

News

Panel discusses Juneteenth, actualizing freedom

Bree Gray, News Editor | June 24, 2020



June 19 marks the formal emancipation of forcibly enslaved African Americans in the United States from their white enslavers, following the Civil War. This day is known as Freedom Day, Jubilee Day or Juneteenth and is a day of celebration for many Black communities.

Juneteenth has yet to be declared a federal holiday, however, several senators announced legislation to make the day a national holiday on Friday, June 19.

The 155th Juneteenth anniversary was commemorated by Allegheny College Dean of Institutional Diversity Kristin Dukes, Dean of Curriculum & Registrar and Associate Professor of History and Black Studies Ian Binnington, as well as Assistant Professor of History and Black Studies Alyssa Ribeiro. The trio were joined in a panel discussion, via Zoom, by three Allegheny alumni, Cristin Archer, '19, Visiting Assistant Professor of Communication & Rhetoric at Coe College Danette Pugh-Patton, '96, and Allegheny Trustee and Senior Policy Advisor on Diversity and Inclusion Robert A. Marchman, '80. The panel discussion was dedicated to discussing the history surrounding Juneteenth and how to actualize freedom for Blacks in the United States.

Binnington provided the context surrounding Juneteenth during the panel discussion. He challenged the popular belief that the Civil War ended with the surrender of Robert E. Lee at Appomattox Courthouse. Instead, it did not formally end until the surrender of CSS Shenandoah six months later.

“The ends of wars are particularly messy prior to mass communication,” said Binnington.

“They technically surrendered in May but just because the governing General of the Trans-

Texas technically surrendered in May but, just because the governing General of the Trans-Mississippi Department had surrendered, (this) does not mean that everyone followed the rules. On June 19, 1865, Union Major General Gordon Granger 'liberated' Galveston, Texas."

Again, Binnington challenged the popular belief that the Emancipation Proclamation issued by Abraham Lincoln, two years prior to the Juneteenth Proclamation, freed enslaved people. He read from the Juneteenth Proclamation and remarked that enslaved people, which included some of the last Black enslaved people, learned of their freedom on June 19, 1865.

"Emancipation became a cause that was actualized in the Civil War era due to the actions of African Americans," Binnington said. "If you think about this as a historian, it is not just what happened but also, why it happened. (The what) Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, (the why) because he felt as though he did not have a choice."

Enslaved African Americans offered to work for military generals in exchange for protection from their enslavers. Some Union generals allowed them to work for the military, however, many other Union generals did not. This created a conundrum that the Union had to solve therefore Abraham Lincoln, after several laws had been passed, issued the Emancipation Proclamation, Binnington added. He noted that the Emancipation Proclamation was an attempt to advance the war and rectify the situations that African Americans were creating while seeking freedom by making abolition of slavery a sentiment of the war.

"Actualizing freedom is not a one way street," Ribeiro said. "We tend to have narratives of American history where people are becoming more free or there is more liberty as time goes on but that is not the case in a lot of situations."

Riberio noted the decades following the Civil War are well known for having citizen's rights gained only to be subsequently limited or taken away. She discussed the underlying causes for this phenomena as being the result of significant transitions in the rural south, widespread racial tension, and issues over land and labor.

"Change is really slow, especially when it is in the legal system or our entrenched political bureaucracy," Riberio said.

Any progress that was made leading up to Brown v. Board of Education are the result of deliberate and incremental change to existing legislation through test cases, Riberio remarked. Progress still lacks in certain areas, predominantly with the wealth disparity between Black communities and their counterparts.

"In the past, many tended to talk about the Black community or write about the Black community as a unified whole, but that elides a lot of the humanity there and a lot of the productive and contentious discourse within Black communities about how to try to actualize freedom," Riberio mentioned.

Activism exists on a spectrum from nonviolent to violent means to change, especially with protests. Individuals decide where they exist on the spectrum based upon their beliefs and the risks that they are willing to take for their cause, Riberio added. In addition, she noted that individuals in Black communities have great diversity within their opinions and any individual can change their positions depending upon their own circumstances.

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“The media has a huge influence on the shape that actualizing freedom takes,” Riberio said.

Freedom has many different definitions to members of Black communities, Dukes added. Dukes invited three Black alumni to discuss their viewpoints of freedom and how they believe that freedom can be actualized moving forward.

“True freedom, to me, would be the ability to be myself without being disadvantaged by doing so,” said Archer.

Archer noted that prison reforms, education reforms, and socioeconomic opportunities are very important to the discussion of actualizing freedom for Black citizens, but she was adamant that (the solution) does not end there.

“People are under the impression that if we solve these problems then that is freedom for Black people but in reality, freedom is not just the freedom to live – that is a basic human right,” Archer said. “Freedom for Blacks in the United States, in my opinion, should be about being able to experience the world without having to be concerned about how this will be affected by (our) Blackness.”

