

# The Wall of Courage Proposal

The University of Alabama  
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## **Introduction**

The University of Alabama has spent a great deal of time this year in celebratory efforts regarding the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the University's desegregation. The Through the Doors events have been nothing short of enlightening, empowering, and inspiring to students, faculty, staff, and visitors. As a student, it has made me proud to be part of a past, present, and future student body full of courageous individuals that stood up to attitudes of extremism and hate not only for the University, but for the many, many students that were to come through this University.

My fears within all of this is that 2013 will come and go, and the University will leave the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebrations ultimately inviting ignorance of empowering and inspirational history within the students that walk the halls of the colleges on campus until the next anniversary. The University of Alabama prides itself on several modes of tradition, with very little student body knowing of our strong tradition of courage. With this, we as students are left with an administration that allows us to continue being enthusiastic football fans, yet does not give us a chance to care about the true and pure reasons that make this University great; we do. It is 20 year old students just like Vivian Malone, James Hood, Autherine Lucy, the first African-American walk-on football players, and several forgotten pioneers whom have disregarded power, manipulation, and hatred to change the course of history at this University; in knowing this, we as students today can continue to do the same.

## **The Reasons: Research, History, Irony, and Opportunity**

Within my senior research this semester, I have taken E. Cully Clark's *Stand in the Schoolhouse Door* and expanded upon the information given about Hill Ferguson and Gessner McCorvey. My research has focused on The Ferguson Center and McCorvey Drive, and I chose this because I found it interesting not only that our student union, which holds Crossroads, is named after Hill Ferguson, but also because The Ferguson Center, in the words of E. Cully Clark, "appropriately looks over McCorvey Drive."

I applied the academic research of Socio-Onomastics, Public Memory, and Diversity Communication to The Ferguson Center, and a large portion of my research is emphasized by case studies on college campuses. This research tells us that the names and commemorations on our campus are important, and that there is power and opportunity within this. Socio-Onomastics tells us that names are not just a collection of symbols and sounds, that they hold stories meaning and history. Public Memory tells us of the dangers of forgetting the past in both passive and active manners. It also shows us the empowerment, and goodness behind taking control of sensitive histories. "We remember because, we forget and we forget because we remember" (Bradford Vivian). Lastly, Diversity Communication research tells us that narrative functions and conversations, are one of the most crucial aspects of the climate on college campuses today, and these conversations happen when the campus environment is conducive in creating these conversations. The Ferguson Center, along with the convenient location of McCorvey Drive has a great deal of opportunity to embrace the past while creating an environment that can be successful in creating crucial conversations of diversity on campus, but this can only happen if people are given the opportunity to know about it.

Along with this scholarship research, I did a great deal of my own investigative research. Through interviews with UA administration, an interview with the Division of Diversity at The University of Texas, collecting newspaper articles, and the analysis of Ferguson and McCorvey historic collections, it has been made clear that there is a great deal of irony surrounding The Ferguson Center. Considering the history, attitudes, and actions of both Ferguson and McCorvey against the interest of our University, it should be deemed inappropriate to have such attitudes commemorated on our campus together, because even in the context of the times during their actions and commemorations, such statements and attitudes should not have been acceptable,

especially within Alabama's most prominent higher-education institution. These two former Board members, while they did loyally serve the University for extensive periods of time, they both were a "tag-team" on this University's integration efforts with Autherine Lucy and Malone, Hood. While history has given the embarrassment to George Wallace's symbolic stand in front of Foster Auditorium, it was the leadership of both Ferguson and McCorvey that created the real monster giving us something to be embarrassed about as a University. Along with this, they both conducted boycotts for football games against integrated teams, because they did not want their glorious all-white football team to be on the same field as black football players. The football team was a large segregation-platform for both Ferguson and McCorvey during their time on the Board. There are records of letters that McCorvey sent to President Rose regarding a game against Penn State (an integrated football team); in one letter he suggested that the band play "Dixie" throughout the duration of the game. The Ferguson Center was named in 1969 and built in 1973 along with McCorvey Drive. Both of these names came along during the middle of the integration of the University of Alabama's football team, which destroyed one of Alabama's last remaining symbols of white-power, something that would have been unacceptable to both former board members. It seems only appropriate to question the motives behind the decisions made by The Board of Trustees during this time. This is irony.

