

Civil Rights and College Journalism: Mark Lett, in the 1961 Southwestern *Megaphone*

(This is a paper that Milton Jordan presented April 5, 2014 at the Texas Oral History Association meeting in Nacogdoches, TX. Mark Lett granted permission to display the content here.)

On the first day of February, 1960, four freshmen students at North Carolina A & T sat down at the Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro and asked to be served. When they were refused, the four young African American men remained on their counter stools until the store closed a few hours later. The number of students participating in the sit-ins at Woolworth's and elsewhere in Greensboro increased daily. A week later, on February 6, students from several historically black campuses in Nashville, Tennessee, began their own sit-ins as a nonviolent civil rights action guided by Jim Lawson, himself a student in the Graduate School of Theology at Vanderbilt there.

These actions marked the beginning of several years of civil rights protests involving students, black and white, from campuses across the country, challenging segregation at lunch counters, on trains, busses, at other public accommodations, and on their own campuses. Texas campuses were not far behind. Some of you may remember those actions over 50 years ago. In 1960 my own campus, Southwestern University in Georgetown, was struggling to recover from 30 years of on and off financial and enrollment woes.

The school, a merger of four earlier Methodist efforts in various Texas locations, had been chartered in Georgetown in 1874 as Texas University, but relinquished that name back to the state a few years later. At the end of the first decade of the twentieth century Southwestern's President, Robert S. Hyer, attempted to move the entire operation to Dallas. His effort failed, though he took some faculty and staff with him and began S.M.U. in that North Texas city. Southwestern survived that disruption and remained in Georgetown.

The depression of the 1930s dealt the school an even more serious setback, until the Navy came to the rescue in the '40s with a large V12 training program that brought an enrollment and income surge. That program ended soon after the war and student numbers and dollars were again a major concern. Those struggles continued into the 1960s and played a significant, mostly negative, role in the administration's response to the beginning civil rights efforts on campus.

In the manner of most institutions in the south at that time, Southwestern followed a policy of racial exclusion and had a strictly segregated student body, an all white faculty and a mostly white staff, at least in office and professional positions. African American and Mexican American employees were limited to building and grounds, housekeeping and the kitchen of the college dining hall, The Commons.

My friend and fellow student, Mark Lett, paid some of his tuition through his college work study program in that kitchen, working with about half-a-dozen black men. This is Mark's story, and theirs. During the past couple of years Mark and I have had several conversations by phone, email and in person about a particular event involving Mark and those African American kitchen employees. One of those conversations was an oral history interview directed by Dan K. Utley on February 14 this year. Dan, a professional oral historian, has been a great help in my very amateur efforts on this project.

Mark Lett came to Southwestern in the fall of 1957 after graduation from Liberty Hill High School, about 15 miles west of the Georgetown campus. Southwestern was his mother's idea at first, but Mark swears that he enrolled at Southwestern because he met a girl from a neighboring town at a District Methodist Youth meeting. She was enrolling at Southwestern, he said and "If she was going to Southwestern, so was I. She was the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen." Whatever his motivation, Mark had a successful four year career at Southwestern. But that girl from Bertram? He said, "She managed, I don't know how, to go through four years of college with me and I don't think she ever looked at me, or noticed that I was there."

Mark majored in history, not because of an interest in the great sweep of historical events. "I didn't care much about the analysis of the economic conditions in the South," Mark said. "It was the stories; I loved the stories of history. I was interested in finding a story about what happened to Joe Blow in the battle of Gettysburg on July first." Mark took his attraction to stories from his maternal grandfather Mark Nasworthy, for whom he is named, as well as from his mother, Lacey Lett and father, James Edward, "Eddie" Lett. "Stories were a big thing for us, family stories, stories of the land, stories of the people around us." Mark claimed, "we always thought in terms of stories."

His mother and father also taught Mark, primarily by example, to treat all people fairly. "Though her father was 180 degrees in the opposite direction," he said. "My mother accepted all people as equal. After the war, World War II, my father bought the ranch near Liberty Hill," Mark said. "Mother learned that the school for Negroes only got used textbooks after they had been retired from the white school." She spoke to the administration and the School Board until they started getting current books for the Negro school. "My father was a general superintendent for Brown and Root. If he had a black man who drove a bulldozer and a white man who drove a bulldozer then, by God he was going to pay them the same." That parental influence toward fairness and equality followed Mark through his years at Southwestern and beyond.

