

# **“I Love This Penn State – But Freedom Is Dearer To Me”**

**H. Jesse Arnelle: “A Love-Wait Affair” – May 18, 1968**

*(Note: On May 18, 1968 H. Jesse Arnelle, the former Nittany Lion Basketball All-American, and Football All-American honorable mention, was the guest of honor at the Penn State Football Awards Banquet. Arnelle would stun many in the crowd by denouncing the University’s record in failing to recruit more Black students, faculty and staff, instead of talking about sports. He further shocked many by turning down the first Annual Alumni Award in protest. The following is a partial text of H. Jesse Arnelle’s speech delivered that evening as printed in the November 19, 1968 Daily Collegian.)*



**H. JESSE ARNELLE**

These are very dissimilar times from the decade of the 1950s when I attended Penn State University. Rather than embroider further the “sweet smell of success,” which is the obvious theme of this evening’s occasion, I have had to reluctantly decide to go at variance with precedence. Forego the pleasure of polite banality and not give into what would be very heavy nostalgia, but use the time instead to speak of our monumental and historical failures; the things that bring dishonor instead of glory to the University; issues pivotal to our time, heavy on my conscience and lay uncomfortably on the hearts of most American.

Since it has been over a decade when I was last amongst you... and since it may be another before I return, I ask that you indulge me a little longer than the twenty-five minutes

allowed.

I do not broach these matters with relish. My undergraduate years here were untypically exciting and stimulating. Having grown up, as it were, in a slum, I miraculously received the benefits of a university education and hold, therefore, enormous gratitude and profound affection for my university. The four year undergraduate love affair I had with Penn State continued upon my graduation and during the intervening years has assumed a form of jealously protective of her virtue and honor.

## **Love-Wait Affair**

I am not unmindful of the nature of the occasion which brings us here tonight. I know the “sweet smell of success” and have contributed in by gone days partially to the then moments of Penn State glory, but in growing protective of her virtue, I grew distant in my respect for her when alas I became less caught up in the euphoria and more aware of the faults which in my mind’s eye despoiled greatly the otherwise matchless beauty of her

symmetry. Mine was never a love-hate relationship; it has been a love-wait affair. However, over the years I have grown weary of waiting, and last month while in Memphis, Tennessee and Atlanta, Georgia on the eve of the calamity (*the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*) which compelled me immediately from Los Angeles, I decided that further delay served only to prolong my disenchantment. So at the risk of queering the pitch, it becomes necessary now to sharpen the controversy.

I am confident that you, the honored, will not allow the tyranny of acclaim and public approbation rob you of your individual courage; still your sense of outrage or muffle your demand for action. True courage stands the test of public censor and leadership requires conviction. While the University rejoices tonight victoriously in the one area, it has historically courted disaster in another.

In the decade of the 1960's we have witnessed the assassination of two of America's most gifted sons: John Fitzgerald Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In those calamitous days of extreme national agony, Congress, spurred on by unprecedented national outpouring, respond by passing legislation long overdue. Universities rededicated institutes, proclaimed scholarships and academic chairs in the name of President Kennedy and Dr. King,, but then it was business as usual.

However, legislation through assassination and scholarship in the name of sacrifices cannot be the accepted pattern for social and educational progress in American. The cost, regardless of whose life is forfeited, is too heavy a burden for democracy to bear. There is a better way... a way which hues relevancy into the very fabric of the university system giving it meaning in contemporary times.

The Pennsylvania State University must become a principal player on the field of social and educational change. Far too long it has been the largely impassive spectator, on a distant sideline, aroused momentarily by the reports filtering through concerning the great conflict raging somewhere in the outside world. Isolated as it is from the teeming, sprawling, urban jungle; insulated from filth, stench, and the sodden pock-marked ugliness of the black ghetto, the University in splendidly contrasting surroundings while grown bigger in size, student enrollment, and resources has grown ratably smaller in commitment to social change and largely insensitive to the frustrated aspirations and daily indignities of the "Other American," which James Baldwin, Kenneth Clark and Claude Browne have written so movingly.

### **"Other America"**

It is more by happenstance or individual scholarly curiosity, than by design that the great majority of Penn State students are made remotely aware of the "Other America." It is both revealing and intolerable that the average undergraduate student, even one majoring in American history, should graduate this 16<sup>th</sup> largest American institute of higher learning and have no deeper insight or historical perspective of Black Americans than what is so frequently distorted and briefly portrayed in a standard American history text.

