

Chapter 9: Donald Williams Jr. and Students for Racial Equality



Historical Background:

San José State has been dealing with racism for a long time. Historically, SJSU was a white institution. However, the demographics of the study body began to change in the mid 20th century, which of course led to deep reflection about what kind of university was SJSU going to be. In this booklet, several of the chapters have dealt with how SJSU and the larger society has wrestled with racism, including the chapters focusing on Chicano Commencement, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, and the Re-establishment of the EOP. In addition, issues of race, as well as social class, were also connected to the minimum wage campaign and Students for DMH.

Race continued to be a central issue at SJSU in the late part of the 20th century, as the decision to acquit the Los Angeles police officers that beat Rodney King rocked SJSU on April 29, 1992. On the campus, two student groups, Striving Black Brothers & Sisters and Students United for Accessible Education, led over 300 predominantly Black and Latino students through campus and the streets of the city. Students shouted “No justice, no peace”, with some calling for peaceful protests, while others broke windows and glass doors on campus (over 60 windows and glass doors were broken).¹

The campus exploded again on April, 1995, when an Administrator, Michael Day, from the Department of Admissions and Records, allegedly called Wesley Flowers, an SJSU student, a “stupid “n---er”. Fifty members of the Black Student Union confronted the new President, Bob Caret, and insisted that he implement their eight demands. The BSU was so outraged that they shut down a meeting that President Caret was having with KSJS, the student-run radio station, grabbing the microphone, and not allowing the meeting to continue. President Caret’s response was to appoint a Special Assistant to the President for Campus Climate, create a Campus Climate Office and Advisory Committee, and to develop a University Campus Climate Plan.²

In 2002, Maribel Martinez was running for Associated Student (AS) president, and the person she ran against created a racially charged poster, and put them into the men’s bathrooms. The Campus Climate Committee called on the SJSU President to denounce this racist action, and after several weeks, President Caret released a statement condemning this racism at SJSU.

In 2011, Dr. Susan Murray, a Sociology professor at SJSU, conducted a study, upon request of the Campus Climate Committee, focusing on the experience of various student groups, which included: African American students; gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students; international and immigrant students; Latinx students, Vietnamese students, and White students. The report highlighted in rich terms how students of color negotiate the negative stereotypes from faculty, staff, and other students, the feeling of disenfranchisement due to being ignored, unwelcomed, and the desire for more acknowledgment, and the hope to have their culture included in the diversity celebrations. The report also discussed how homophobia and transphobia exist on campus, and how this negatively impacts gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students. Unfortunately, the Murray report was not acted upon; in fact, President Mohammad Qayoumi disbanded the Campus Climate committee.³

The Events:



In the fall semester of 2013, Donald “D.J.” Williams Jr. was a 17-year-old freshman student living in Joe West Hall. D.J. was living in an eight-man dormitory suite, and he was the only African American. Over the course of the semester, his roommates displayed the Confederate flag and swastikas in the suite, forcibly wrestled D.J. to the ground and collared him with a bicycle U-lock around his neck, locked him in his bathroom, and called him 3/5ths (in reference to the 3/5th compromise in the U.S. Constitution over how African Americans were going to be counted as 3/5ths of a white person according to the census).⁴

D.J. responded to these attacks by asking his roommates to remove the Confederate flag, which they did for a short time. D.J. told them to never jump him again with a bike lock, but his roommates did it again later in the semester, and D.J. fought them off, receiving a cut lip in the process. In addition, D.J. asked them to not call him 3/5^{ths}, but then they started calling him fraction. On October 13, 2013, D.J. and his parents returned to his dorm room to find the Confederate flag on display again, and a racial epitaph on the white board.

