

**“ALL SIGNED UP”
REMEMBERING THE DESEGREGATION OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA**

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*This is a speech that James Solomon gave on March 19,
2004 during the Civil/Human Rights Anthology Colloquium
at Seawell’s in Columbia, South Carolina.*

The photo on page 6-a of the September 12, 1963 edition of The State paper, in Columbia, SC of three Negro students emerging from Osborn Administration building on the campus of the University of South Carolina (USC) had as its caption the phrase, “All Signed Up.” Underneath the caption was the following statement:

“The three Negro students who enrolled at the University of South Carolina [on] Wednesday leave the administration building, registration papers in hand. Left to right, Robert G. Anderson, 20 of Greenville, Henri Monteith, 17 of Columbia, and James L. Solomon, 33 of Sumter.”

This photo, with that simple straight forward statement, certified to all of South Carolina and indeed the world that for the first time since 1887 African-American students were a part of the student body of that great university. As a result of that act of “registration” the University of South Carolina was desegregated.

I was the oldest of these three students, the only one that had not sued for admission, a husband, and a father. *Why was I here?*, and *How did I come to be a part of this historic event?* Forty plus years later, I am attempting to answer those and other questions and to assess the impact of my decision to become a part of the history of the desegregation of the South Carolina system of higher education.

Harvey Gantt had become the first of our race to be admitted to a state supported white college in South Carolina, since reconstruction, when the court ordered in 1962 that he be admitted to Clemson University in the spring of 1963. Later, in 1962, Henri Monteith gained wide publicity as she won a court order calling for her admission to the University of South Carolina in the fall of 1963. Robert Anderson, who had also sued for admission to USC, and whose suit became moot when Henri’s case was acted upon, had applied for admission to USC and was also expected to enroll in the fall.

As all of this unfolded, I was teaching mathematics at Morris College in Sumter. Many Morris College students were active participants in the on-going Sumter civil rights movement and discussions on campus among students and faculty centered on what else could be done to promote the cause. I had a Master's Degree in Mathematics from Atlanta University and began to entertain the notion of earning a Doctorate so that I could become more effective with my students. After many discussions with my wife, Helen and consultations with my dean about my courses and how they might be scheduled, I made the decision in July 1963 to apply for admission to the USC Graduate School. This I did, and later advised by the dean of the USC Graduate School that I had been admitted and that upon completion of pre-registration materials by 10 September, I could enroll. This is how I came to be with Henri and Robert as we desegregated USC on September 11, 1963.

There were of course a number of significant and memorable events that occurred between the time that I applied for admission and my actual enrollment, as well as during my initial stay at the University,¹ however, I will not discuss those here (they will be related in the Anthology). Rather, I will share here some of my thoughts some forty-one years later, from a recent interview about this experience and how I believe that it impacted my family. I do this because I believe that this aspect of the lives of those identified as pioneers (being the first) in actions to promote social justice, is very important but often overlooked and my responses to the questions posed provide some of my personal insight.

What I am about to share results, from a recent interview with Dr. Kwakiuti Lynn Dreher² for the Winter 2004 publication of "Networking News" a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) newsletter, published in Lincoln, Nebraska in February 2004. What follows are the questions posed by Dr. Dreher during that interview and my responses to those questions.

Interview with Dr. Kwakiuti Lynn Dreher, Assistant Professor of English and Ethnic Studies, University of Nebraska.

KD: What was it like taking on this responsibility during such a chaotic time in our history?

JLS: If I had it to do over again, knowing what I know now and knowing what my family went through, I probably wouldn't have done it. Participating in that sort of experience is really a young person's game. At the time, I was a 33-year old husband and father. I had two small children to

¹I left the University after the Spring, September of 1965 but re-entered in the late seventies in another doctoral program.

²Dr. Kwakiuti Lynn Dreher (a Columbia native) is an Assistant Professor of English and Ethnic Studies, Department of English, University of Nebraska in Lincoln, Nebraska. Dr. Dreher is the editor of "Networking News."

support and a wife that needed me. I just didn't think all of that through before I got into it. Naively, I thought that if I was accepted, I would enroll, take a couple of courses, and be home most of the time.

KD: *What was the major intrusion at that time?*

JLS: I didn't expect all of the publicity because in my mind it wasn't that big of a deal. You see, Henri and Rober had already been admitted. I thought then, that if a Black person wanted to take some courses he could do that. So, I didn't think that there would be any fuss made about my entry. It was never my intention to open any doors because the door already was opened by Henri and Robert.

KD: *How as all the fuss made?*

JLS: After it became known that I had applied for admission the media began to pay me some attention—now that itself put a strain on our family. For example, Cynthia and Bennie, our children, were attending predominantly white schools under "Freedom of Choice"; kids said mean things to them. While I was away, somebody threw a brick at our house one night when my wife (Helen) was alone with our children. The window looked like someone had shot a bullet hole in the window frame so I called the sheriff. The deputy came out and was not very kind at all. He told me that if my wife was afraid that I should stay home with her. So I said to him that if I am home and something like this happened again, I was going to take whatever action I could. He didn't like that, and my wife and I ordered him off our property. After that incident, my course work suffered, and I discontinued the program after two years.

KD: *Were you aware of any emotional strains? If so, how did your family handle them?*

JLS: To be honest with you, I really didn't understand the pressures on my family until I was well into this process. My wife and I had discussed my desire for a doctorate and my desire to enroll at the University. To keep me motivated and focused on my goal, she supported and encourage me and refused to tell me any of the inner turmoil she and my children were going through. When all is said and done, my wife, Helen, was the real heroine.

KD: *You have applied to the University and you have been accepted . . .*

JLS: When I applied, I was told I had to take the Graduate Record Exam. Large amounts of media awaited me at the exam site. I was the only Black person taking the exam, and the media attention made me quite nervous. I knew the stakes were high, and what came into my mind was a prayer: "Lord, please let me score well on this exam because if I don't the whole world will know."

KD: *Describe the atmosphere in the classroom.*

JLS: I was anxious the first day of classes. They were small, but the white students and I got to know one another very well. The students in the program were encouraging, mature, and friendly. I never had any of them treat me anyway but nice. Chair Wyman Williams was very nice to me, and mid-way the first semester, he helped me apply for a national Science Foundation (Cooperative Graduate) Fellowship, and I got it. The only time I encountered ugly words is when I walked across campus.

KD: *You and Dr. King were classmates . . .*

JLS: King and I went to the same high school, Brooker T. Washington High in Atlanta, Georgia, but we didn't take classes together. I became associated with him through my attendance at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. Daddy King required that Martin and his brother, A.D. [to] preach every [fifth] Sunday night. So a group of us would get dressed up and go (and) "Amen" him. Then, we'd all go to the local drug store (across the street). We'd take our little money and buy the girls a soda [and] try to do a bit of courting. King wasn't a serious minister at that time; he just was getting into the ministry. He would say he was preaching because his daddy wanted him to.

KD: *What or who gave you the strength to carry on?*

JLS: We had people in my community and high school who made us believe we could do anything! My folks were always encouraging me. They would caution me about how to behave when stopped by the police; how to behave around white folks because they would shoot you. See, Blacks were still being lynched back then. My parents taught me that all people were God's children; that you have to choose carefully with whom you associate.

KD: *In closing, what are some of your concerns?*

JLS: I am concerned about the number of Black males that are incarcerated. I am concerned that there are more Black women in college than Black men. I have four granddaughters, and I worry about them finding good husbands when they grow up. I am concerned about the number of children having children and just the general culture of our society and its impact on people. I would just encourage all young people to make the best of what God has given them and to utilize their talents to the best of their ability.

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