

## Helping the Disenfranchised

I have spent my life trying to shift the balance of power toward the disenfranchised—sharecroppers in Mississippi, peasants in Guatemala, children with disabilities, and poor families of color whose children have been taken from them, often for reasons of poverty and race. I launched my career of activism at Williams, a safe though narrow place to begin. Safe because we were in the purple valley and our every need was taken care of by the college. And narrow because it was a white male upper to middle class college with a smattering of others and a similarly narrow ideological perspective.

My parents believed in racial justice and economic equality and that the underlying structure of capitalism not only kept some people poor but that the world would be better off without it. The call for racial equality resonated because as Jews we had been discriminated against. My father, who became an eminent academic and clinical physician, couldn't get into medical school in this country because of strict quotas for Jews. The call for economic equality while logical was more theoretical because we led financially comfortable lives.

Thus I came to Williams with a critical eye toward the society that surrounded me and a belief in an ill-defined collective solution to social problems. Some, myself included, would label that solution socialism, but I really had no idea what that was at the time.

Williams had a civil rights committee and a chapter of SDS, Students for a Democratic Society, which provided the opportunity for me to learn and do.

I was anointed by Steve Block '65 to be chairman of the Williams Civil Rights Committee my junior year. I organized a spring-break trip of students from Williams (Ben Copland and John Way among others) and Windsor Mt. School in Stockbridge, Mass. to rebuild a black church in Mississippi that had been fire bombed because civil rights meetings had taken place there. Professors Bill Peck and Bob Gaudino came out of their desire to help though I don't know the extent to which the college encouraged their participation as a way to keep a fatherly eye on us.

I was thrilled by what I experienced in Mississippi, not just rebuilding the church, as satisfying as that was, but by the exuberance, pride and courage I saw in the people who worked with SNCC (the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) and COFO (the Council of Federated Organizations) that organized Mississippi Summer the year before.

While rebuilding the church we were invited by a representative of a local segregated Mississippi college to have a conversation about race, but only if the black students in our group did not participate. Gaudino's political orientation, promoting dialogue above almost all else, led to one of the worst decisions of my life. Listening to the pressure for dialogue from Gaudino, I agreed to the meeting. Though it was a different time and

Mississippi was profoundly segregated, I now see it was a mistake, even in that historical context.

I returned to Mississippi as a summer volunteer with COFO a few months later and was torn between staying in Mississippi and returning to Williams for my senior year. Choosing to stay at school, I changed my major from premed biology to psychology. I would have preferred a major in sociology but Williams did not even offer a course in sociology then.

I applied for a Fulbright Scholarship to Colombia, and was awarded one to Guatemala. Someone at Williams said the eminent Harvard sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset wanted to see me. Lipset asked me to participate in a “research project” as he called it to study the political beliefs and activities of students at San Carlos University where I would be studying. I recognized the slimy hand of intelligence gathering and had the good sense to turn down his offer. The connection between Williams and intelligence gathering disturbed me especially knowing that Richard Helms ‘35, director of the CIA went to Williams, and how strong personal networks are at Williams.

I went to Guatemala in 1966 only 12 years after the CIA overthrew the elected government of Jacobo Arbenz after he nationalized United Fruit Company land. On the streets of Guatemala, I saw the rich indigenous culture, the barefoot impoverished peasants, and machine guns and Ford police cars provided by the U.S. government to help put down a guerrilla rebellion.

While in Guatemala I began working with a small research center, the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA) which produces well-researched analyses of Latin American issues, particularly how the United States government and corporate America contribute to Latin America’s underdevelopment.

Living in Guatemala had a profound effect on me, not only because it gave me a palpable understanding of the damage caused by foreign economic and political domination, but because it was there that I fell in love with Risa Jaroslow, a Bennington student who took a semester off from school to live with me. We married the following September and have been married happily and passionately for 47 years.

Although I spent the next four years in graduate school in sociology at Yale, I spent most of my time writing about Guatemala and organizing with the American Independent Movement against the Vietnam War. I handed in my draft card with hundreds of others to William Sloane Coffin who famously left Williams when he found it a narrow and dangerous place for his dissent.

In May 1968 three other American students and I travelled through an exploding Paris to Hanoi as the first U.S. student delegation to visit North Vietnam. This was only weeks

after Johnson said that he would not run for president and stopped the bombing of North Vietnam.

My sympathies for the Vietnamese were heightened by seeing their culture, their society and their commitment to independence. My horror at how the United States was conducting the war was amplified by seeing, among other things, the pellet bombs, outlawed by the Geneva Conventions, which the US military used recklessly.

Toward the end of my course work in graduate school in 1971, I went back to Guatemala to gather data for my doctoral dissertation on U.S. investments. My wife, three friends and I were arrested after a knock on the door by the Guatemalan secret police. The reasons for our arrest are still unclear. The charges were trumped up—they “found” 5 joints because 5 of us were arrested, and they made us pose in front of a semi-nude poster of a Mexican theater group they took off our wall to show our immoral behavior. We were kept in jail for a week and then remained in Guatemala for a month after our release, unable to leave because the police had taken our passports. Eventually we fled the country, disguised as Salvadorian peasants. The case against us was ultimately dismissed because it “lacked credibility.” I haven’t returned to Guatemala.

