Why Did We Go? A Panel Reflection

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This panel discussion highlighted the first day of this year's Civil Rights Reunion and Renewal activities. Nine panelists, including the moderator, Professor Cynthia Merriwether-Devries, shared their memories with over 600 members of a packed Ellis Hall audience. The two-hour discussion has been edited and condensed by Steven E. Knepper, Juniata Class of 2006, for inclusion in *Voices*.

Moderator, Cynthia Merriwether-Devries: Why is it that you went? Why did you go?

Harriet Richardson Michel: Several people are looking in my direction. I was a senior. I had spent my four years at Juniata in a lot of turbulence, I guess. Kind of pushing and kicking and demanding that the students and faculty recognize me for who I was. Which was an African-American student who had spent some time in Europe before I came here. So, for me, going was, at least in part, a continuum of the struggle and battle that I had during my

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four years at Juniata. But what galvanized it obviously as an African-American was knowing of the deaths that had occurred, both whites and blacks who had sacrificed themselves for the voter rights of people who looked like me. I felt very much that I wanted to stand up for principle. And I can only say tonight that I am really sorry that at the last minute Galway Kinnel couldn't come. Because you need to understand that he was our leader. He was our intellectual and spiritual leader. He taught us many things during his semester here as a poet-in-residence. He brought the outside world into Juniata, and he showed us where we could be more human. And at least for me, he helped me galvanize what I was feeling so passionately about what was going on, and we made the decision to go.

Elmer Maas: The decision to go was in the context of so many things that were happening at that time. And we had just within a matter of hours and days been brought into a consciousness of the terrible violence that was being acted on the people. We were trying to march from Selma to Montgomery on what became known as Bloody Sunday. Eighty-five people were clubbed almost to the edge of their lives, simply trying to march to the county seat to get permission and security and attaining voter-registration rights. People could not vote, and to see that as a national public issue was one of the most horrible and disorienting events that we had witnessed in the United States in a long time. African-Americans witnessed it, of course, as part of their lives and part of their lives every day of their lives, and this was not new history to the folks who were experiencing this and were risking their lives to register to vote. This was an event that suddenly hit the national attention, and to see this and to put this together as people see the horrors and oppression of the segregation that still existed in the southern states of this country and challenging that was admiral for all of those who tried to march from Selma that day across the bridge. I think it weighed on the consciousness, and I felt grateful that there were students and others here on campus, Galway was here, and there were students who had been devoting a tremendous amount that people hadn't recognized up to that point. Suddenly it got at least respected; here is something that we can't just read about and just watch on television. We have to become a part of putting an end to it. And in whatever small way that meant, and certainly in

our lives it was small in magnitude to what the people were facing, but we had to do something, and that's what made us say we have to do it in some way – in a simple way, whatever that may be – we're going to be a part of putting an end to this.

Pamela Clemson Macomber: There was very much a sense that history was changing. What Martin Luther King was doing was creating a new opportunity. And very much, if you were not participating, you were automatically on the side of the status quo. In other words, there was no way to be neutral. And it was a historical moment and it was an opportunity. You could say you were for equality and for justice and all those things, but all of the sudden history was going to move in a new direction, or at least it had the opportunity to. The momentum was beginning, and it was almost like we were given the gift to participate and to help that momentum along. And I think that was the sense that to do nothing was to say that it was alright if black people didn't vote and it was alright to have segregation. And the sense that there was no way to be neutral.

Chuck Lytle: I grew up in a small river town in Pennsylvania that had economically started to die at the end of World War II. It was tied to manufacturing, and the factories were closing all around it. It was geographically isolated as so many small towns are in Pennsylvania, and because of that it also was very socially isolated. When I came to Juniata in the fall of 1964, I had never spoken to a black person. There were no Blacks, they were almost rivals of my town. As a small child, I would be frightened into obedience by my parents telling me stories about black people who would come and get me. For me this was about being abysmally provincial and, in a larger sense, ignorant. And I brought all that with me to Juniata as personal baggage. And I was lined in September of '64 with all that. You will not get my lecture tonight about what Juniata was like, but by the time this happened, already I knew that I wasn't in Kansas anymore. And so much had happened within me in terms of the intellectual and moral – moral – I'll say that again, moral, expectation of this campus and the professors. It was life-altering. Now everybody here who is a student is rolling their eyes. Luckily I can't see you. But I have to admit that as I was a freshman, this place was life-altering. And so by the time all of this happened, and I understand that all of the administration didn't approve of all that was

going on, the school sort of did itself in. It was the professors. You're looking at one right here, Professor Maas, who I had my freshman year. And I had been so turned-on, that when I found out that Harriet had met with Galway?, had met with Don Hope. And I was friends with Gary Rowe. How many of us worked in the dining hall? We were the group behind the counter. It was like we were drawn. I was a completely different person because of the campus and all that was going on. It was the students, the profs, and the incredible expectation. So why did I go down? The pump was primed. And for me, not being politically active, and being so young, trust me, I did not intellectualize it. It was almost gut reaction. It was like, how could you not do it? It was almost like, how could you not?