In America today, much is being openly said about the historical sickness that is ours. The President in his State of the Union message allowed ....” there is a certain restlessness in the land...” It is devolved to his Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders to name the sickness so diagnosed. In a display of great intellectual clarity and considerable courage they concluded our country suffers from “racism,” the progeny of slavery and colonialism. While doubts were expressed regarding this diagnosis, they were mainly exploded by the circumstances surrounding Dr. Martin Luther King’s assassination.

Now, racism has many forms. It knows no geographical limitation and admits of no institutional boundaries. From playground to pulpit; community to classroom racism has been disclosed in all its hideous dimensions. When I wore my freshman “dink” it was fashionable to refer to Penn State University as a lovely predominantly middle-class college in social transition, framed by a picturesque college town which while conservative, was coming to grips with social enlightenment largely due to the University’s presence. At the time of my graduation there appeared to be a glimmer of hope both on campus and off.

Today, more than a decade later, in spite of all that has transpired in America, despite broad public acceptance of formerly unrelieved truths, Penn State in the interim of my graduation has yet to come to grips with contemporary moral and social consciousness. Somehow she seemed to have lost the way. For it is now more than a century since the commencement of this land grand college and there has never been a Black American on the faculty, with tenure, holding the rank of a full professor of anything.

There has never been a Black dean of a Penn State faculty; there has never been a Black Vice President of the University in any capacity; there is no known Black Penn State graduate appointed, assigned, or consulted at the policy-making level of the University. Should the University’s President call his immediate staff in conference there wouldn’t be a black face in the room. When the Board of Trustees meets their deliberations have never been enriched by the contribution of a black trustee member.

How can American aspire to generate hope through education in the Black ghetto when Penn State University continues to deny the very symbols of the great American dream entry into positions of honor in the university complex?

These days one not only hears a great deal of talk about Black Power and student power on university campuses but one quickly is made aware of their existence here at Penn State. Categorically they represent youth in rebellion. Why ... parents ask, educators ponder, and officials wonder ... are America’s young people so resentful of authority, so unbridled and out of step with their elders.

### **Daily Confrontations**

I suggest the answer is rooted in their realization that in many quarters of society, authority has been exercised indiscriminately, selfishly, and irresponsibly by many entrusted with authority. Young Americans have had a daily confrontation with the

twisted face of hypocrisy, heretofore safely shielded behind a mask of self-righteousness and cloaked in the garb of respectability. Out of their mounting sense of outrage, young Americans from college campuses to city corners have decided to say to hell with the system, down with hypocrisy, be done with bigotry and up with FREEDOM.

During the early 1950's the University's undergraduate student enrollment was between 9000 and 12,000. The then percentage which Black students comprised of that total was one percent. Today the University with 42,000 undergraduate students is among the top 16 universities in enrollment, but Black student enrollment represents still only one percent of the total. The majority of the students graduating from Pittsburgh and Philadelphia high schools are Black.

### **Unwavering One Percent**

While it was insisted when I was here as a student and student leader that Penn State looked not to racial characteristics in her admission policy ... nor would it countenance a racial quota under any circumstances more than mere coincidence must be now attributed to the unvarying one percent Black student representation which persists even today. With the Black ghettos in the commonwealth pleading for education, Penn State University has responded with traditional "tokenism."

Can there be any doubt now that many who in the name of "liberal education" preside over; manage, and lecture at this University live in the glassiest of houses? The shameful record of more than 113 years has run unabated at the University suggesting the in-residency of America's most crippling and destructive sickness.

We may have here the classic symptoms of a new and bizarre syndrome. Like the deep South until recent years laid low with the malady Harry Golden coined the "Vertical Negro," Penn State appears under heavy affliction with what I now call the "Supper Black" syndrome. ... Ask why Black Americans are the excluded stepchild in the university system and I am sure you will be told by an university official "... we have found few qualified and those so found decided to go elsewhere."

In a peculiar lexicon of the reluctant integrator, "qualified," you must now understand is the key word of those most heavily afflicted with super black, for when they speak of qualified, they mean super and black. For instance to mention a few examples: Super educated and Black; super intelligent and Black; super articulate and black; super poised and Black; super religious and Black; super morally and patriotically strong and Black; super acceptable and Black; super renown and Black; in essence super-human and Black.

But it certainly does not include super "ambitious" and black because this would imply the possibility of an "uppity black." The faintest scintilla of evidence implying "uppitiness" rules out a Black applicant, this in a truly paradoxical sense the University gives credence to the old Black folk adage "... the white man don't care how close we get just so we don't get too high."

