



Our Story

The Jackson Center began with a knock upside the head. In 2001, a colleague and I approached a member of the Lincoln High School Alumni Association at the time, Ed Caldwell Jr., for help connecting us with neighbors with whom our students might conduct oral histories about local, school desegregation. Ed's response was sharp: "Y'all have studied the hell out of the black community and given nothing back. Why should I help you?" Ed went to the heart of a problem that continues to plague University research: a "come and go" approach that not only takes much more than it gives but fails to recognize the harm that even the best intentions can do. Ed called us out as representative of University practices that continued to take advantage of the generosity of Northsiders who had for so long welcomed students into their neighborhoods and homes and who continue to serve the University with sweat and pride.

We weren't listening. Not really. We began to dedicate ourselves primarily to witnessing to the strength, struggle, and vision carried in oral histories across differences of class, race, faith, gender, and generation. At the end of that 2001 semester, we performed public witness to histories we had heard: we listened "out loud" to accounts of the past crafted in and carrying forward the urgency of the present. The hundred or so community members in attendance witnessed back. They responded with more remembering and retelling. The ensuing relay rang with scriptural reference and the call of faith to justice. I had known desegregation from a largely secular, juridical point of view. Listening and then *listening again* (which eventually became a hallmark of Jackson Center practice) raised the perhaps naïve question that drove the next phase of our collective journey: *what was the role of the black church in the wake of desegregation?* To engage this question we had to make a more sustained investment in the world of the mentors and leaders who lived just blocks from campus. In 2005, I was forever fortunate to meet Reverend Troy Harrison of St. Joseph C.M.E.—a church renowned as a primary site of civil rights organizing in the early 1960s. Pastor Harrison's vision of a "church without walls" spurred my hopes for a "classroom without walls"; together, we began working towards a "community without walls": a resilient community of which the University is a part but not the institutional center, a resilient community, what King called a Beloved Community. For Pastor Harrison, the stone walls that Northside masons so artfully constructed around UNC were at once testimony to ancestral slave labor and a sign of where contemporary, local youth "can't go." The stones may stay but the barriers they symbolized would have to come down.

The first result was a course partnership in which I became the student to my students' lessons: community and responsibility cannot end with the end of the semester, students like Hudson Vaughan and Rob Stephens told me. One course became another became hundreds of hours of oral history listening, legal advocacy, co-labor, sharing pews and sharing food—which soon deepened into a community collaborative and a student organization, UNC NOW or United with the Northside Community Now. The Northside and Pine Knolls neighborhoods had become what realty ads now called "hot property" and "student rental heaven." Investors were buying up homes and replacing them with what neighbors considered oversized rooming houses, which were often occupied in flagrant violation of town ordinances. The Midway Business District—the economic hub of the historically Black neighborhoods—had been razed in order to build a towering, mixed-use condo complex. The oral histories we were hearing continued to describe generations of struggle and triumph but were now shaded with anger and despair at the prospect of a disappearing homeplace.

By 2008, UNC NOW had found an outpost upstairs at St. Joseph C.M.E., where we soon held over 50 oral histories, many from neighbors who would not have donated their stories to a University to which they had already given "the shirt off our backs": *why should we give them our history too?* In 2009 we could think of no better way to honor our inspiration, Mrs. Marian Cheek Jackson, the longtime historian at St. Joseph—who taught us that "without the past, you have no future"—than to announce the formation of a center "for saving and making history" in her name. The incipient Center sponsored youth interns. Started a community newspaper. Planned forums. Launched a prize-winning radio program. Created a community-based, multi-mediated documentary installation. Renewed the Orange County Training School end-of-year tradition of a May Day Festival. We supported the growth of St. Joseph's food ministry—which soon became Heavenly Groceries/Comida Celestial and grew to serve 5,000 households/month on a daily, grocery-style basis. And, continuing to listen with the aim of doing justice by what we were privileged to hear, we began to organize against displacement.

In 2011, that organizing took the form of the S.O.S. (Sustaining OurSelves Coalition): a scrappy, wide-ranging collective of clergy, residents, students, and friends who fought for and won a short-term moratorium on development in Northside in 2011. Chapel Hill Town Council passed the measure just hours before the Governor signed a bill banning moratoria on development across the state. The S.O.S. Coalition was recognized with an Indy Citizen Award, the citation for which testified to the broad scope of what makes a "citizen":

I've covered many marches, rallies and speeches. Until recently, I would have counted attending then-candidate Obama's 2008 victory speech in South Carolina as the highlight of it all. I say until recently because I've never been as inspired by those I've written about as I was covering Sustaining OurSelves and its fight to preserve, cherish and advance Northside and Pine Knolls, two historically African American, working class neighborhoods in Chapel Hill.