Today The Ferguson Center holds Crossroads, a multicultural unit, and the Director of the Ferguson Center is an African-American. It has evolved since its opening in 1973 and had become a large destination point for students on campus, making it arguably the most diverse building on campus, while the great majority of the student population have no idea who Ferguson or McCorvey are. With this history, the University has an amazing opportunity to inform and encourage students by using the parallels and irony surrounding the Ferguson Center. We are given an active chance to look back at who we use to be, to see and state that we are not the same students, faculty, and staff we were in the 50s and 60s.

### **The Wall of Courage**

With this, I have created something backed by my scholarship and investigative research to be of use to the University and its students; The Wall of Courage. During my research on memorials at college campuses, I found that for some reason universities love big, tall towers and statues. This was something I wanted to get away from. Using something simple and interactive instead of a multimillion dollar tower project that will lose its meaning over time (as Socio-Onomastics tells us), is a much more effective route. Also, as stated earlier, in diversity communication research, one of the most important things that a university can do to encourage diverse conversations is creating an environment conducive those types of crucial conversations. Through inspiration from memorials around the country as well as our own football coach statues, I am proposing that a "Wall of Courage" be placed inside of the Ferguson Center.

- University Focused

This wall will commemorate the pioneers of change and courage at this University. This will include not only students, but also staff, faculty, and administration. Within this wall will be very visual gaps and spaces to be filled by future pioneers in social change issues that exist today and will exist in the future. The spaces act as a reminder that it could be any of us to fill in the diversity and intercultural spaces that are prevalent today. There was an empty space for years where Nick Saban's statue stands today, this gap served as a symbol on inspiration and greatness to come; I think we can do the same for the students that come through our campus. The commemorative individuals must be university focused; while MLK and Cesare Chavez were amazing individuals, this needs to be about the courage that has come from this specific university; basically, this needs to tell the story about us. By doing this, the University as well as the students can then continue to control the Public Memory of the crucial and controversial history at our University, instead of passively allowing such power to slowly slip away. Quotes

from individuals regarding diversity can also be placed on the wall, for inspiration.

- Interactive

In addition, I want this wall to be interactive. I would like a chalk-board type wall that can be written on and erased beside the commemorated wall, where students can write what they believe defines courage. This is something that truly will allow people to *do* something. The physicality and prompting of thinking and stating would allow there to be a sense of unity amongst a campus which is still segregated amongst different social groups. One concern that I have with this is that students will abuse their right to write on the wall, by writing inappropriate language or drawings. This can be successful if put in high traffic areas making it much easier to monitor and control. This interactive feature will allow novelty, by erasing the board each time it gets full or every semester allowing more students to add their thoughts about courage. This will give opportunity to create new conversations continuously.

- High Foot-Traffic

The wall needs to be in area with high foot-traffic in order to become part of the environment of The Ferguson Center, which is crucial to diversity communication. One of my fears regarding the "Wall of Courage" is that it will be shoved in a corner. In a conversation with Student Affairs, I was told that my proposal was great and that they could put a Ferguson Center History inside of a room on the third floor. Placing things like this in a wall or a corner something will make efforts ineffective. We have the Lucy Tower in front of Foster Auditorium, but this is less effective because it is a destination point. Although The Ferguson Center is a destination point in it's own right, this Wall should not be. I want the people to have to walk by this wall when they grab coffee or meet friends for lunch.

- Historic Marker

Most importantly, there will need to be a historic marker explaining why the wall is there, along with explaining the history and irony of Ferguson and McCorvey, giving a clear depiction of who we use to be as a University, because the bravery of all of our pioneers means nothing without that. These historic markers will not be reference to just bring blame and dishonor to Ferguson and McCorvey, most definitely their achievements will be expressed, and there are no further plans to take away Ferguson or McCorvey's names from campus. This historic marker needs to be effective, but still gracious, in explaining these ironies, which means none of the passive or vague language found on several other historic markers around campus.

At an institution that is constantly losing and bring in new students on a semester basis, it makes it important to have constant reminders of history in order to not lose what people remember. I believe this wall of courage will be a very powerful and inspirational reminder each semester to the students that move through arguably the most diverse building on campus.

I hope that you believe in this proposal and find its power and potential useful to the University. We are not the same students we use to be, and it is time we start being treated like the students that we are today. This is step that the University is ready to take.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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