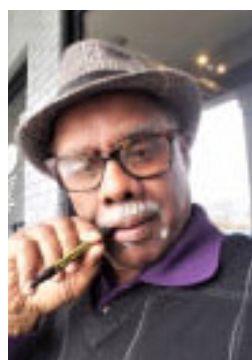


## COMMENTARY / CULTURE

*African American History Month, what else don't we know?*

Wait! Hold on! Put aside your cleaning cloth.

Don't misidentify the dark spots on the collar and shirt worn by the Black fellow in the accompanying

picture, or on the hand and sleeve of the white fellow, as smudges on your screen. They're not. Those are actual blood stains.

In the following paragraphs, I'll get to the breath-taking story behind the two men in that picture, John Lewis and James Zwerg, and in less than a thousand words. As the adage goes, "pictures are worth a thousand words."

Now like many, I would love to have been a proverbial "fly on the wall," listening intently to candid conversations between those two men. Of course, we —well, most of us anyway — know about the late congressman John Lewis. But James Zwerg?

Like the color of their skins, Lewis' and Zwerg's biographies are as different as night and day; Lewis born and raised in Alabama, Zwerg in Wisconsin. Now if there are words that undergirded their relationship, bloodshed, courage, sacrifice and fearlessness would top the list.

Now to put their relationship into a historical context, one can look at those of Stanley Levison, advisor, speech writer and friend of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., or that of Julius P. Rosenwald and long-time friend of educator Booker T. Washington. (The interested reader is urged to Google those names, histories, and relationships).

Zwerg and Lewis met in Nashville as college students and shared a seat on the Greyhound bus in 1961 as Freedom Riders. They greeted each other as "Brother John" and "Brother Jim." Although many know of Lewis, let's find out a bit more about James Zwerg.

Born in Appleton, Wisconsin at a time the 1940 city census listed just one person as "Negro," Zwerg, a graduate of Appleton High School became engaged in the civil rights movement as a 21-year-old student.

While attending college, where he had an African American roommate his first year, Zwerg participated in an exchange program that took him to Nashville's Fisk University.

Shortly after his arrival, he met Lewis and soon became involved in demonstrations against segregation, participating in lunch counter and movie theater sit-ins while being subjected to repeated verbal abuse and physical assaults. As one of the few white men involved in the peaceful protests, Zwerg often drew targeted abuse as a "n\*\*\*\*r lover." Once, when trying to enter a theater in 1961, Zwerg was hit with a monkey wrench and knocked unconscious.

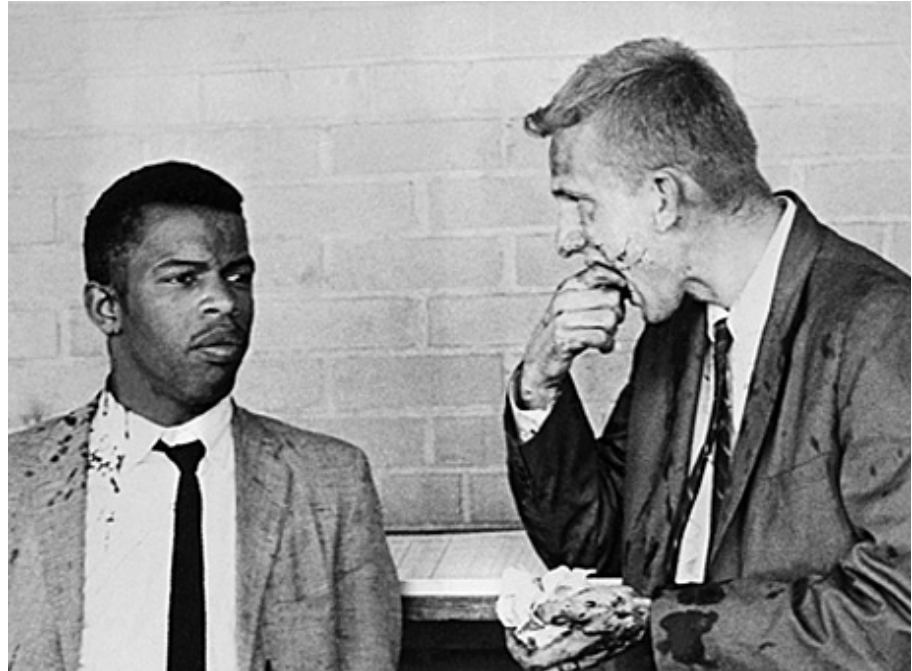
A stop in Montgomery on a Freedom Ride in 1961 left both Lewis and Zwerg bloodied and battered. Zwerg was one of ten student Freedom Riders — and the only white male — to board a bus in Nashville bound for New Orleans. On the way, Zwerg was among several students arrested in Birmingham and spent two and a half days in jail. In Montgomery, the Freedom Riders were met at the bus station by a mob armed with bricks, pipes, hammers, chains, and a pitchfork.

"When I volunteered to go, I realized that if anybody was going to get killed, it would probably be me," Zwerg recalled. "Because they hated me, the white n\*\*\*\*r lover. I accepted the possibility of my death."

Zwerg wasn't killed, but was beaten so badly — a severe concussion, a broken nose, a broken thumb, half his teeth were broken, three cracked vertebrae, numerous cuts, and bruises — he spent five days in a hospital. Photos of a beaten Zwerg (below) ran in national magazines as well as newspapers around the world.

"Segregation must be stopped. It must be broken down," Zwerg said in an interview from his Montgomery hospital bed that was broadcast on the national news. "We're going on to New Orleans no matter what. We're dedicated to this. We'll take hitting. We'll take beatings. We're willing to accept death. But we're going to keep coming until we can ride from anywhere in the South to any place in the South."