He spent three of his four college years working daily in The Commons with African American men, residents of Georgetown, who had worked at the University for 20 or 25 years or more. "Those men were a big part of my education," Mark said. In September 1958, at the time Mark began his work in The Commons, a retired U. S. Army Sergeant and dietician took over as Southwestern's Food Service manager. Ms. Williams, or 'Sarge' as everyone referred to her, was a gruff, no nonsense, autocratic ruler of her mess hall. "She had landed," Mark remembered, "at Normandy on the fourth day" and set up one of the first kitchens and mess halls on the D-Day beachhead.

He also remembers the story of Sarge's first encounter at the Dean of Women's Sunday Table. Dean Ruth M. Ferguson was a prim and very proper, uptight woman. Mark used more colorful language to describe her. Mary Jean Fincher, Mark's campus girlfriend and now his wife of over 50 years, was an A student, a campus leader and a regular invitee to the Dean's Sunday Table. Mark tells this story as he heard it from Mary.

"Sarge came over to pay homage to Dean Ferguson and one of the girls said, 'O, Miss Williams, it's so wonderful the things you did in the Army. You must be so proud that you have done something just like a man could.' And Sarge Williams said, 'Honey, the only thing a man can do that I can't do is piss out of a second story window.' Someone had to start fanning Dean Ferguson immediately."

In September 1960, Mark began his Senior year and was named, he said, "Head Waiter, whatever that means. I just helped her set the schedule." That year Mark also was invited by Editor Dan Adamson to write a weekly column for *The Megaphone*, the student newspaper. He called his column *The Voice of Agora*. "I probably read it in some book," Mark said, by way of explanation. "It just sounded groovy to me."

Mark was active in the Student Christian Association at Southwestern, affiliated with the College Y (YMCA) movement nationally. He remembered that, "A considerable amount of group energy was related to the race issue and college students' involvement." Early in the spring semester 1961, the local group proposed to the Southwestern Student Senate a resolution in support of student sit-ins and other civil rights actions in Greensboro, Nashville, and elsewhere.

"I was supportive of the resolution," Mark said, but it wasn't a personal issue. The salaries in the kitchen were. "I knew these men for three years and I knew them well," he said. For working six days a week these men were paid \$90 to \$150 a month, salaries not even adequate to feed their families. "My view was that they were underpaid and that the University should do something about it." So Mark wrote his column "focused on those men and what they got paid." The column was scheduled for publication February 17, 1961. That, however, did not happen. Mark had been too specific about the inadequate salaries being paid to his friends in the University kitchen. "I got a call from (Editor) Dan (Adamson) saying they had pulled the column."

"The guy that set the type must have told (Don) Scarborough (publisher of the local *Williamson County Sun*, where the college paper was typeset and printed) that there was something outrageous in this column." Mark said, "and Don Scarborough had let the Business Manager at the school know that there was something unseemly in the column." The Business Manager, I. J. McCook, gave Mark the first official word on not printing his column. "Dr. McCook called me in, acting as President since (College President) Dr. (William C.) Finch was out of town. I have a distinct memory of (McCook's) anger," Mark said. "He was pissed off. He told me they would throw me out of school for writing the column," even if it wasn't printed. Editor Dan Adamson, who, Mark said, seemed more angry than he was at this interference, printed that issue of *The Megaphone* without Mark's column, but with a masthead reading "*The Megaphone of the Administration.*"

Dr. Finch returned to campus a day or two later and called Mark into his office. “Dr. Finch set me at ease,” Mark said. “Though he thought I had overstated things and made Southwestern look worse than it was, he agreed the guys were underpaid. I was not going to be kicked out of school. He had some things about fringe benefits he wanted me to include in the column. He said, ‘Mark, you can print the column if you help me out with these few things I’d like to see in it.’ I might have said, ‘Oh hell, Dr. Finch, I’m going to print it my way or not at all.’ But I was too relieved not to be kicked out of school.” The column was printed, with the additions Dr. Finch requested, a week later in *The Megaphone* of February 24.

Mark does not know whether or not that column had any positive impact on the salary structure or integration at Southwestern. He graduated in May that year, moved to Harper in West Texas and had very little to do with Southwestern for several years. He thought the column was at least “a little step toward raising the consciousness toward some sort of equality.” In fact, no official change in the salaries was ever announced. Four years later Ernest Clark enrolled as Southwestern’s first African American student. Soon after, African American staff were employed across University divisions and the salaries were equalized.

Mark does not remember if Dr. McCook ever spoke to him again after their encounter over the column. In terms of Dr. Finch saying anything more, Mark said, “that is more meaningful and personal to me. The day after graduation Mary and I got married in the Chapel at Southwestern. When the service was over we turned around to come down this long, huge aisle and there sat all the guys from the kitchen, all the black cooks. They had come to our wedding, and Dr. Finch was sitting there with them. We both cried.”