D.J.’s parents contacted the campus housing officials to complain about these behaviors. Finally, San José State took action, by first removing the racist roommates from the suite, and eventually expelling them. Three of the students were charged by the District Attorney with a hate crime and battery. Incredibly, the three students were found not guilty of committing a hate crime, but were convicted of misdemeanor battery, and were sentenced to probation and community

service. Many students at SJSU, and the African American students in particular, were outraged by this decision, and they held an emotional rally on campus to denounce the verdict.⁵

It was in this environment, that Wanda Ginner, a board member of the SJSU Tower Foundation, the university's fundraising unit, made a racist comment at a campus meeting, stating "I contribute to this University because these little Latinas do not have the DNA to be successful." A university vice president, and member of the President's Cabinet, was present at the meeting, but remained silent. This was particularly shocking since San José State had responded to the D.J. Williams case by implementing a "See Something, Hear Something, Say Something" campaign to combat racism. A Latina staff member was present at the meeting, and she made an informal complaint to the University, but no action was taken. Then, she made a formal complaint to the University. However, many months went by and nothing was happening.

At this point, the students became involved. The students responded by organizing a new group, Students for Racial Equality, and they developed three demands: (1) the removal of Wanda Giner from the Tower Foundation Board, (2) a letter of apology from the university to the Latina staff member who was present at the meeting and who had made the formal complaint, and (3) mandatory anti-racism trainings for administration, faculty, staff, and students. Students for Racial Equality targeted the university President Qayoumi, and all actions were focused on him. Within three days of the group's kickoff event, which was attended by media from all the major TV networks, President Qayoumi was pushed to act, with the president announcing that the board member was stepping down. At this time, the president also announced the resignation of the vice president who was present at the meeting but did not challenge the racist comment. Within the year, the second demand was met, as the president apologized in a letter to the Latina staff member who had filed the informal and formal complaint.⁶

In response to the D.J. Williams case, the issues raised by Dr. Murray's study, and the rising racial discord, the University responded in 2014 with a Special Task Force on Racial Discrimination, composed of faculty, staff, students, and chaired by Judge Ladoris Cordell. The task force would make 54 recommendations to the University. One of the key recommendations, which was to hire a Chief Diversity Officer, occurred in April of 2016, with the hiring of Kathleen Wong(Lau). Importantly, Wong(Lau) has implemented a five-hour Freshmen Diversity experience, which trains more than 5,000 students a year, and the University recently has created the African American/Black Student Success Center and the Chicax/Latinx Student Success Center, both of which are community learning spaces to build community, to get personal and academic support, and to learn about campus and community resources. More recently, SJSU has announced the search for a program director to support the Asian Pacific Islander Desi American community and the creation of another student success center.⁷

Resources:

- "Jury Finds SJSU Defendants Guilty Of Battery, Not Hate Crime", February 23, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZ1P7WN50RI>
- "San José State University Students Denounce Board Member's Alleged Racist Statement", November 11, 2014, www.nbcbayarea.com/news/local/san-jose-state-university-students-protest-board-members-alleged-racist-statement/78156/ (accessed, September 5, 2021).

Chapter 10: Student Homeless Alliance and the Push for Emergency Beds on Campus



Historical Background:

In the early 1990s, Scott Wagers, an undergraduate SJSU Sociology student, started going under the freeway overpasses, to meet and talk with the people who were houseless in San José. These conversations led Scott to create the Student Homeless Alliance (SHA), which brought together students and people without homes together to advocate for immediate emergency housing. As part of this effort, SHA held a “tent city” protest at San José City Hall in 1992, which ended in 12 arrests, with three of them being SHA students. This protest led to a meeting with Mayor Susan Hammer, which led to creation of the Little Orchard Shelter. In addition, SHA took over four abandoned houses owned by the water district along the Guadalupe River, which led to the Water District giving two houses to SHA for \$1 a year until the Guadalupe river flooded in 1995. In 1993, SHA led protests against the Redevelopment Agency, which led to several meetings with Frank Taylor (then head of the RDA), and then to the construction of Pension Esperanza, the last single-resident occupancy (SRO) ever built in San José.⁸

In the mid 1990s, Scott left San José to work on a master’s degree of divinity at Yale, but upon completing his degree, he returned in 1997, where he started the Community Homeless Alliance Ministry (CHAM) based out of the First Christian Church, which is right across the street from San José State on 5th Street. Then, in the early 2000s, a group of students who had learned about the social action of the Student Homeless Alliance decided to re-start SHA.