Gary Rowe: I'm a different part of the story in a sense. I did not go on that first trip to Alabama. President Ellis, Calvert Ellis, dealing with all this turmoil and torment decided to do what many college administrators could have easily done in that era, and that was to invoke a doctrine called *In Loco Parentis,* Latin for "We are your parents," essentially. That was literally the administrative feel of the time. We came to college; we were placed in this institution and in the trust of the administrators. And they were, in effect, our parents. So I faced a choice after helping to commence all of this turbulence: to defy my parents who would not supply a letter, to risk losing a scholarship, and I just didn't want to go somewhere else, or to lick my wounds and wait for another day. I finally won the battle with my parents. I went to Atlanta that summer with Phil Jones...but what I learned seeing my colleagues and best friends go there and return, something that was reinforced by my trip to Atlanta that summer, was that our problems were here, not just in the South. Certainly the dramatic confrontations occurred in the South, but if we started to look around this community, as we did, there was a lot of work to be done. While not having gone on that trip, my peers found it necessary to elect me the head of the Student Committee on Racial Equality at the school. We did a lot of work, and we did make a difference. I'm probably the only one on this stage who lives in what was formerly called the Deep South, now known as the New South. I live in Lawrenceville, Georgia, south of Atlanta. But I live on a street with fifteen houses around the cul-de-sac. Four families are African-American; four are

Caucasian; one is Pakistani and one man is from Nigeria; another couple is from New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, respectively; and two families are from Peru. And no one thinks anything about it. It is utterly unremarkable because the New South is that way in many, many states. And this state, this commonwealth, is transformed, too. And a lot of that started in 1965.

Don Ardolino: I was involved just with several groups who were active and pushing the Civil Rights Movement. And I was involved in numerous arguments and discussions for a couple years, battling both classmates and family opposition. This stuff kind of grows. I tried to get involved in real live ways as opposed to just complaining. I was a little more able to be there and actually accomplish something personal and see it done rather than just talking about it.

Janet Kauffman: You know I had some of the same conversations with my family about whether I could or could not go. I think that the interesting thing for me as a student, here, a young student, was the fact that we were invited. The opportunity that everybody talks about was really an invitation throughout the United States from Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committees, asking colleges to send students out. That made a big difference for all of us. It wasn't that we were just out of some organization of our own thinking we should go there. I felt at least that I was being asked to go there, and if I was being asked, somebody ought to be there as a body, not to do anything in particular, but to arrive, be present, and be visible so that there was sense that the nation was going to be alerted to the fact that there were this many people concerned about voting rights. So in a way it was a very abstract and hugely idealistic action for me. I just believed as a basic principle that it was important for people to do this, all sorts of people. And I know my parents of course thought it was a communist-inspired plot, and everybody didn't approve of all of that, and we argued a lot on the phone. And long distance phone calls are expensive, and we spent a lot of time on the phone for about two days, trying to convince them. I thought that they never gave permission. For thirty years I thought I went there in defiance. But last month, I was helping my parents move to a retirement home, and my mom gave me this box of letters. And of course, knowing that this was coming up, I looked through 1965. And on the Thursday before we left, I wrote to my parents and said this: "Even if we don't go to Selma, I

want you to know how much it meant to me that you sent permission anyway." I forgot it! "I knew you didn't agree based on some of the demonstrations, but I know you had realized that I had thought a lot about going, and I decided it was necessary for me to go to put into action what I felt and talked about all along. Because you sent in the permission slip, I feel suddenly older, knowing that you have faith in me even if you disagree or worry about my safety." I was so shocked! And I spent a lot of time thanking them all over again, because they really did not want me to go. So I learned a lot. I learned it is important to support students. It's important to support your children in doing the things they hold so dear and so morally important to them.

