

# The Dudley-A&T Revolt Revisited

## The Struggle for Democracy and Beloved Community in Greensboro's 1969 Segregated, Jim Crow School System and Beyond

May 23 and 24<sup>th</sup> 2019 will mark 50 years since the North Carolina A&T State University (A&T) Campus was assaulted by 650 National Guard troops. The troops fired 50 caliber machine gun bullets into Scott Hall Dormitory and lobbed tear gas canisters through the broken windows in a 6 a.m. invasion. When the troops stormed inside Scott Hall, they shot through doors, turned over furniture, scattered personal belongings, wrecking dorm rooms in the process.

That raid resulted in busloads of students being detained and bussed to the McLeansville prison, some 10 miles outside of Greensboro, in what was termed "protective custody." A&T was closed for the year and A&T's President Dr. Lewis C. Dowdy was summoned to Washington, DC to testify before the *House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC)*.

There is very little about this in the International Civil Right Museum, very little on the A&T Campus, and very little in the Greensboro Historical Museum. Perhaps the only place to get a reasonable understanding would be the archives of the *Carolina Peacemaker Newspaper*.

We must ask the question, why? Could it have had anything to do with maintaining "white power" against a movement that was determined to forge a little "black power" for the children of those whose great grandparents were enslaved to create wealth for white slave masters? How easily we forget historical context and how easily we invent "alternative facts" (or dismiss facts altogether) to support an alternative narrative.

I recently read in the April (2019) edition of *A&T Alumni Times* some reflection from members of the class of 1969 related to what is often referred to as the A&T-Dudley "riots." I was both pained and deeply saddened by the comments. The comments were probably factually accurate from the perspective of the students, most of whom I know. But they were without context. **To cite isolated facts out of context is to do a disservice to truth, knowingly or unknowingly.**

Context provides meaning. The facts properly organized is a source of truth. But what I was reading was as if someone parachuted into a war zone and started saying I saw somebody shooting and somebody else shooting back. I saw somebody running, somebody bleeding, somebody screaming, somebody dying, etc., etc., etc. All of those statements might be factually accurate, but without context there can be no real understanding of what's happening and certainly no understanding of why.

Further, without context, false narratives emerge, primarily from the dominant culture and then equally as bad confusion abounds over conflicting narratives. In our make-believe war mentioned above, several questions require answers: Why were folk fighting or being shot in the first place? Why were people fighting back? What led to it? In the case of Dudley High School what were the precipitating issues beyond the school election? What were black people struggling against and what were white supremacists fighting to maintain?

I know that answers to the questions above reflect stains on our collective souls as well as our untamed egos; but, these are the basis questions to be answered if our city and indeed the US society is to move forward together. As an organizer and active participant in the struggles here in Greensboro since 1966 until the present

moment (2019), I want to offer my perspective in a sincere desire to contribute to correcting the flawed popular narratives and to promote justice for all.

**In 1969**, Claude Barnes Jr, a Dudley High student from the Morningside Public Housing Community filed to run for SGA president at Dudley High School. But, the school system leadership refused to allow his name to be put on the ballot because they claimed he belonged to a militant or subversive organization, namely the Youth for the Unity of a Black Society (YUBS) which was objectively the youth arm of the Greensboro Association of Poor People (GAPP). The school officials claimed that YUBS was a militant and subversive organization.

It is important to note here that GAPP had emerged in 1969 as a considerable force in the community; GAPP, working with the NAACP, ministers, and civil rights veterans had built a network of seven neighborhood-based grassroots organizations. In addition, the Student Government Associations (SGA) at both Bennett College and A&T were working with GAPP. It was this coalition of groups and organizations, including Dudley students, that was the concern of white Greensboro leadership.

What was actually emerging was a relatively united Black Community that was growing increasingly aware of its history, its power, and its historical duty to forge creative alternatives to the scourge of racism, dehumanization, and all forms of exploitation. It was this unprecedented level of unity of the historic Greensboro Black Community that was the target of the white supremacist, segregationist leadership, which were in charge of the City. The primary source of information to city leaders and white leaders in general was the police, sometimes directly, but often through public media. Without this context you will not be able to accurately understand the Dudley-A&T Revolt of 1969 or the police-facilitated Klan/Nazi Massacre of 1979.

Dudley students largely rejected the school system's logic and chose to **write-in Claude Barnes as Dudley SGA president anyway**. He reportedly won by a two to one margin. The all white school board and superintendent, objectively guided the "rejection process of Claude Barnes through their public relations director, Mr. Owen Lewis, who was also white. Mr. Lewis objectively replaced the school principal Mr. Franklin Brown as it related to governing the school that was now in crisis. The school system refused to accept the write-in ballots because they said write-ins were not upheld by the school constitution.