That statement galvanized the country, sending participants of all



Freedom Riders John Lewis, left, and Jim Zwerg were beaten by a mob in 1961 after they arrived in Montgomery Ala.



Jim Zwerg after being badly beaten by a mob in Montgomery armed with bricks, pipes, hammers, chains, and a pitchfork.

persuasions to segregate the South. In 1961, Dr. King presented Zwerg with the Southern Christian Leadership Freedom Award.

Zwerg graduated from Beloit College in 1962 and earned a degree in theology at Garret Theological Seminary. Ordained a minister in the United Church of Christ, he served churches in Wisconsin until he moved to Tucson to become minister of the Casas Adobes United Church of Christ. He left the active pastorate in 1975 and spent the rest of his career in a variety of community relations positions in Tucson.

The bond forged between John Lewis and James Zwerg in the 1960s during the civil rights movement remained strong until Lewis's passing.

Back to what I said at the outset;

really, I wish I could have been a "fly on the wall" as those two incredible men shared their hopes and fears during those dangerous freedom rides, during sit-ins, or on adjacent hospital beds recovering from brutal beatings.

© Terry Howard is an award-winning writer and storyteller, a contributing writer with the Chattanooga News Chronicle, The Douglas County Sentinel, The BlackMarket.com, Hometown Advantage, The American Diversity Report co-founder of the "26 Tiny Paint Brushes" writers' guild, and recipient of the 2019 Dr. Martin Luther King Leadership Award.

## THIS WEEK IN AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY

### AN ACCOUNT OF THE TRAGEDY OF THE 'TUSKEGEE EXPERIMENT'

It's been nearly 50 years since the "Tuskegee Experiment" ended, but Wendelyn Inman is constantly haunted by the thought of what it did to her "Uncle Gus."

"He was in that study and didn't realize it was a study," says Inman, sobbing, as she recounts her family's trauma that resulted from the study, arguably the most infamous biomedical research study in U.S. history.

"They gave him syphilis and he didn't realize he had been given syphilis," adds Dr. Inman, a professor and director of the public health programs in the College of Health Professions at Tennessee State University.

In the study, conducted between 1932 and 1972 by the U.S. Public Health Service and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, investigators enrolled a total of 600 impoverished African American sharecroppers from Macon County, Alabama. Of these men, including Inman's uncle, Augustus Reynolds (Uncle Gus), 399 had latent syphilis, with a control group of 201 men who were not infected.

As an incentive for participation in the study, the men were promised free medical care, but were deceived by the PHS, which never informed them of their syphilis diagnosis and provided disguised placebos, ineffective methods, and diagnostic procedures as treatment for "bad blood." More than 100 died as a result.

Inman, now a microbiologist and a nationally recognized infectious disease control expert, says as result of the study, her uncle contracted syphilis and eventually went blind. By the end of the study, Inman's family, including her grandparents, had left Alabama, and moved to Sandusky, Ohio, where she grew up. Reynolds' wife divorced him because of his syphilis diagnosis, accusing him of being unfaithful. Blind and no one to care for him, he moved to Ohio and stayed with his siblings.

"He was blind, and I remember my siblings leading Uncle Gus out of the house to sit with us under the tree in the summer and having to lead him to go to church and things like that," Inman recalls. "He died from it. That's what I remember."



Wendelyn Inman is from a family of eight brothers and sisters, with accomplishments in medicine, law, military service and education. Back row, from left: Donald Harris, Inman, Anthony Harris, Howard Harris, and Helen Harris Abrams. Middle row: Howard Harris, Sr., father, and Ada Reynolds Harris, mother. Front row: Lt. Col. Steven Harris, Adrienne Harris, and Gaye Harris Miles.

Inman says she became interested in medicine and public health to "help my people better understand and avoid the mistakes" of the past.

"When he (Uncle Gus) was going through this, I was a very young child," says Inman.

"So, I heard a lot of things about what my parents talked about. It did motivate me for a research career that I chose. What did my Uncle Gus die from? An infectious disease. So, I am on my path to helping my people be better, because now, I have a complete understanding of how a microbe works," adds Inman. And she does!

When COVID-19 hit the United States followed by widespread vaccine hesitancy, especially among black people, Inman was among those public health experts encouraging her fellow African Americans to take the available drug against the disease. The Tuskegee Study is often cited as one of the reasons African Americans do not trust the vaccine. Efforts to increase vaccination rates among African Americans often focus on misconceptions surrounding the

study as a result.

"This is no time for hesitancy," says Inman. "The vaccines work."

At TSU, in particular, Inman has helped in the effort to get employees and students vaccinated. Currently, close to 80 percent of the university's full-time faculty and staff have received vaccinations, as well as hundreds of students.

Looking back at what happened to "Uncle Gus," Inman has good reason to be optimistic about the vaccines. After all, she is a professor of public health, been an advisor on several national initiatives in that area, and previously served as the chief of epidemiology for the State of Tennessee.

"There is great advancement in medicine today," she says. "When you look at science, there are so many benefits that outweigh the negatives, and there is access. If they (Uncle Gus and others) had equal access to healthcare, they could have gone to another doctor, but they didn't have access to other healthcare and they knew it. So, they (U.S. government) enticed them by offering them healthcare while they were destroying their health."

On May 16, 1997, President Bill Clinton formally apologized on behalf of the United States to victims of the Tuskegee study, calling it shameful and racist.



Wendelyn Harris Inman on receiving her Ph.D. from Vanderbilt Graduate School of Medicine School of Medicine. (Augustus Reynolds, aka, "Uncle Gus" was the brother of Milton Reynolds, the father of Wendelyn's mother, Ada Reynolds Harris.)



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