John Fike: Well, you know for me, part of it was that Galway continually kept harping on this theme of you're so provincial. Now I came from a high school in New England, and my view of the world was not real mature. Provincial – you've got to be kidding! What is it? Provincial. A narrow point of view. A narrow way of seeing the world within a certain social context. Within a certain defining geography, of values. Without an input of variety. And something resonated with that and that is that the Church of Brethren values of service to humanity, not piety, as some of the Anabaptist Brethren emphasized in those days of the 17th century. But service – that was the three-century-year-old tradition. That among other things, while at Juniata College, service to humanity. So, provinciality and service was what drove me down there. Because what I wanted to do was have an impact on the lives of the people who couldn't vote. I said, probably in sophomoric terms, to Jo McMeen of *The Daily News,* that if those folks down there couldn't treat people the way they need to be treated, we would have to demonstrate and show how this is done. Now that was pretty weak, but the idea was that if you are going to confront something – an institution, a person, a set of values that you may look on as wrong or evil or against humanity – then you must confront it with some kind of alloy that it doesn't really understand, so groups of people making a moral witness using the press is the only way you get to guys on white horses with ball bats. You can't go out and confront them; you'd get your head beat in. So you use demonstrations. I wanted to be a part of that. I wanted to say, "Yes, these people deserve to be able to vote. They need to be able to

determine their own opportunities." We got invited down there to do that. I think that's why I went.

Merriwether-DeVries: Each of you have alluded to a somewhat different campus experience than most of our students are familiar with. Can you share with us some of the perspectives of the students who did not go along, and how you were treated before you left? And when you came back?

Harriet Michel: I was awkward here my whole time. I have to keep reminding those of you who are here because someone said to me earlier that the good thing about Juniata now is that people can be who they are. They can revel in their individuality. That certainly was not so forty years ago. Most of the students were from small towns around Pennsylvania. Most people were familiar just with those who looked, smelled, thought, talked like them. And so, when I arrived here in 1961, immediately people began to ask me what country I was from. I'm from Pennsylvania, right outside of Pittsburgh. I had to spend a lot of time, I felt, explaining what it was like to be black in America. They didn't know. I felt it was my duty, in fact, to say to people that there are people who are different from you, and I'm it. For a long time, I was the only black female student on this campus. I couldn't get a date, ladies. None of the boys here would date me because they feared being ostracized. For many of my classmates, in those days, college – that was one place where you looked for your spouse. And that wasn't even an option for me because people felt like they weren't comfortable. So I was in an entirely different position than my classmates. And the faculty, Elmer and Don Hope were dolls; there were some faculty members I could go to, but many of the faculty members wanted to know what country I was from too. They just didn't have that exposure. So I felt that part of my role while I was at Juniata was to expose people. I was a teacher the whole time I was here; at least I felt like that. I think I learned here at Juniata, that there is nobody in the world ever like you. There was never anybody in the world exactly like you before you, and there will never be any exactly like you in the world after you. So because you are so unique, each one of you, each one of us, each human being on the planet, is so unique, we absolutely have an obligation to exercise that uniqueness around the world, because the world will never have another shot at it. And I believe that. I learned it in my freshmen psych

class; I wrote it down, and I absolutely believe it. And so, damn it, I was convinced that this world at Juniata would know I was here. And experience my uniqueness.

Merriwether-DeVries: Mr. Rowe, you've been identified by several of the people on this stage as somewhat of a ringleader of this process. How were you received at that time?

Gary Rowe: My recollection is that we were committed to what we were affirming at that time, and I don't remember fretting much at all about what anyone else thought. I don't mean that to sound that I was segregating myself from the rest of the campus, from the rest of the student body; or I was thinking of myself as some sort of superior human being, clearly not. I think we stood up for what we believed in. Yes, we hoped that others would believe in that, too. But there was a change in the atmosphere of this campus. And in the regard we had for what was going on in the rest of the world. We never looked back; at least for the rest of my time here, we continued those commitments. I don't remember ever sensing the need to convert the rest of the campus.

Merriwether-DeVries: You bring up an interesting point, that each of you have gone on to continue to be engaged in the Anti-War Movement, to be engaged in the Civil Rights Movement, to be engaged in sources of change. Can you share a little bit about what you've done since you've been at Juniata?