In the early 2000s, SHA worked closely with CHAM. In 2001, SHA students participated in taking over unoccupied housing units right across the street from First Christian Church, forcing the City to respond. These actions led to the City coming up with a plan to house one hundred people in units throughout San José. In the mid 2000s, SHA started “Poverty Under the Stars”, an annual sleepout in early November to draw attention to the fact that Silicon Valley was the homeless capital of Northern California. SHA was not very active for a few years, but re-emerged in 2014 when “The Jungle”, one of the largest homeless encampments in the nation, and just six blocks from campus, was shut down by the City. SHA had been advocating for “No Sweeps” and the creation of legal encampments, but on that December day when the sweeps began, SHA students literally left classes, and walked out into the rain to help people move their belongings to other places, including other encampments.⁹

In 2017, SHA shifted its focus to students who were experiencing homelessness. The first response of SHA students was to advocate for legal encampments on campus. SHA believed that campus encampments should be available for students, professors, and community members. Just that year, an SJSU faculty member had made news for living in her car, since she could not afford rent in San José. SHA students visited Seattle and their legal encampments, and returned with many good ideas. At that time, the thinking was that there were about 400 SJSU students experiencing homelessness.¹⁰

4,350 people in San Jose are "houseless"

400 SJSU students are homeless

70% of houseless have jobs but can't afford housing

132 homeless died on the streets of San Jose in 2016

DO YOU WANT TO END HOMELESSNESS IN SAN JOSE?

STUDENT HOMELESS ALLIANCE (SHA)

SHA's goal is to work towards stopping the homeless sweeps and creating legal encampments. As part of this campaign, SHA is working toward legal encampments at SJSU to shelter students, professors, and others who can't afford housing.

SHA
Contact us to learn how to get involved!
shainfo@comcast.com

Follow us on:
Facebook: SJSU SHA
Twitter: sjsu_sha
Instagram: sjsu_sha

SJSU students propose homeless encampment on campus

Thursday, April 19, 2018

GIGI BOLANOS
STUDENT HOUSING ALLIANCE

EMBED <> | MORE VIDEOS ▶

The topic of homelessness took center stage on the San Jose State University campus Thursday afternoon as students demanded action from university officials.

SAN JOSE, Calif. (KGO) -- The topic of homelessness took center stage on the San Jose State University campus Thursday afternoon as students demanded action from university officials.

In 2018, a California State University (CSU) Chancellor's report was released that showed that 13.2% of SJSU students had experienced homelessness in the past year, which meant that there were 4,000 Spartans who were houseless. With this information, the SHA students changed their demands.

The Events:

By late 2018 and into early 2019, SHA's demand had become three-fold: \$2,500 emergency grants, safe parking for students in the 7th Street Garage, and an emergency campus housing program with a minimum of 12 beds.

To encourage the campus President, Mary Papazian, to agree to SHA's demands, the students held rallies and marches. SHA students also did creative events, like "Cookie for a Call", which is similar to "tabling", but adds an additional dimension to it, which is that the people the students are talking to are asked to make a call right there to the target's office asking them to support the campaign demands. If they make a call, the students gave them a cookie. SHA used the above flier in their "Cookie for a Call" event, getting other students to make over 100 telephone calls to the President's office. In addition, SHA members asked students walking by their table, which was set up in a centrally located space on campus, to write down their housing insecurity stories anonymously on a post-it note, and then these post-it notes were placed on a board to the side of the table which could be viewed by other students and campus members walking by. Additionally, these post-it notes were transcribed into a document, and then were sent to the President. As part of SHA's efforts to gather support for their demands, the students

met with San José Mayor Sam Liccardo, Council member Raul Peralez, State Senator Jim Beall, and Assembly members Ash Kalra and Marc Berman.



President Papazian Support SHA's Demands
SJSU Homeless Students Need More Help!

