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**Charles Becknell Jr.**  
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# Conversation with the Becknells: careers, racism and Black Lives Matter

## Black Studies directors bring perspective to current affairs

By Mary Beth King  July 03, 2020

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Charles Becknell Sr. and his son Charles Becknell Jr. carry not only the same names but the same position as directors of the Black Studies program at The University of New Mexico. Although their terms as director are about 50 years apart, both have wrestled with similar social upheaval and outrage over racism.

Becknell founded the program in the throes of national unrest in 1969 and 1970. Protests and riots surged across the country and on UNM's campus. Black people, inspired by leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who was assassinated in 1968, called for an end to racism and inequality. The Black Power movement intersected with the call to stop the war in Vietnam and the rise of feminism.

Five decades later, racism is still rampant. Amid a worldwide pandemic, people watched in horror as a bound Black man took his last breaths under the knee of a police officer in a video that went viral on social media around the world. In this new swell of outrage, angry citizens took to the streets to demand justice and the Black Lives Matter movement rose to prominence in the national consciousness - echoes of the 1960s turmoil the elder Becknell experienced.

Becknell (<http://news.unm.edu/news/first-africana-studies-director-rises-from-segregation-to-become-educator-author-activist-pastor>) grew up in segregated Hobbs, N.M. He went on to get his Ph.D., and establish the African American studies program at UNM in 1969, serve on the cabinet of two New Mexico governors, and become an activist, pastor and author. In a 2016 interview ([https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/black\\_alumni\\_interviews/4/](https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/black_alumni_interviews/4/)) for the UNM Black Alumni Oral History project, Becknell talked about his remarkable life.

**Racism: An Educational Series**



Becknell Jr. was born and raised in Albuquerque and earned a degree at UNM with an emphasis in African American Studies. After graduating, he worked as an intern for Sen. Jeff Bingaman (D-NM, 1983-2012) and earned a Master's degree in Criminal Justice Administration. He realized a call to the ministry and relocated back to Albuquerque to pursue it. He also earned his Ph.D. at UNM and after five years as a special assistant to the Vice President for Equity and Inclusion, was appointed as director of Africana Studies in 2017.

The summer the elder Becknell began his term as director of the new Black Studies program at UNM was an iconic one: Men took their first steps on the moon, young people flocked to Woodstock, and President Richard Nixon announced he was withdrawing thousands of troops from Vietnam. The following year, four college students died after being fired on by the National Guard in Ohio and protests erupted across the nation. Becknell remembers the smell of tear gas and the National Guard on the UNM campus.

Establishing the program was a challenge in the midst of national turmoil. Black students clamored for a university experience that explored their history and lives, instead of the almost exclusively European-American-centric history being taught in schools.

One of Becknell's biggest challenges was putting in place a program that was new not just to UNM but campuses everywhere. Besides finding faculty to teach classes, he had to push back against doubt about the program's academic validity and spread the word on campus that these courses were not for just Black students, but also white, Hispanic and Native American students as well.

"There was a great deal of activism going on. We saw all across this country a push for Black studies on predominately white university campuses," recalled Becknell, who wrote his dissertation on 'Can Black studies survive on a predominately white university campus?' "And we saw a great deal of student activism. The Vietnam War was going on. The Civil Rights movement was in full swing. Things were changing all over the place."

Becknell brought some of the most well-known Black revolutionaries on campus to speak, including Kwame Ture (also known as Stokely Carmichael), who coined the term “Black Power.” Becknell remembered Ture carrying young Charles on his shoulders.

As an administrator and professor, Becknell had duties to the students and school, but also an affinity with the protesters.

“So I had to walk a tightrope,” he said and tried to impart to his students that while the protests were important, they shouldn’t lose perspective on why they were at UNM. ““Get an education. Do the best that you can. Don’t let anything interfere with your pursuit of education.””

Becknell Jr. listed what he saw as his father’s main challenges.

“Personal and family safety and security, keeping a family together against all odds, not losing sight of his purpose, and centering Blackness in an anti-Black environment... Finally, I think it’s important to add that when he was director, Black Studies was a new academic enterprise throughout the country and arose from the heels of Black student activism. It was not welcomed by the University with open arms. There was resistance at every turn.”



*Kwame Ture, also known as Stokely Carmichael*

As head of the program now called Africana Studies, Becknell Jr. had his challenges, some similar, some new. He recognizes that his father’s legacy is a powerful one that laid an essential foundation for continued work.

“As a result of my father’s activism and time as director, I had the opportunity and privilege to be around people in the Black Power Movement who were making themselves known to the world. Among them was Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael). When I reflect on his relationship with my father, I am sure that part of the reason that I have reached higher heights is because I was carried on the shoulders of such a giant. How many people in Albuquerque, let alone the world can say that Kwame Ture carried them on his shoulders?” Becknell Jr. said.

Although the program is well-established now with a five-decade history, there are still obstacles and, unfortunately, dangers. Becknell Jr. was the target of racist threats earlier this year.

“These experiences not only taught me about the role that dedication, self-sacrifice, and courage play in working toward the greater good of Black people. They also taught me about the dangers that come from centering Blackness in the midst of an anti-Black space. Death threats: normal. Stress on the family unit: standard. Resistance: customary. Economic challenges: expected... We are charged to promote academic excellence in an environment that doesn’t place a premium on Black intellectual thought, and we are charged by our discipline and the Black community to promote social responsibility. Make no mistake. Leading a Black Studies program is a struggle. Yet, we remain in the struggle until the end.”

Being free to exercise their Blackness on campus without facing resistance or negative consequences is still a task for Africana Studies students, Becknell Jr. said, adding, “Ultimately, I want them to use their acquired skills and knowledge to challenge oppression, anti-Black racism, and unethical social norms. I hope that this season of protest against anti-Black racism fosters more opportunities for them to express their authentic Blackness in the classroom and throughout the rest of the campus—with pride, dignity and power.”

