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ROSE
JACKSON
FLENORL

BOOK REVIEW
“RIOT: WITNESS
TO ANGER
AND CHANGE”

**FROM DRONES
TO WEARABLES:**
WHAT’S NEXT FOR
NEW MEDIA?

Q&A WITH FORBES’
LEWIS DVORKIN

FIRST AMENDMENT
MEANING AT ISSUE

Rose Jackson Flenorl



By Leah Gibson

Rose Jackson Flenorl ('79) left her mark on the University of Mississippi by breaking racial barriers, and she continues to influence in multiple ways.

She chose to attend the University of Mississippi during a time when few minority students were enrolled. In 1975 she recalls that minority students were about six percent of the student body. Thus, the university created a program to attract potential minority scholars from throughout the state.

"We had an opportunity to attend classes," Flenorl said. "There were panel discussions with student leaders, and there were social events. I think the goal was to at least get students who might not otherwise consider Ole Miss to take a look for themselves."

The program worked. Some African American students came with a preconceived image of the university, but after visiting the campus and talking with professors and students, they left with a different view, new memories and new friends.

"I remember Otis Sanford, a journalism major, was then president of the Black Student Union," Flenorl said. "I still remember the students being very honest about the pros and cons of attending Ole Miss. We had a great dialogue. I appreciated the honesty. I had planned to major in journalism. Learning about the journalism program also impacted my decision to attend Ole Miss."

One former administrator, Ronald Farrar, remembers recruiting students like Flenorl for the journalism department.

"When I was chairman of the Department of Journalism back in the 1970s, we were acutely aware of the lack of diversity among our student body," Farrar said. "I was able to get a modest grant from the Newspaper Fund to travel in Mississippi to talk to high school seniors about opportunities for minority students."

Farrar recalls the task taking a great deal of convincing.

"The prevailing attitude among African American kids, especially the college bound, was that journalism simply wasn't a career path open to non-whites. With this grant, Otis Sanford (one of our few minority students) and I visited various high schools on recruiting missions."

During her time at Ole Miss, Flenorl took advantage of every opportunity to get involved with student life.

"I was a member of an organization called the Association for Women Students," Flenorl said. "There were few women in leadership positions, so the organization promoted leadership and development of women students. I was elected president my senior year. I often spoke at university, alumni and community events along with the then president of the ASB Rick Outzen. Serving as AWS president, I had the opportunity to represent Ole Miss as a student leader — great training for my future role as Alumni president."

Flenorl said she witnessed many firsts during her time at the university. She explains it as "the opening of doors and a more inclusive university." Throughout her involvement she witnessed women being admitted to Omicron Delta Kappa, Ben Williams becoming the first African American elected Colonel Reb, and much more.

Her influence on campus was seen by the student body, and she was voted onto the homecoming court her sophomore year. She was the first African-American elected campus favorite. She was the first African American female to be

inducted into the Student Hall of Fame. (Years later, her daughter, Lillie, also would be elected into the Hall of Fame.)

In the midst of her involvement, Flenorl said she went through some times in her undergraduate career where she had to learn a few lessons the hard way. Mainly she had to learn the art of balance.

"I wanted first to be a good student academically, but I was involved in so many other activities," Flenorl said. "I had to learn to prioritize. I had to remind myself that I was a student first. I also had to focus on making sure I had the skills required for being a good journalist. That meant I needed to write. This meant turning my attention to internships and writing opportunities."

After she mastered the skills needed to balance academics and extracurricular, interned at the Delta Democrat Times and The Memphis Commercial Appeal. She then joined Women in Communications and the National Society for Professional Journalists (SPJ). She later was elected to the SPJ's National Board of Directors beating out a now famous journalist, Deborah Norville.

Even after being inducted into the Hall of Fame, Flenorl still remembers a goal she was not able to meet during her time as an undergrad. She had decided to run for Miss Ole Miss her senior year.

"I had a great campaign slogan, 'Pick a Rose for Miss Ole Miss,'" she said. "I had a great campaign team. We ran a good race, but I lost. Running for Miss Ole Miss was the first time I experienced overt racial comments."

She remembers many of the African-American students telling her not to run and many of her white friends counseling her with the same mindset.