CALL HER:
 (408) 924-1177

EMAIL HER:
 sjsupres@sjsu.edu

Tell President Papazian We Need:

1. \$2,500 Emergency Grants
2. Safe Parking in 7th Street Garage
3. Emergency Housing with minimum 12 beds for 60 days

For More Info, Contact the Student Homeless Alliance (SHA): shajsjuinfo@gmail.com

Petition Signatures & Housing/Food Insecurity

After several months of SHA holding rallies and marches, the President agreed to meet with the SHA students in early March, 2019. Several students—including Alejandro Mayorga, Mayra Bernabe, and Saline Chandler, all of who are in the below image—met with President Papazian, and presented SHA’s three demands, but the President refused to agree to any of them. However, in the meeting, President Papazian did promise “to house every Spartan” that needed emergency housing.¹¹



The SHA students were clearly disappointed, but they took this new commitment from the President and started encouraging all Spartans who needed emergency housing to contact SJSU Cares, which is the office on campus that deals with the basic needs of the students. In early fall of 2019, the media reported that 100 students had asked for housing, but that SJSU had provided only six students with housing. With this information, the students held a rally at the Tommie Smith and John Carlos statues that was attended by about 100 students. The press conference received a lot of media attention, and soon after, the President’s office called SHA, and said they would like to meet with the students to discuss their concerns.



SHA students met every two weeks for the next several months, and by the end of December, an agreement was reached. The students work was aided by the support of Supervisor Cindy Chavez, who spent time with the SHA students helping them with the language for the agreement, and to place clear time frames on when certain “action items” would be completed. The final agreement included the creation of a 12 bed emergency pilot program in the dorms, a centralized space in Clark Hall where students can talk privately about their housing and other basic need issues, a marketing and communication plan to let all SJSU students know about the 12 emergency bed program and other SJSU Cares resources, and the creation of an Advisory Board that is composed of members from SHA and the Bill Wilson Center (an ally of SHA). In January of 2020, the SHA-SJSU Agreement was announced in front of the media, with President Papazian sitting next to the President of SHA, Briena Brown.¹²



Resources:

Spartan Daily, “Student Homeless Alliance Demands Resources from SJSU”, March 4, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d0UagZ63pE0> (accessed September 11, 2021)

Chapter 11: Who Will Write the Next Chapter?



Today, SJSU students are involved in many actions on campus. Students are active in the #MeToo movement. For example, in the fall of 2017, Students Against Sexual Harassment (SASH) won their demand to force the resignation of a professor who had sexually harassed a student. Originally, the professor had been given a two-week suspension and was provided diversity training, and then was allowed to return to the classroom. SASH was outraged and advocated successfully to have the professor resign. Moreover, Dreamer students have been actively defending the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. This work dates back to 2010, when Collective Voices for Undocumented Students won their campaign to allow AB 540 (undocumented) students to use computers from Clark Hall and to receive certain SJSU scholarships. Lastly, there are five SJSU faculty teaching social action in their classes, providing the students an opportunity to solve social problems. If you are interested, please contact Dr. Scott Myers-Lipton.

Which SJSU students will write the next chapter? Maybe it will be you!

APPENDIX: A LIVING DOCUMENT

Possible Future Chapters

This booklet explores some of the major racial and social justice activities at San José State University; it does not claim to explore all of them. In the future, there are additional chapters that may be added. These activities include:

- 1) Principal Allen instituted vocational training program in the basement of the Normal School, while students of the Normal School established public education in the region during the period of 1880-1900.
- 2) During World War I, there were a number of student relief committees on campus. For example, there was an Armenia relief committee as early as 1916. Also, during the Depression and World War II, students were involved in relief work.
- 3) During the Viet Nam War, there were major student protests on campus focusing on Dow Chemical. Check out <https://ww2.kqed.org/news/2017/09/12/vietnam-war-inspires-a-lifetime-of-political-activism-in-san-jose/> and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MOfs8iJNTE&feature=player_embedded. In addition, there was campus activity around the bombing of Cambodia
- 4) Students were involved in the women's movement and the creation of women's studies on campus. See: http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kt8199s37q/entire_text/

If you have suggestions for a possible chapter, please contact Dr. Scott Myers-Lipton at the SJSU Human Rights Institute.