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For me, this coalition takes the mantle because it demonstrated exactly the type of hope and change Obama described on that March 2008 night. This is a community movement that combines people of different generations, different backgrounds, different races and other preconceived notions of standing in society. It's a movement about neighbors and what happens when people start truly living in community with each other.

It's a testament to what can happen when instead of lamenting what has been lost, people celebrate what remains and envision a promising future.

SOS, which combines activists from the Marian Cheek Jackson Center for Saving and Making History, the NAACP, EmPOWERment Inc., St. Paul's and St. Joseph's among others, showed us what can happen when you combine powerful narratives and undeniable data with heart and determination.

They proved that a movement can defeat powerful investors who have changed the face of a family neighborhood full of charm into one rife with students living in homes that tower over their neighbors.

They showed that truth is more powerful than the power players. For that, we are thrilled to honor them with this Citizen Award.

The warriors of Northside were rising yet again.

In 2012, the Jackson Center formally incorporated as a 501(c)(3). In 2013, it moved next door to St. Joseph's former parsonage, where it now serves as a hub of community-first organizing, education, and celebration. In 2015, it launched the Northside Neighborhood Initiative, a historic collaboration between the Town of Chapel Hill, the University of North Carolina, and the Northside/Pine Knolls communities. Led by a community Compass Group, in its first year the NNI put 15 properties at risk of rental investment into a "landbank," with our affordable housing partners: welcome 18 new neighbors to Northside, provided critical repairs to over 30 homes of elderly neighbors, launched a property tax mitigation program, reduced nuisance complaints by 60%, and celebrated the first increase in the African-American population in Northside in 40 years. The Center has now hosted several major installation events, including *Facing Our Neighbors* (2010), *Civil Rights in Chapel Hill* (2012), and *The Struggle Continues* (2015). In 2016, it enjoyed the support of over 400 University and community volunteers and partnership with over 45 resource agencies. Led by our Community Mentor Team, we are teaching k-12 students local, oral, and civil rights history. Renewing a proud tradition of economic independence and interdependence, the Center hosts the Neighborhood Business Network. Between the avid work of the Northside Precinct Network and our Student Leadership Group, student tenants are now learning the rich history beneath their feet—and beginning to feel the rare privilege of living close, proud, and connected in Northside.

The Jackson Center's commitment to "saving and making history" is poised between Ms. Esphur Foster's rallying cry: "you are nothing without your history" and Ms. Gladys Brandon's sense that that history has "always been about change." The Center is dedicated to continuing to work with all of those who live, work, play, serve, and worship in Northside and its neighboring community, Pine Knolls, to sustain and create histories worthy of a community that has long traveled an arc that bends towards justice.

The work of the Marian Cheek Jackson Center has been generously recognized by UNC's Office of the Provost, the North Carolina Campus Compact, The Independent Weekly, Preservation Chapel Hill, Eta Phi Zeta, the National Communication Association Forum, the UNC, Chapel Hill MLK Community/University Foundation, and the North Carolina Humanities Council.

— Della Pollock, Executive Director

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A Glimpse at Our Work

The Jackson Center is a hub of creative action dedicated to preserving the future of historically Black neighborhoods in Chapel Hill, NC. Located in the heart of the Northside community, Center staff work in collaboration with Northside neighbors and friends to respect and to serve histories that, even as they are told, make new history out of Emancipation, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, civil rights struggle, and desegregation. Today Northside and Pine Knolls are among the most racially, ethnically, and economically diverse neighborhoods in the region.

The Value of Oral History

Oral history is at the center of the Jackson Center's organizing model. It teaches us values, visions, struggles, and victories of every day history-makers, and it has continued to ground our work in listening and to inspire all of us to build a more just community together.

Our primary aim is to listen well: to hear and to carry forward histories shaped by abiding values and visions for vibrant community. We want to make sure that the histories of everyday, courageous and faithful leadership that we are privileged to hear—and to hold

"So you had to have courage. It's not just courage for a moment; it's courage every day you live."

-- Edric Cotton