The problems that people are not talking about are fixing underlying bias and microaggressions within society. It begins with children, when a young child feels as though they are not beautiful because of a lack of representation in the world around them, it impacts how they view their self worth. Archer noted that addressing this bias and understanding how it impacts how Blacks view themselves and how society views Blackness, is a major step toward progress and ensuring that Blacks have the ability to live as they would like.

People are focusing on ensuring basic human rights as opposed to also ensuring Black people can express themselves without persecution. From going to the grocery store without being followed to being able to wear natural hair or dreadlocks in a professional setting, these are essential to ensuring freedom for Black people, Archer expanded.

“There is a saying that freedom is a struggle, and it still is a struggle,” Pugh-Patton said.

She approached freedom from the viewpoint of a parent, especially considering her own experiences with bias in public. Pugh-Patton expressed her concern for the safety of her child in society due to the color of his skin.

“Can he walk in the mall with his friends without being followed?,” Pugh-Patton questioned.

“Can he drive without being stopped by the police? ... Is he going to come home in the evening?”

Pugh-Patton recalled her encounters with racial prejudice at the mall and the lack of recognition of her academic accomplishments.

“When I go to the mall, I get questioned several times if I have money to buy something,” Pugh-Patton said. “I used to make reservations and only use initials, and at the time my partner was a white male and they would say Dr. Patton and look at him. So it is the freedom of being who I am and being recognized for who I am.”

The prejudice exists from the lack of generational wealth in Black households which creates the reality that for many Black people, attending college or becoming an entrepreneur is unavailable to them, Pugh-Patton added. She urged colleges to discuss systemic racism and the effects that it has on campus and in society.

“From 1865, this country has institutionalized second-class citizenship for African Americans in the law,” Marchman paraphrased from Congressman James E. Clyburn. “When asked what does freedom look like, on one hand, it would be for myself and other people who look like me to be viewed and treated equally and as human beings.”

Marchman pointed out a cycle of inaction, there is an instance that causes a reaction from the public, such as a protest, that results in little to no change. He expressed his optimism for actual resolution due to the increase in ally participation in the recent Black Lives Matter movement.

“One thing that this country has yet to come to grips with is the impact of slavery on this nation. When we talk about inequities with regard to wealth, health or whether we are talking about education, the criminal justice system, or housing – all of those are consequences of the institution of slavery and its impact on this country.”

UPDATE June 24 11:58 a.m.: It is important for allies to the Black Lives Matter movement to recognize their privilege and educate themselves on how the institution of slavery continues to impact Blacks in the United States, Marchman added. In order to actualize freedom, everyone must be given the opportunity to have equality to use the privilege of freedom. Marchman noted that this is often viewed as doing Black people a favor by affording them equality.

“If you give everyone a seat at the table and they are able to actualize their full potential, it is a benefit to all,” Marchman said. “It is a win-win.”

Archer discussed her involvement in the recent Black Lives Matter protests and her activism, however, she acknowledged that there needs to be actual change aside from raising awareness to the issue. Bias is the underlying issue that prevented Blacks from actualizing their freedom because it is institutionalized and individualized. Community conversation is essential to combating bias, changing perspectives, and ensuring that everyone feels as though they are included, Archer added.

“That is part of what we need to help create outside of a college campus, building that community to support one another,” Archer said. “That change is supporting one another but also supporting the subgroups in the Black community that we do not always support: Black women, Black LGBTQIA+ members, Black people with disabilities, and Black people with mental health issues.”

On occasions, these subgroups are ostracized from the Black community and not recognized as being integral to the community, Archer acknowledged. Issues within the community must be addressed as well as issues within politics and economics.

Pugh-Patton agreed with Archer on the need to establish a community support system, especially with regard to intersectionality.

“That means letting whomever have a voice and a lot of time in the Black community, we do not want to listen to certain voices, particularly in academia,” Pugh-Patton said. “We are tuned out to what is going on in the community ... and recognizing what we have to say is important.”

Pugh-Patton stressed the importance of listening to members of the community when attempting to make change. This affords them the opportunity to have these conversations and to voice their opinions, Pugh-Patton added.

She highlighted the significance of the media for conversations on how to actualize freedom for Blacks in the United States because media coverage impacts how they are portrayed and perceived.

“The reality is that we do not have access to the levers of power to make change,” said Marchman. “We need to focus on accountability, and for those who are in positions ... who profess that they are supportive of Persons of Color having true equality then they are going to have to demonstrate that.”

Ally accountability is essential to enabling Blacks to actualize their full potential, Marchman expressed. Blacks need the support of their allies to actually make change this time as opposed to simply raising awareness to the inequalities that Blacks experience in society.

“When the will is there and you see it as a priority, it can be done,” Marchman said. “If you want it to happen, it will happen.”

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