***“What a great time in our history. This is a moment that may never come again, the opportunity to have open legitimate discussions about racism.” – Charles Becknell Sr.***

Father and son reflected on the current events and atmosphere.

“What a great time in our history. This is a moment that may never come again, the opportunity to have open legitimate discussions about racism,” the elder Becknell said. “I am very, very encouraged. I’ve waited since 1968 for this day, when I first got involved in the Civil Rights movement, to see white people and Black people on the forefront together protesting racism in this country together. We’ve avoided this moment so long. We have seen people in charge deny, obstruct, redirect, ignore, and marginalize the issue of race.

“It’s a topic that made people uncomfortable but we’ve finally come to the point where young black activists are now saying we want a different society, we want change in our society, we want people to be treated equally. As long as we were saying it as Black people, no one listened but now that whites are getting involved and saying ‘Hey, we have a problem and we got to work together to solve it,’ well, that just makes my day.”

“All we ever asked was to listen to what we have to say. If it’s reasonable then let’s do something, if it’s unreasonable, let’s talk about it but we’ve never had a discussion about race like we’re having today. I know it makes people feel uncomfortable but I always feel in order to feel comfortable with something you have to feel some discomfort. The more we understand the more we know the more we discuss the better off we’re going to be as a society.”

***"Though our hearts are filled with anguish, we can take this opportunity to learn about the power that lament holds for calling our nation to be more deeply dedicated to humane ideals." – Charles Becknell Jr.***

Becknell Jr. agreed with his father that this is a watershed moment in our nation's history, but added, "This is also a time of lament. We lament over the long history of violent attacks against Black people—too numerous to mention them all, here. Our collective lament overflows into the present, where we find ourselves grieving for Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Rayshard Brooks, and thousands of other Black people murdered as a result of anti-Black racism and state-sanctioned violence. Though our hearts are filled with anguish, we can take this opportunity to learn about the power that lament holds for calling our nation to be more deeply dedicated to humane ideals. Lament also reminds us that we can't run past 500 years of brutality against Black people in this country on our way to justice."

We need action as well as good intentions, he said.

"While I value the broad statements of support for Black people and the condemnation of racial violence, I do expect to see the institutions and corporations, and people take definitive action to confront the anti-Black racism that exists in its own backyard. While the Black Lives Matter movement has gone mainstream, these words—*Black Lives Matter*—represent far more than a current watchword or hashtag. They are a decisive call for a deeper paradigm shift and transformation in American society to fully affirm the humanity and dignity of Black people and guarantee equal protection and opportunity under the law, for all. In this case, saying 'Black Lives Matter' requires changing the culture and transforming a whole system of racial injustice."

Becknell Jr. had powerful words about what white people need to know and do.

"Protests are a disciplined reaction to the sickness of racism. It's difficult to help individuals understand that oppressed people will not be comfortable living in an endless state of oppression. Eventually, their hunger for justice demonstrates itself...This is your moment to solve the problem of racism. Black people cannot be responsible for bearing the burdens of racism and then be expected to provide the solution. We did not create this problem. This expectation is part of the Black experience. We are required to traverse powerful interlocking forces designed to reject our present aspirations and neglect our future promise. It entails masking pain with beaming pride. It involves watching our children experience their existence through the eyes of others while controlling a temperament frequently edging the realm of the neurotic. It includes being governed by policies that intend to undermine our legacy, overwhelm our present, and overpower our future.

"All the while, claiming neither the strategies nor the strategist as racist. It is being condemned for being disabled by the very people who amputate the limbs from our bodies. The Black experience means witnessing our entire family spiritually slaughtered by arsenals of day-to-day exploitation, domination, and subjugation—and then being despised for being a guttersnipe orphan. It entails personifying a love ethic in the face of bitterness and hate, while holding on to physical life amidst psychological death. If there remains any uncertainty about the Black experience today, then I will state this principle once and for all. A given society is racist, or it is not."

The elder Becknell looks to the future with optimism.

"I've never felt this way before. We've made little baby steps but we made a huge step when Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act. We were very, very optimistic but then we see the Act was signed but it wasn't enacted and, that is to say, racism continued. We did make progress but I think we're going to make greater progress now because people are talking more openly about racism and how people feel when they're discriminated against and that's being talked about - maybe not accepted but talked about - so we need to keep the discussions going, we need to keep the pressure on, we need to let people know that we are in the point in our history when this is not going to go away. The Black Lives movement has turned into a worldwide situation and all over the world, people are talking about this issue of race. We've got to get this behind us and I hope we can do it in my lifetime."

***With gratitude to Dr. Charles Becknell Sr. (<https://news.unm.edu/news/first-africana-studies-director-rises-from-segregation-to-become-educator-author-activist-pastor>) and Dr. Charles Becknell Jr. (<https://africanastudies.unm.edu/about-us/faculty/charles-e.-becknell-jr.html>) for graciously sharing their stories.***

### **Racism: An Educational Series (previous stories)**

- Meaning behind the movement: Black Lives Matter (<http://news.unm.edu/news/meaning-behind-the-movement-black-lives-matter>) - June 26
- Learning from the Past: A brief historical background (<http://news.unm.edu/news/learning-from-the-past-a-brief-historical-background>) - June 19



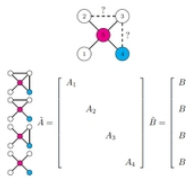
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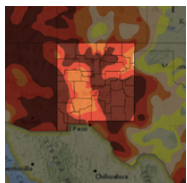
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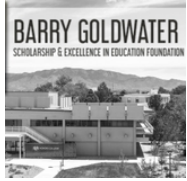
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