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- ¹ Daily Staff Report, “Riot Breeds Violence”, *Spartan Daily*, May 1, 1992, scholarworks.sjsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=8277&context=spartandaily (accessed January 8, 2018); Daily Staff Report, “Rallies Spilt Between Peace and Destruction,” *Spartan Daily*, May 1, 1992, scholarworks.sjsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=8277&context=spartandaily (accessed January 8, 2018).
- ² Kristina Allan, “President Speaks with BSU”, *Spartan Daily*, October 20, 1995, scholarworks.sjsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=8751&context=spartandaily (accessed January 13, 2018).
- ³ Susan Murray, “Final Student Report of the Campus Climate Focus Group Research Project”, Fall, 2011, www.sjsu.edu/people/susan.murray/mypubs/FGReportStudent_LogoFinal.pdf (accessed January 13, 2018).
- ⁴ Tracy Kaplan, “San Jose State Expels Three Charged with Hate Crime”, *San Jose Mercury News*, May 2, 2014, <https://www.mercurynews.com/2014/05/02/san-jose-state-expels-three-charged-with-hate-crime> (accessed January 18, 2018).
- ⁵ NBC Staff, “3 San Jose State Students Guilty of Battery on Black Freshman, But Not Hate Crime”, *NBC News*, February 22, 2016, www.nbcbayarea.com/news/local/Jury-Verdict-in-San-Jose-State-Hate-Crime-Against-Black-Roommate-369701611.html (accessed January 13, 2018); Jodie Hernandez, “San Jose State University Students Protest Against Campus Hate Crimes”, *NBC News*, March 17, 2016, www.nbcbayarea.com/news/local/San-Jose-State-University-Students-Protest-Against-Hate-Crimes-372499552.html (accessed January 17, 2018).
- ⁶ Kate Murphy, “San Jose State Donor’s Alleged Remarks about Latinos Investigated”, *San Jose Mercury News*, November 10, 2014, <http://www.mercurynews.com/2014/11/10/san-jose-state-donors-alleged-remarks-about-latinos-investigated> (accessed January 13, 2018); “Latinas Don't have DNA to be Successful' Comment Leads to Resignations at CA University”, *Fox News*, November 15, 2014, www.foxnews.com/world/2014/11/15/latinas-dont-have-dna-to-be-successful-comment-leads-to-resignations-at-ca.html (accessed January 17, 2018).
- ⁷ Kate Murphy, “San Jose State Racial Bias Fixes have Long, Unfulfilled History”, *San Jose Mercury News*, April 19, 2014, www.mercurynews.com/2014/04/19/san-jose-state-racial-bias-fixes-have-long-unfulfilled-history (accessed January 17, 2018).

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- ⁸ Conversation with Pastor Scott Wagers, September 11, 2021; Gallucci “Students Strike Out Against Student Homelessness”, April 3, 1992, <https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=8263&context=spartandaily> (accessed September 11, 2021).
- ⁹ Abel, “SJSU Alumnus Aims to Curb Gang Violence”, November 7, 2009, <https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1307&context=spartandaily> accessed September 11, 2021); NBC Bay Area, “San Jose State Students Sleep Out Under Stars in Solidarity With Homeless”, November 13, 2016, www.nbcbayarea.com/news/local/San-Jose-State-Students-Sleep-Out-Under-Stars-in-Solidarity-With-Homeless-347494141.html (accessed January 27, 2018); Pan, “San Jose Shuts Down ‘The Jungle,’ One of Nation’s Largest Homeless Encampments”, December 9, 2014, <http://peninsulapress.com/2014/12/09/san-jose-homeless-encampment-shut-down> (accessed September 11, 2021).
- ¹⁰ KPIX CBS SF Bay Area, “Homeless San Jose State Professor Forced To Live In Her Car”, August 30, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y8FeXvn-8zY> (accessed September 11, 2021).

- ¹¹ KPIX CBS SF Bay Area, “Activist Rally On Behalf Of Homeless Students At San Jose State”, March 4, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X11YFLz-EM> (accessed September 11, 2021); Homeless SJSU Students Ask School For Place Where They Can Park And Sleep”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6vqiTW4iWts> (accessed September 11, 2021).
- ¹² KPIX CBS SF Bay Area, “San Jose State Accused Of Not Doing Enough For Homeless Students”, October 2, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eufd-eRw4sM>; SJSU Newsroom, “Press Conference: Comprehensive Housing Solutions for SJSU Students, Faculty and Staff”, January 27, 2020,

<https://blogs.sjsu.edu/newsroom/2020/press-conference-comprehensive-housing-solutions-for-sjsu-students-faculty-and-staff> (accessed September 11, 2021).