen more than my fair share of parties going off right outside my house with cars lined up on the sidewalks and people partying and fighting. This was the cycle the first few years of my life. It was the worst place for a person to be, especially for a kid. I moved from place to place, for years traveling through the low-income badlands where the corrupt vampires in the night, sucked out the life from the weak. After my father gained custody of me, I made my final stop in North Birmingham.

I looked at all the broken house windows, collapsed ceilings, and old rusty cars. It was no better than the last place I lived in other than the fact that my dad tried to blanket the dirty hell with flowers and trees in his front lawn. But, in a way, it made our house stand out from the rest of the old beat up houses around us. North

Birmingham made me into the person that I am today: a person with a tough exterior, yet an extremely soft interior. The soft interior comes from my dad's overflow of kindness to even the worst of men and women. One day we were robbed right outside the apartment we used to live in before moving to a house not far from there. He simply let the thieves have what they wanted, going so far as to have a small conversation with them.

I carry the same name my dad did, just with a different middle name, keeping me from gaining the title of Junior. With all his kindness given to the people around, you would not think that he actually fought in the Vietnam War. He was a hard-working veteran who believed in the notion that work equals success. Although he worked long hours at a postal service, he still had time to care for his garden and our house. To him, your surroundings shaped what type of person you became. Our house was filled with elegant artwork and furniture while our lawn had two small beautiful trees growing in front along with a ton of flowers growing

Real Life Poets

continued from page 9

My name is Kameron Malik Robinson, I am a rising high school senior and youth poet at RLP, Inc. As a youth poet, I perform poems that I've written as a means of self-expression and information distribution. I have been a member of RLP since early February 2015, yet within my short tenure I have garnered a great deal of life and artistic experience. I attended workshops leading up to my first spoken word performance in April 2015 at the annual *Word Up!* Poetry Slam. Afterwards, I continued to work with RLP and have since performed in a variety of settings. A few of the broad range of events and instances in which I have performed as a RLP representative are the following: the Birmingham Museum of Art BMA Speaks Race Relations Panel; First Baptist Church 9th Street in Bessemer, Ala.; the State of the Word Southeastern Youth Poet summit held at Vanderbilt University; Social justice camp ANYTOWN; and even a baby shower.

My purpose as a poet is not just limited to writing, memorizing, and performing. It extends to the realms of advocacy, community service, leadership, social consciousness, and much more. RLP encourages me to be introspective and inquisitive; it also helps in the building of my leadership skills and the expansion of my body of experience in serving local communities. I have helped to facilitate workshops, promote events, and conduct work within the community on behalf of RLP, and I have invited others to work with and experience RLP. In short RLP has functioned as a facet through which I am guided and guide others.

In closing, RLP is an organic nonprofit organization, providing a voice to those in need and the many amenities that come with that provision such as safe environments, a safe space, and community through food and access to the local art communities and individuals who may help in mentoring and/or inspiration. ✨

Kameron Robinson is senior at Bessemer City High School who will be graduating in 2017.

behind them. While he worked to make our house reflect the person that he is, he worked to make me into a better person than him. He always said that work was what shaped your personality. “From there the people will see you for who you are and appreciate you for who you are,” he used to say. From the year he took custody of me, I worked to become my own self while working to become a better person than my dad, just like he wanted. My heart, so sensitive, would start to build under the harshest of situations.

The tough exterior comes from the outside world breaking me down with each passing day with their insults, fights, and undermining. The place wasn't all bad. There were amusement parks I went to and lots of people that I met. However, there were very few that gained my trust. I was a soldier amongst the rest of the childish student body, with one side loving to have fun while the other was a serious young man looking for answers that most didn't have. North Birmingham made me into a man who wants to be successful, wanting to

live a life where love is in the air and happiness can be achieved in such a scale that a euphoric high can't reach its limits. Finding happiness is like finding treasure, along the way there are always clues, puzzles, and dangerous and risky passageways that you have to take. In the end, it's all about how much you really want it—love, happiness, the American dream that everyone so desperately yearns for. And for years, up to this very second, I'm still looking for answers, still looking for the treasure, still looking for love. Birmingham is a series of lessons in the forms of people, places, and interactions. And I feel confident that these lessons have long been learned and made me into a better person. ❏

Ronnie Davis is a 2016 Berea graduate with a degree in English.



WHAT I'VE LEARNED

Ronnie Davis

CARL'S BIRMINGHAM PART FIVE



“I think it's fairly typical of many [Birmingham] communities now. There is no real sense of community. I wish I could say that people are making a link between the history of Birmingham in terms of civil rights and what that struggle was about and what that struggle brought about and realizing that dream that King and others had as a result of that. In many ways, we're not realizing that because the younger people are not connecting. There's been a breach in terms of those stories, and they're not being carried along.

Something I thought was a huge challenge to the breakdown of the infrastructure among the African American community was the war in Vietnam. It took a lot of our men away, many who never came back, and those that did were very damaged either with what they witnessed, finding coping mechanisms that are not positive things and so now you don't have that family structure that I spoke about or I grew up in where you have the two parent family. You've got struggling single parent homes. You

don't have the kind of guidance that I got from my dad. It bothers me that kids can't reference back to what my daddy taught me. That may not sound important but it was extremely important for me. What would my father have done in this situation? You don't have that reference, you don't even have what the patriarch would bring to a family experience. It's lost and it's just not there, so you see people who are disconnected.” ❏

—Carl Thomas

The Berea College Service Awards

Established in 1979, the Berea College Service Award is an opportunity for the College to recognize an individual who has provided outstanding service to our society in achieving the ideals of Berea's Great Commitments. Honored at the annual Service Convocation, the recipients of the Berea College Service Award are individuals who in their daily lives have offered service. This award is a unique opportunity to honor practical service by persons in all walks of life.

