

Dr. Donald Cole
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Oxford, MS
Interviewed by David Rae Morris
Transcript

DC: I'm Donald Cole, I'm, I'm from originally from Jackson, Mississippi but I'm from Oxford Mississippi now I've been here so long.

DRM: And when were you at the university as a student?

DC: Ah-ha. I first entered the university as a freshman in 1968. I am back as an administrator now since 1993.

DRM: What was the racial climate like when you first enrolled here in the late 1960s?

DC: When I first enrolled the university had been integrated a number of years and I guess I thought it had been uh what I would term "thoroughly" integrated but that was uh not the case. I guess I sort of forgot that one person came in '62 and maybe two or three others in '63 etc. and so by the time '68b came there were a number of uh blacks here uh, but uh they were um [clears throat] in uh pockets and sort of scattered around the university. SO there were many individuals who had not uh served a person, uh, like myself. Many faculty who had not taught a person like myself, and uh the uh racial climate was certainly better than 1962, uh but it still had a ways to go.

DRM: And what do you remember most about that time?

DC: Mostly uh I uh remember, maybe, maybe a few things. One of them was how, how acceptable it was to uh treat uh the uh few blacks here, that were here uh in a rude manner. Uh, how acceptable it was to for um for, for a group of white guys to uh make me get uh off the sidewalk and uh walk around and not be condemned. But uh get a "hooray." Yes, yes, yes, type of sign. And uh certainly uh I remember the uh the isolation where uh there were would be individuals who perhaps would speak to me in private but certainly would not speak to me in public. And uh the isolation in the classroom so it wasn't a uh, uh a setting for which I would today like to send my kid.

DRM: What did the university represent to you?

DC: Oh, uh. The University of Mississippi I thought was a uh a fine academic institution. I heard it uh I'd heard of it. And I'd hear of it's prestige uh and so uh and I was a Mississippian so part of it. And in some sense it was a pinnacle of uh higher education in Mississippi and I wanted to be a part of that pinnacle.

DRM: What was the first you heard of James Meredith?

DC: Oooooooo, I might have been uh in 6th grade or so. And uh distinctively remember as if it was yesterday that I was outside playing and I walked in side and uh my parent's eyes were glued to the television. Uh and uh to the point that it made me stop and ask "What are you watching?" And uh they uh simply said "The University of Mississippi is being integrated." And maybe that is the first time that uh I probably heard the name. And I just remember some mean, evil looking faces on television and just saying to myself that I would never go to a place like that. Of course I was 6th grade at that time and fast-forward a few, few years and [chuckles] and, and I was here.

DRM: So you did not graduate from the university?

DC: I did not graduate from the University as an undergraduate

DRM: Tell us why.

DC: Uh, well, uh at the time that I came here and began to feel a little uncomfortable here and express those feelings to uh the administration here at the time and it seemed if no relief was taking place uh and that was the late 60s. That's when all of America was protesting. Uh, everything from the Vietnam War to uh and uh, we here began those protests as, as well. Uh and of course we were protesting uh something very local and our idea was that somehow if we could get worldwide attention on the university then uh what we wanted would come to fruition and uh the way that we were treated would be stopped, etc. And those particular protests ended up in uh my and several others getting expelled from the university at that time.

DRM: And what exactly were you protesting against?

DC: Okay, so we were uh protesting what we were calling the evils of the day. We were protesting to uh get the University to integrate in terms of the faculty and professional staff. We were protesting uh to get the university to integrate it's sports facilities in football, basketball, and the other sports as well, we were way that we were being treated, the use of the Rebel flag, and the list went on and on and on.

DRM: So you left and came back 25 years later?

DC: Uh, something like that the number of years I can't rem...well actually, uh, uh, uh certainly less than that. I left and ended up graduating from Tougaloo College, and then going on to take a Master's uh and start a Ph.D. uh at another institution, and then decided I was going to come back here and complete my uh doctor's degree. So I did come back in '77 uh and uh and in the mid-80s I completed my doctorate and left again.

DRM: When you came back in the late 70s and early 80s, how had the racial climate evolved? Since the late 60s.