"They were concerned that the student body, alumni and the state of Mississippi were not ready for an African-American Miss Ole Miss," she said. "I ran anyway, and I would do it again."

"In life you don't always get what you want. Sometimes you lose. The key to success is to not let failure defeat you. I also reminded myself that the number of people who supported and cheered me on outweighed the people who criticized my run for Miss Ole Miss."

Flenorl said her run really increased her faith.

"I had to learn that a closed door does not mean that God does not answer prayers," she said. "Sometimes he closes a door, but opens a window. Months after that loss, I was named by Glamour Magazine as one of the Ten Top College Women in the United States. I was blessed with the opportunity to represent Ole Miss to the nation."

Flenorl said she received an outstanding education from the university and was ready to compete academically against anyone.



Flenorl visits with 2015 Meek School graduates Kimberly Herring and Phalisha Jackson before giving the commencement address.



“I was pushed to grow my skills through writing for The Daily Mississippian, internships both in-state and out-of-state, and serving as a newspaper stringer,” she said.

Flenorl said that her experience at the university really sharpened her skills and through her mentors she was exposed to what she called a “new world.”

“After graduation Rose went to work for The Commercial-Appeal,” said Will Norton, Jr., dean of the Meek School. “However, that fall Chancellor Porter Fortune asked her to return to Ole Miss to help with challenges facing African-American students.

“I know James Meredith legally integrated Ole Miss,” Norton said, “but I watched Rose integrate it de facto. She is an amazing human being.”

Today, Flenorl still is being recognized on campus. She was inducted into the Alumni Hall of Fame in 1998, and in 2008 served as president of the Ole Miss Alumni Association. She was elected chair of the University of Mississippi Foundation Board of Directors in 2014.

Her love for alumni came from her time as president of the Association for Women Students when she was given many opportunities to meet with graduates and update them on student life. She loved their dedication to the university and could not wait to do the same.

“When I left Ole Miss, I moved to Memphis, Tennessee, to work for IBM,” Flenorl said. “I joined the Memphis Rebel Club. I was asked to serve on the Memphis Rebel Club Board of Directors. Later, I was asked to serve on the University Alumni Board of Directors. I chaired several committees and was asked to serve on the executive committee. I also served as chair of the Black Alumni Council. I have been an active member of the alumni association since I graduated college.”

Flenorl says that serving as the alumni association president is one of the highest honors of her entire life.

Each year she speaks with the Chancellor’s Leadership Class and gives each group “Rose’s Top Ten Rules for Exceeding Excellence:”

1. Set goals for yourself. Short-term goals and long-term goals. Set goals that demand your best.
2. Be prepared. Prepare so you will be ready when opportunity knocks.
3. Take action. Don’t just dream. Go after your dreams.
4. Believe in yourself.
5. Keep a positive attitude. Attitudes are more important than aptitudes.
6. Be different. It’s ok.
7. Have the ability to overcome obstacles. Don’t be afraid to fail.
8. No excuses. If you never try, you’ll never know.
9. Be of service to others. Give back.
10. Keep the faith.

As she looks back on her legacy at Ole Miss, she wants to see other students dream big and believe in the power of their dreams.

“I have been hurt many times in my life, but I have never been defeated,” she said. “My faith sustains me. I love students. I want to inspire and motivate them. I hope my legacy is opening doors for others and inspiring them to reach their goals.”

Flenorl now is manager of global citizenship at the FedEx Corporation. She said her journalism background played a large role in her consideration for the position. Global Citizenship is in the Corporate Communications Department of FedEx. Within the department, there are Ole Miss journalism graduates who support media relations, social media and citizenship and reputation management.

“I am very thankful to so many members of my Ole Miss family who have encouraged and supported me over the years,” said Flenorl. “I am also grateful to James Meredith and other African-Americans on whose shoulders I stand. If they did not have the courage to break barriers, I would have never had the opportunity to be an Ole Miss Rebel.”

The author is a junior, broadcast journalism major from Starkville, Mississippi.

Photo by Timothy Ivy

Flenorl lectures to students taking the Nonprofit Communications and Cause Marketing course in the Meek School.



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