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Fisk Installs New Fellowship Program in Honor of Alum John Lewis

By Ashley Benkarski

NASHVILLE, TN—Fisk University's John Lewis Center for Social Justice announced a new fellowship program in honor of its late alumni's lifelong fight for justice last Wednesday. The three Fellowships are focused on policy, arts, and S.T.E.M. and were made possible with the support of the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies.

Founded in 2019, the Center's mission is "to foster and advance social justice across every sphere of contemporary society by engendering rigorous research, applying scholarship, artistic production, and community engagement locally as well as globally," the institution's press release explained.

"Fisk University has always been synonymous with a global concern for equality, inclusion, and prosperity. From W.E.B DuBois to Ida B. Wells, John R. Lewis and Diane Nash, Fisk has helped shape a better world for more than one hundred and fifty years," said Fisk University President Vann Newkirk.

According to Fisk:

- The Policy/Activism Fellow will follow in the footsteps of iconic Fiskites Diane Nash and the late Congressman John Lewis to continue the fight against bigotry and confront ongoing attacks on civil rights like voting, healthcare, and education.

- The Arts/Culture Fellow is inspired by extraordinary Fisk artists, poets, and musicians such as Nikki Giovanni, Arna Bontemps, Aaron Douglas and the Fisk Jubilee Singers—all of whom have sought to promote social justice through their work.

- The Tech/Data Science Fellow will advance the tradition of Fisk Alumni W.E.B DuBois to shape the evolving data, science, and tech fields toward ensuring full and equitable access to Black communities, both as consumers and as producers. In never-before-seen footage of Lewis at Fisk in 2019, the late Georgia representative remarked

that he wouldn't have made it to Congress if not for his time at Fisk. "Even before I arrived at Fisk ... I had heard and read about W.E.B. DuBois and it was a source of inspiration. I grew up in rural Alabama and I always dreamed of going off to college," he recalled.

It was in Nashville where he truly grew up, Lewis said, and he got involved in the Civil Rights Movement and met James Lawson, from whom he learned the philosophy and discipline of nonviolent protest. Fisk faculty acted as support in the best and worst of times, Lewis said, driving students to sit-in sites, participating and offering encouragement. When Lewis and 88 of his peers were arrested and jailed, it was Fisk faculty who signed their bond release.

"To be at a place like Fisk was so wonderful, so meaningful," Lewis said. "We need Fisk University now more than ever before."

Amid book burnings and attacks on teaching American history through bans on "critical race theory," now is the time to empower Black students to attend HBCUs and advance social justice, representatives of the Center said.

"Whether it's Fisk University or another university, a college must be about the business of seeking and building on this whole idea of social justice. We have to find a way to bring fairness and justice to all of our people," Lewis remarked. "Young people all across America and around the world are looking for places to go where they can not just get a good education but be inspired to stand up, to speak out and play a role in helping to create what Dr. King and others call the "Beloved Community."

"Today's student body shares this ethos and appetite for a university experience that incorporates social justice across all disciplines. The establishment of this Fellowship recognizes the tremendous social justice ethos among Fisk students and the future impact of this Center," said Fisk's Executive Vice President Jens Frederiksen.

Dr. Karida Brown, the Endowed Chair and Director of the John Lewis Center, said the

Fellowship will be "instrumental in expanding the impact and reach of the Center and we could not be more excited to begin the search for these exceptional scholars."

Fisk's substantive contributions to society make a visit to the campus akin to walking on sacred ground, Dr. Brown remarked, and the John Lewis



Late Georgia Representative John Lewis.

Center is meant to be the lifeblood of the campus's social justice impact.

She acknowledged that James Fraser, the Center's Associate Director and an Associate

Professor of Social Justice, was working hard to drive a robust curriculum for the program. The Center will issue calls for applications in mid-Spring for those at all levels of their career phase, with residences filled in Fall 2022. "



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