So, from the SGA election day on May 2, 1969 until May 22, 1969, nearly three weeks, Black community leaders, clergy, and community organizers made many efforts to solve the problem, holding meetings and pleading with the School Superintendent and the Board of Education. These efforts involved NAACP President Dr. George Simpkins; Rev. Cecil Bishop, Pastor of Trinity AME Zion Church; Mr. A. S. Webb, Secretary-Treasurer of American Federal Savings and Loan Association; Rev. Otis Hairston, Pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church; Nelson Johnson, then vice president elect of the NCA&T Student Government Association and director of GAPP; as well as other residents and parents of Dudley students. This May 2nd to May 22nd period, nearly three weeks, is a very critical period to understand. In a lengthy article in the Sunday, May 19, 2019 ***News and Record*** on the Dudley-A&T Revolt virtually nothing was said about this 20-day period of intense work by the black community to resolve the Dudley crisis.

In spite of all the efforts of a relatively united black community, the all-white school board refused to budge. The Dudley students protested; they were sprayed with tear gas and abused by police. Wet from rain and bruised from scuffles with police, Dudley students were jailed. When they were released, they came to A&T's Student Union where the founding Conference of the Student Organization for Black Unity (SOBU) was meeting and asked for help. I was presiding at that meeting. We agreed to adjourn the SOBU Conference, and the attendees as well as a large number of A&T students marched to Dudley High School. After trying to speak to Principal Brown (he refused), we entered the women's gym and proclaimed Claude Barnes as the duly elected president of the Dudley SGA. It was all peaceful, no one was threatened, no one was hit and no school property was damaged or destroyed. A significant number of Dudley Students did leave their classrooms and

joined us in the Gym. After the brief ceremony in the Dudley Women's Gym, all the conference attendees and students returned to the Campus of A&T.

The News Media quickly spread the story across the city and beyond. Later on that evening and into the night of May 22<sup>nd</sup> tensions built on Market street where whites and blacks engaged in verbal and sometimes physical exchanges with each other. But as the night grew, police began to engage the students. Our best information is that police officers got out of a vehicle on the campus near where Haley Hall is now located and fired into a crowd of fleeing students and hit Willie Earnest Grimes, an A&T student and a ROTC member, in the back of the head. Grimes was taken to the hospital by friends where he was pronounced dead. It is then that a group of veterans of the Viet Nam Tet Offensive made the decision to secure the campus; they informed me of the decision the next day.

On the following day, I was contacted by Mr. Hal Sieber, who was employed by the Greensboro Chamber of Commerce and urged to attend a meeting he had convened. The meeting attendees were mainly white men. I agreed to attend along with young Claude Barnes. I remember a kind of grilling of Claude by the group, and under pressure he began to weep. My heart went out to him as I tried to defend this 16 (or 17) year-old boy being put under such pressure because he was striving to be an authentic leader.

They asked me to "call off" the student occupation of the campus. I indicated that I did not have the power to do that in that I did not initiate it. I also pushed the point that they had the power to end the occupation. All they had to do was to agree that Claude Barnes was the duly elected president of the Dudley Student Government. They did not agree to do that; so Claude and I left. Later that day (May 24, 1969) while the campus was still occupied, I married Joyce Ann Hobson, and we will soon be celebrating our 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary.

There is so much more to this story, but I must bring this document to an end. As I do so, I want to emphasize that we in Greensboro and people all over this nation need beloved community and we need real democracy, perhaps more now than we did in the 60's. Today, our nation is beginning to splinter, split and grow increasingly antagonistic with itself. Our moral/ethical standards are being eroded as the democratic institutions, already fragile, are being sabotaged. But, we do have an opportunity to change and to be better. We as individuals and we as a city can more fully and truthfully engage our past, learn from it so as to make a better future.

Over the years, I have tried to do what I believed to be right and just at the time. I realize that in my journey, I have made my share of mistakes. I have tried, not always successfully, to correct them. I have tried and I pray that I will continue to try to grow stronger in truth and grace in the time I have remaining. I hope the future will find all of us striving to walk towards each other as we grow to respect and affirm our wonderful diversity and especially the dignity, worth, and enormous unrealized potential of each person and all peoples. Now you have my perspective. Any feedback you wish to provide will be appreciated.

Yours in peace and love,

Nelson N. Johnson  
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