



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 25, 2024

PENN STATE FAYETTE DEDICATES STATUE IN HONOR OF CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVIST

Uniontown, PA – For many, the name most associated with the U.S. Civil Rights Movement is Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. But Rev. James M. Lawson Jr., a Fayette County native, worked alongside King and was renowned in his own right for his activism, particularly his philosophy of nonviolent protest.

Lawson was born in Uniontown on Sept. 22, 1928, and after waging a long and storied battle to secure the civil rights of African Americans, passed away on June 9 at the age of 95. But Lawson’s legacy lives on, and a tangible reminder of that legacy was unveiled June 22 in the library at Penn State Fayette, The Eberly Campus.

The bronze statue, sculpted by New York-based artist Vinnie Bagwell, is a life-size figure of Lawson, standing with his right hand in his pocket and the index finger of his left hand pointing. Sculpted in relief on his jacket are the faces of civil rights activists and others affected by his teachings.

During the statue dedication, Penn State Fayette Chancellor and Chief Academic Officer Dr. W. Charles Patrick said that the statue was a project three years in the making.

“Bob Eberly Jr., our most recent past president, contacted me about three years ago to discuss a tribute to Dr. Lawson,” Patrick said. “He was a renowned tactician of the nonviolent protests of the 1950s and ‘60s. Bob suggested Penn State Fayette as the physical location (for the tribute), and of course, we were open to the idea.”

Patrick said the college matched a contribution from the Eberly Foundation, and Lawson was contacted.

“He was humble, gracious and very enthusiastic about being honored in this way,” Patrick said.

He said the conversation with Lawson generated the idea of making the tribute a public sculpture. A request for artistic proposal was sent to artists specializing in African American art, Patrick said, and Bagwell was “overwhelmingly selected.”

Bagwell said when she received the request for artistic proposal, she was determined to be chosen.

“History is the memory of the people. I am old enough to remember the Civil Rights Movement,” Bagwell said. “So, when I saw this call, I said, ‘That’s mine. I’m getting that.’”

After being selected, Bagwell was put in touch with Lawson, whom she said told her, “Just call me Jim.”

The civil rights leader recounted his days working with King, who recruited him to the cause, as well as many other dedicated people. Though born in Uniontown, Lawson grew up in Massilon, Ohio, and received his ministry license as a high school senior. He earned a degree from Baldwin Wallace College in Berea, Ohio, and later traveled to India as a Methodist missionary. There, he studied the philosophy of nonviolent resistance developed by Mohandas Gandhi and his followers.

Lawson returned to the U.S. and enrolled in the Graduate School of Theology at Oberlin College in Ohio. While there, he married Dorothy Wood, with whom he would have three sons. He also was introduced to King, who encouraged him to move south with him and get involved in civil rights activism. Lawson moved to Nashville and enrolled at Vanderbilt University School of Divinity. He also began teaching nonviolent protest techniques while at Vanderbilt. His activism caused him to be expelled in 1960, but he went on to receive his Baccalaureate in Sacred Theology from Boston University.

During his time in Nashville, Lawson mentored and trained many key figures in the Civil Rights Movement, some of whom helped launch the Nashville sit-ins protesting segregation in stores.

Lawson also helped develop tactics for the Freedom Riders, who rode segregated buses in protest of the non-enforcement of laws proclaiming such segregation unconstitutional. He served as chairman of the Memphis sanitation strike committee in 1968, and though he retired from ministerial work in 1999, continued his activism in support of the American Civil Liberties Union, the labor movement, and reproductive and LGBTQ+ rights.

In 2006, Vanderbilt University apologized to Lawson, and he returned to teach there as a Distinguished Professor until 2009.

"I'm just extremely proud and delighted that the artwork came out like I wanted it to," Bagwell said of the statue in Lawson's honor.

Penn State Fayette Associate Vice Provost for Educational Equity Dr. SeriaShia Chatters said the sculpture is "more than a tribute to a distinguished man. It is a testament to the impact of nonviolent resistance." She noted Lawson's belief in nonviolence as a powerful force.

"Let us remember his commitment to justice, peace and equality," she said.

Robert Eberly III, current president of the Eberly Foundation, said he is pleased with the statue and believes Lawson would be as well.

Eberly said the honor is "long overdue," calling Lawson's work "foundational and transformative for our country."

"(The statue) is representative of the work they did, and representative of the work that we all need to continue to do today," Eberly said.

To learn more about Penn State Fayette, The Eberly Campus, visit www.fayette.psu.edu. To learn more about Fayette County, visit www.fayettcountypa.org.

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This communication is part of the Fayette County PR Initiative, which is funded through the Fayette County Local Share Account (LSA) and Hotel Tax Grants in cooperation with the Fayette County Board of Commissioners, Fayette Chamber of Commerce, The Redevelopment Authority of the County of Fayette, The Redstone Foundation and other partners. This funding has been designated for the continued promotion and marketing of Fayette County, PA.

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