DC: Okay. I certainly could tell a change uh since uh, uh that time. Uh, and uh, it was somewhat of a welcome change. Some of it took place I while I was a student here of a ?, certainly low key. There was some question about whether I could even uh come back uh, or not. And so, with being allowed to come back certainly I was low key. Uh, but uh, but I did have the opportunity to see the university disassociate itself with the uh Rebel flag, for instance. Something I had been wanting for a good while. I did have opportunity to see where uh the university had uh integrated its, its administration. Uh, uh, I did have opportunity to see where the faculty had been integrated. So certainly I did note some uh some change and I welcomed those those changes, as well.

DRM: How have the state and the university evolved in the last 50 years since Meredith?

DC: Oh, the uh state has come a uh has come a good piece. Uh, and uh we have gone from uh, oh uh a fairly, a much segregated system to one for which uh, uh those ideas are not the main ideas of Mississippians right (?) now. Uh of course uh we'll, we'll have some people who, who will never change. And uh we recognize that. Uh, but uh but uh but in terms of uh us being a university, in terms of us being a place that educates individuals to go out in the world, to be a good citizen and make the world a better. Uh I think that we are doing a uh, uh excellent uh job at that. I think we are now a diverse uh institution. Not to say all is well, not to say that we don't have problems. Uh but uh we recognized now that uh that, that, that we put something on the table to talk about. And uh we don't avoid it. We recognize now that we have to train the individuals to solve problems that my generation could not solve. And those terms we have come uh what I call a long way.

DRM: But we're not "there" yet?

DC: We're not there. Uh. You can look at the glass as half empty or uh half full. Of course, the uh the, the half full part is that fact that we've come uh such a long way. And the half empty part is the fact that we've a long way yet to go.

DRM: So is James Meredith a hero?

DC: James Meredith is a hero to me. He is a hero to the University of Mississippi. He is a hero to our nation.

DRM: Talk about the Black Bear.

DC: Oh, man! The Black Bear is a much-improved mascot. Uh, I uh remember a few years ago that as we decided to go and re-visit the mascot issue uh that uh for

myself it would not matter what emerged. Uh, and so there were several we talked about that I uh that I liked. Um and I guess uh I remember my son sort of saying: "It has to be an animal, it has to be an animal," for some reason. And the fact that it was uh an animal sort of pleased me, but the idea of a uh of a, of a mascot is something that all can rally behind. And so this is something that all can rally behind. There were just many uh individuals who could uh, uh could just never be a Colonel Rebel.

DRM: Where would we be without James Meredith?

DC: Uh, integration at the University of Mississippi would have certainly taken place at some time without uh, uh James Meredith. But uh he was a very courageous individual and he was the quote "man of the hour." He was the one uh that uh God sent at that time. Uh, and uh I don't if many others could have uh done it at that time. Uh I would like to think that the University of uh Mississippi would have taken perhaps a different path. It didn't take the path that I would have desired where uh It would not have been controversial at all. But uh the fact that uh it was that it took Courageous individuals like James Meredith uh to uh to make that happen. And I just applaud him and I applaud where we are now as an institution.

DRM: We're on the site of the riot in 1962. Is this hallowed ground?

DC: Oh, without a doubt. This is hallowed ground. The University of Mississippi's itself is pretty hallowed ground is what I think of. It's a very special place. Uh, it you know it's a place that takes, has taken a pretty good look at itself. Uh, some of the aspects of that uh looking at itself it did not like and it uh, it uh, it uh it started uh to correct itself. Um and I'm sort of reminded of uh when I go back to my high school reunion and I see the guy who used to, to bully me. And sometimes I think of uh him uh as a bully, even though now I recognize he is a minister. And so in some sense that's the fate of the University of Mississippi. It has changed tremendously, and there are some who uh will uh who will not acknowledge that change. But anybody who's come, who comes on this campus uh, anybody who reads uh about us honestly, anybody who takes a uh a good moral look at us will see we are not the university of 1962, but we, we are a 20th, 21st century university and ready, if you will, to lead the nation in race relations.