### **For a Little While**

If you could but for a little while crawl into a black skin, assume the role of, a poorly educated black ghetto American not yet 22 years of age in the hostile or even indifferent white community then, you might realize what the most disadvantaged American is up against. Hated because of his blackness, despised because of his poverty, ridiculed for his relative lack of education; first suspected in crime, last to receive justice; first to be fired, last to hired; a 7 year shorter life expectancy and in that time less of the expectancies of life; caught up in the mere subsistence cycle of the welfare system.

Locked in filthy, scarred cold hovels in the winter, no privacy of his own at any time of day or night, forced to seek an escape from daily humiliations in the garbage filled alleys and litter strewn streets in the summer; and then suddenly one day you receive orders which read to the effect because you are a citizen of the United States your government asks you to report to the military to protect democracy, freedom and our way of life in Vietnam.

I do not mean to ridicule the diligent search of those here who suffer from Super-Black. Obviously the search has a basis of some justification. Any human being who dares to aspire under such overwhelming oppressive odds and succeeds in getting the credentials of respectability must have been blessed with something akin to the characteristics of Super Blacks. But if he happens also to be Black and succeeds then he might justifiably lay claim to all the attributes of the mythical Super Black. Necessarily there are fewer Blacks than the supply and when you therefore go looking for my Super Black Brothers the results are predictable.

Nevertheless, if the University were serious in its efforts, I am sure it could get excellent service from the common garden variety, everyday Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Princeton, Berkeley, Morehouse, Howard, Penn State, Michigan State, Black graduates with Ph.Ds. Should you find yourself in the market for an average All-American, All-Pro, championed or Olympic gold medal winning Black athlete to coach any number of sports offered at the University, I can suggest where you might take a look ... merely flick on your television sets during the seasons when such popular sports are being played and you will find quite a few on your success. These Black men may not be of the super-variety, however, their credentials are otherwise unassailable.

### **Sincere White**

When the University does send its representatives to look for the Black brother it usually sends a sincere white brother to make contact, but with our communities having existed separately for so many years, the white brothers are unfamiliar with where his Black brother can be found. Then to, with integration being what it is, the new widely popular ethnic hair styles, Black Americans looking much like their African brother, and with so much more he doesn't know, the white brother is apt to be confused in his mind. I do not want to leave you on a note of hopeless despair over the university's failures; for there are signs of some hope on the horizon even today.

### **More Can Be Done**

But more can be done building on these recent developments. The University could bend the efforts of its gifted people to design low cost, attractive and comfortable housing to replace those unfit, humiliating roach infested hovels in the ghettos; the University could put its gifted people on the task of devising alternatives to the government's monumental and hopeless failure ... the present welfare system; the University could extend the franchise of a college education into the Black ghettos, through a system of street academies; the University should substantially increase the number of scholarships, grants and athletic assistance programs for Black youth; the University must waive the present artificial admission standards which favor middle-class backgrounds over the ghetto poor; the University can through a variety of ways create a climate of sincerity in making the Black brother welcomed....

### **Love University**

Let no one doubt that I love this Pennsylvania State University deeply, but freedom is dearer to me. So in the words of Martin Luther King, let freedom ring; Let freedom ring from the top of Mount Nittany; Let freedom ring from the bell in Old Main; Let freedom ring from the chairs of every Dean and Department head of every faculty. Let freedom ring! Let Freedom ring from the Office of the President of the University; from the meeting room of the Board of Trustees; from the Governor's oak desk in Harrisburg, and when the day dawns on freedom at my beloved Penn State and all its commonwealth campuses then I will come back and join hands, and we will sing together the prophetic words

*Free at last.  
Free at last  
Great God Almighty we're  
Free at last.*

**Note:** *Following Arnelle's speech, Ridge Riley, the Penn State Alumni Association President, got up to present Arnelle with the first annual alumni award – a large statue of the Nittany Lion, “as a token of our thanks. We are proud of your achievements and of your dedication to the great problems of our time,” said Riley. Arnelle walked to the podium, and after the applause died down, he said “I am deeply honored with appreciation, but I decline to take it with me now. I will come back for it when freedom is here, when I can accept it with gratitude, affection, and extreme humility.”*

*In June 1969, Arnelle was elected by the Alumni to serve on the Penn State Board of Trustees. He has since been elected to twelve additional three years terms.*

Source: Daily Collegian, - May 21, 1968 and November 19, 1968