I left graduate school but continued to work as a writer and activist. After co-writing and co-editing a book on Guatemala I was ready to move on to a less academic, more activist life. I jumped into taxi organizing in New York City with a group called Taxi Rank and File, made up of outsiders, gentle souls and screamers, Marxists and Anarchists, who could not agree on a winning strategy.

That was in 1974 which was a major turning point in my life. I reached a dead end politically and was unhappy personally. Politically, neither power structure research nor rank and file organizing was a way for me to both help disenfranchised people and have a satisfying life. I started therapy and Risa and I separated for almost a year. When we got back together we had our first child. I still wanted to bring about the same kind of changes in the United States but didn’t know how I could do that in a way that made me proud, happy and able to support a family. I spent the next years figuring that out.

To inch my way out of taxi driving, without much of a resume to promote myself, I got a job with the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) interviewing heroin addicts and former heroin addicts. My job was to locate and interview them and give them \$10. Generally people were glad to be found and I was glad to learn about their lives.

From there, a friend told me of a job in the Division of Youth and Family Services in New Jersey as a health planner. It was my first introduction to child welfare. Analytically it was fascinating—a gigantic, poorly connected bureaucratic system with a billion moving parts that arguably harmed children and families as often as it helped them. There were children being hurt and great people working for change.

I got a job working in New York City Council President Carol Bellamy's office as head of her human services unit. I focused on child welfare and the harm foster care was causing children. Through reforms we enacted foster care improved, albeit temporarily. I wrote my dissertation on the rise and fall of those reforms and got a Ph.D. from Yale in 1989, 22 years after I entered graduate school, and just before our son was born.

As the Berlin Wall fell, my father said he wanted to see "how things got so screwed up in Eastern Europe." So my parents, sister and I went there on a trip organized by Monthly Review, an independent socialist magazine. I used the opportunity to visit orphanages in Poland, Hungary and East Germany. I then went back to Budapest to do a more formal assessment of one particular children's home.

When UNICEF learned of the horrors of the Romanian orphanages, there were not many people who knew about child welfare who had been inside an Eastern European orphanage, so the agency asked me to help develop a strategy to reduce Romania's reliance on orphanages. I conducted the first assessment of the child protection system in Romania which helped bring a wave of reforms in the orphanage system there.

The World Bank learned about what I did and asked if I would work with it in Lithuania, not just for children and families, but also for the elderly and disabled. There was irony here, as for me the World Bank was part of an Evil Empire.

I still feel that many of its structural adjustment loans do more harm than good, but I was able to develop an effective, humane, and -- of particular interest to the Bank -- cost-saving strategy to help children and adults. I worked proudly as a consultant there for almost 10 years.

At the same time a friend asked me to help her give away a large inheritance. We created the Child Welfare Fund which provided grants to reform New York City's child welfare system. Our strategy was based on the principle we learned in the Sixties as community organizers -- if people participate in the decisions that affect their lives, they are more likely to have their needs met and their rights protected.

As a result of our work, and the work of hundreds of others, the number of children in New York City's foster care system decreased from almost 50,000 in 1994 to fewer than 11,000 today. I wrote the story of this change in a recent book, *From Pariahs to Partners*

And so my life has evolved from outside activist to working with governments to bring about change. I recently finished a project with six state governments and UNICEF in Nigeria and am now working with the state government of Tabasco, Mexico. I still hold the same core beliefs which have helped me find ways to both shift the balance of power

and use government as a vehicle to improve people's lives, though not always on the same project.

Which brings me back to Williams. I believe a core function of the college was, and still is, to train the middle and high level managers of corporate America and to integrate us into that culture. Williams did that extremely well. But this created a culture limiting political and economic thinking. It produced faculty who recruited for the CIA or who consulted with the State Department and presented the government's position on the Vietnam War. We never heard faculty speak on behalf of colonial or post-colonial Vietnamese revolutionaries. This environment encouraged Bob Gaudino to counsel dialogue at the expense of justice.

I have often felt like an outsider—not just in relation to the mainstream culture, but in the midst of the groups I've worked to support. I felt like an outsider before, during and after Williams, so the problem is clearly not just Williams'. But when I am able to bridge one of those gaps, to connect with people who are different from me, I feel exhilarated. That recently happened at Williams when several years ago our beloved classmate Jeffrey Owen Jones died.

Jeff had a genius for friendship and the group of us that gathered to honor him with a journalism fellowship in his name represented all aspects of Williams, including the core culture. Working with those guys, linked by our love for Jeff and our connection to Williams, has not diminished my concern about Williams' narrowness or my ambivalence about the school, but it has added to my appreciation for the diversity Williams does have, its intellectual rigor and for its brilliance as an institution. It has also increased my friendships with and admiration for the many alums who have taken unusual paths, using the bounty they received from Williams to lead adventurous lives that have improved the world around them.