Berea College Service Award nominees approved by the General Faculty Assembly in a given academic year become the Berea College Service Award recipients for the following academic year. The 2017 Berea College Service Award recipients both hail from Birmingham; they will receive their awards on March 23rd at the annual Service Convocation..

Lynda Whitt

Lynda Whitt is an assiduous educator who is passionate about making sure that her students move beyond accepting a life of mere existence. She refuses to allow students to become trapped in dysfunctional environments. Ms. Whitt will dig, scrap, and claw to find post-secondary educational opportunities for students who, as she says, "deserve more than what they have been offered by a broken system." Many of her students have no financial resources or family support to attend college. But



she does not allow these obstacles to stand in the way of her students obtaining a college education.

Ms. Whitt rebuilds broken communities throughout the city of Birmingham by helping one student at a time achieve a college education. She takes asset-poor students, makes an investment in their lives by providing higher education opportunities, and ultimately creates social capital within their communities.

Ms. Whitt has worked for many years as a guidance counselor in high schools located in some of the poorest communities in Birmingham. Yet she has not allowed these challenges to prevent her from helping students move beyond their environment. Currently, Ms. Whitt serves as the guidance counselor at George Washington Carver High School. For many of her students, Ms. Whitt serves as a parent figure, mentor, and supporter—whatever it takes to get her students to believe in themselves and to believe that they can be successful. Ms. Whitt believes that if the younger children in a community see the older children succeed, they too will believe that they can succeed in accomplishing their dreams. Ms. Whitt demonstrates an unwavering commitment to serve as a catalyst for creating this belief in the students not only at Carver, but also throughout the Birmingham school system.

She has led several students to Berea College over the past decade, a large percentage of which have graduated and gone on to achieve successful careers or pursue graduate studies. In 2010, Ms. Whitt sent Carver's valedictorian and salutatorian to Berea, both of whom graduated on time with their entering class.

Ms. Whitt is unparalleled in her service and commitment to the Birmingham community and school system and deserves recognition for the way in which she has quietly changed the lives of so many deserving students.

A spotlight on Birmingham

On March 23, 2017, Odessa Woolfolk will deliver the convocation address at Berea College in Phelps Stokes Auditorium. Her talk, *Civil and Human Rights: An Agenda for the Future*, will propose new avenues and platforms for civic engagement, reflecting the accomplishments of how 50 years ago, college students helped launch a movement which, in many ways, transformed American life and culture. The convocation is sponsored by Berea College's Center for Excellence in Learning through Service.

Odessa Woolfolk

Harrison Salisbury, reporter for the *New York Times*, once wrote of Birmingham in the early 1960s, saying, "Every channel of communication, every medium of mutual interest, every



reasoned approach, every inch of middle ground has been fragmented by the emotional dynamite of racism, reinforced by the whip, the razor, the gun, the bomb, the torch, the club, the knife, the mob, the police, and many branches of the state's apparatus." There is no doubt that in our nation, Birmingham has been among one of the cities where racism and inequality has wreaked the most havoc and caused the most destruction.


For years, however, Odessa Woolfolk, an educator and civic activist, has been working against this havoc and destruction. Woolfolk serves as a beacon of the community for her native Birmingham, Alabama. When one looks at her record of service in the area of civic leadership and activism, it is easy to see why. Woolfolk has done her best to overcome racial and socioeconomic barriers and prejudices in the areas of housing, community development, public welfare, and education. Her long list of achievements and professional positions simply hint at all her great work, and include:

- Founding member of Leadership Birmingham;
- Administrative work with the Jefferson County Committee for Economic Opportunity, YMCA of Utica, NY, and the Urban Reinvestment Task Force of Washington, D.C.;

- Birmingham High School teacher during the Civil Rights movement;
- State chair of the National Conference of Christians and Jews;
- First African American President of Operation New Birmingham's Board of Directors.

For 21 years, Woolfolk also served the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) as director of the Center for Urban Affairs; lecturer in political science and public affairs; staff associate, Center for International Programs; and Assistant to the President for Community Relations. Upon retiring in 1993, her service to UAB was recognized with the establishment of the Odessa Woolfolk Presidential Community Service Award.

Most notably, Woolfolk is the former President and Board Chair of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute (BCRI). It is only because of Woolfolk's work that the BCRI even exists. Many describe her as the force behind the founding of the institute. This cultural and educational research center is committed to preserving and telling the story of Birmingham, and championing civil and human rights by facilitating an atmosphere of dialogue and understanding. Since opening its doors in 1992, BCRI has been visited by more than 2 million people from all 50 states and countries around the world. Each year, BCRI reaches more than 140,000 individuals through a variety of programming. Visitors include adults, school children and students, families, teachers, researchers, and scholars. It is only through learning about such important (and often ignored) historical events that we in the United States can better understand our heritage and shape our future into a better tomorrow.

Her whole life, Woolfolk has done her best to promote and improve community leadership, race relations, and civic engagement in Birmingham and beyond. The value of her service to those in Alabama, the South, and the larger United States cannot be denied. 



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2016 Celebration of Traditional Music photos.

Clockwise from left: Amythyst Kiah, the Local Honeyes, the Berea College Bluegrass Ensemble, and the Berea College Folk-Roots Ensemble.