Harriet Michel: Well, I was last arrested about fours years ago. My life has been choosing the road less traveled. I never chose an easy path for myself. I sometimes made it much more difficult than it needed to be. But since I left Juniata, I moved to New York, and I have always had jobs that have dealt with equity, fairness, justice, improving the lives of people of color, people who didn't have. I led the demonstrations in New York against the South African Embassy when a group called Trans-Africa, which I was the vice chairman of …(unable to transcribe from tape), went on the hunger strike when the apartheid was still in place. Most recently, I led a group of women demonstrating outside the headquarters of the New York City Police Department in January. It was cold. We sat down on the street in January against the murder of Amadou Diallo, who was an African immigrant who was shot forty times by the cops when he had no gun; they saw his wallet and thought it was a gun. You know, Juniata did transform me. It transformed me because it made me

stronger, but I think that I would have taken the course that I've taken probably anyway. But I learned here to stand up even more, to give an even stronger voice to inequality and injustice. Today I run a very large organization that works with Fortune 500 companies and points them toward businesses owned by Blacks, Latinos, Asian-Americans, and Native Americans. Last year we had offices in thirty-nine cities across and the country and three foreign countries. I've been running the organization for seventeen years, but what I'm most proud of is two years ago our corporate members did eighty billion dollars worth of business with minority suppliers. For that I'm very grateful.

Elmer Maas: The last time I was on this stage was in the spring of 1968. It was a very difficult time in many ways. A time of deep shock and sadness and horror. The vicious murder of Dr. Martin Luther King, the murder that was perhaps brought on by Dr. King's courageous and tremendous [stance]…for speaking out with courage, directness, and clearness in his opposition to the war in Vietnam. And adding that to his continued opposition to racism, poverty, and militarism. Dr. King spoke out in one of his most famous speeches against not only war, but all parts of war: the weapons of war, the violence of war, all violence, certainly including racism and poverty, and other forms of militarism. But he spoke out quoting the Isaiah passage: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks; Nation shall not rise against nation. Neither should they make war anymore." And shortly, some few weeks after Dr. King was so viciously murdered and resonating deeply, I believe, with the spirit of opposition to war and the instruments of war…several other folks went into a draft board in Kingsville, Maryland, and lifted the files out of that draft board. And destroyed those files by burning them on the driveway of this draft board with homemade napalm, saying it was better to burn draft boards with homemade napalm than to burn children, than to burn human beings as what's happening in Vietnam. And at this point, I was myself very deeply grateful and pleased to be able to join with Daniel and Phillip Berrigan some two years later in an action in which we focused our attention on nuclear weapons as such, and on one bright sunny morning, in September 1980, we drove in a couple of cars to the…General Electric Plant in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, drove around the back of the plant. And we

walked inside and opened up cases that would carry destructive power thirty times the power of the bomb that was dropped in Hiroshima, Japan, in 1945. And standing in front of these nose cones that we pulled out of the cases, we held up our hammers and baby bottles filled with human blood, that was a symbol of the life that had been shed because of these weapons. And we destroyed those two nose cones; we hammered on them until they were incapable of being used by anybody to kill, to further the cause of mass destruction that the United States was bent upon at that point with its 32,000 warheads. We were arrested, tried, and I spent two years in jail for that. I guess in a general sense, in reflecting upon the implications in this action we took together in 1965, I am working for life and community trying to resist violence. It occurs to me at this particular time in our struggle to be realistic in what our future may hold and what we must do; we have a simple task, and that's to reclaim our humanity, to simply reaffirm our small human community all the way around, everybody, recognizing that we are hell-bent on the path of mutual destruction, we are hell-bent on the path of struggling with and fighting other people all throughout the world to hold on as a nation, the United States, to its disproportionate share of the world's resources, of the world's advantages, and are willing to manipulate, murder, kill, and even destroy human life, and including our own. And this in fact is what we are looking upon on a global level. It seems to me when we went to Montgomery we carried a solution with us, saying as a human family we must survive by working together and getting beyond all this economics of greed and free of our own weapons of mass destruction, which are at 10,000 in the arsenal at this point, and looking to build a world free of that violence, and free of that spirit of manipulation of others. Freedom that Dr. King understood and that he spoke about in his own life, which he sacrificed for the sake of nonviolence and for peace in the world. And be able to commit ourselves to that for the rest of our lives as deeply as humanly possible.

Pam Macomber: Well, I haven't been arrested since Montgomery. I spent ten years after that time in a religious community basically trying to rearticulate Christianity as a positive force in the world. That's sort of ironic since I'm from the sovereign nation of Texas now. We seem to be leading the world in quite a different direction down there. They tell me I'm liberal, and I look at them like, "You

have no idea."
I've been the first woman in a number of positions for a number of companies which has been sort of interesting. In 1984, I was hired into a multi-billion dollar national company as the first woman in a field management position, which was sort of unbelievable actually. I mean, it was unbelievable to me that in 1984 I could be a pioneering physician. Anyway, I haven't been arrested. But if I could find something that I thought would move history I'd be willing to risk it though.