Queens College’s place in black history.

Breaking Barriers

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The civil rights movement evolved in the 1960s and QC students became more involved in the fight for equality. A chapter of the civil rights organization, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) was established on campus during the early 1960s. The Joint Newsletter in April 1964 announced "Freedom Week," which aimed to discuss civil rights with students, educators, and others involved with the movement. Speeches, debates, seminars, a photo exhibit and a folk concert were used to teach people about civil rights. Another goal of 'Freedom Week' was to recruit students for the Mississippi Summer Project, which would later become known as Freedom Summer, to conduct voter registration drives and staff freedom schools that would teach children who were affected by the closing of schools and community centers because of integration.

Andrew Goodman was a Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) volunteer and QC student, who went to Mississippi, not be able to get an education. Although both students and civil rights workers faced danger, they did what was needed to bring about change.

On May 14, 1965, civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. spoke at Golden Center. According to the May 18, 1965 issue of The Phoenix, King spoke about how although "meaningful strides" had been made by blacks they "still had a long, long way to go." Although King had many supporters in attendance, there were others who handed out anti-King leaflets and held signs such as "Phony Liberals – Hear Dr. King – Ignore South Jamaica."

Along with discussing civil rights, King also promoted his stance on non-violence, as well as criticizing America's involvement in Vietnam. "I never intend to adjust myself to segregation and discrimination...", said King, at the time. "It's either non-violence or non-existence."

In 1966, the Search for Education, Education and Knowledge, or SEEK program, was introduced to QC. The program served students from poor neighborhoods, so that they could get into college and succeed.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the program catered mostly to Black and Puerto Rican students. When the program started it had 175 full time students, according to a 1968 issue of The Phoenix. According to the CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, as of fall 2010, the program which now seeks students of all races, has over 1,000 students. About 7 percent of the students are black. In January 1969, SEEK students demonstrated for the resignation of SEEK Director Joseph Maliholland. They wanted more faculty of color so that students could better relate to their professors, among other goals.

Today, the program is called The Percy E. Sutton SEEK program, but it still strives to allow students who would not be admitted, to experience higher education, be successful and graduate from college. It is housed in Delaney Hall and directed by Frank S. Franklin.

Out of the over 20,000 students that attend QC, including graduates and undergraduates, 8 percent are black, according to the CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment. The graduation rate at QC for black students is 45.6 percent as of 2009, while the overall graduation rate at the school is 53.3 percent, according to college measures.org.

In September 1968, the first African History course was offered at QC, according to the Dec. 10, 1968 Phoenix. It was taught by Jay Gordon and only four students were registered for the class because it was not advertised. In 1995, QC saw its first black president. Allen Lee Sessoms, served the college from 1995-2000. Under his administration, facilities were improved, higher academic standards were implemented, and the George Mitchell Irish Peace Conference was held on campus and the Queens College School for Math, Science and Technology was established.

In 2000, Sessoms resigned after a scandal, according to a 2002 New York Times article "Following Up," that reported he allegedly misled CUNY trustees by saying he had successfully raised money for an AIDS research center at the college, when he had not. Sessoms was also believed to have misled University officials by denying a report that he had used expenses when referring to remedial students.

There have been many influential black faculty members who have taught at QC. According to the 2000 Silhouette yearbook, Delaney Hall was named after Lloyd T. Delany in 1993. He was an associate professor of education and had helped establish the SEEK program. Delany was one of the first African Americans at the college to achieve the rank of associate professor.

Another inspiring faculty member was Rachel Weddington, who was a part of QC's education department. During the summer of 1963, Weddington and 16 students went down to Prince Edward Country for six weeks to teach black children who had been locked out of their public schools as part of the Student Help Project, said Phyllis Padov-Sederbaum, a QC alumnus who worked with Weddington, in an email. She helped to organize the summer's activities and prepare the students for teaching.

Weddington passed away in 2010 and there is a new award being named after her. According to Padov-Sederbaum, who liaised between the Virginia Student Help Alumni and the Queens College Foundation to make the award a reality, the Rachel Weddington Education Award will go to a graduating senior who has demonstrated a commitment to the teaching of inner-city students and who is an outstanding student both in education courses and major or co-major courses.

"Rachel Weddington was a brilliant educator and advisor," Padov-Sederbaum said. "She was tough and had a wry sense of humor."