

UI BAACC: A Place of Black Sovereignty¹

Speech written and presented by Dr. Sydney Freeman, Jr.

I would like to say thank you to Mr. Mario Pile for this invitation. I am so grateful for his leadership and look forward to supporting him and the center.

White colleges and universities were not made with Black people in mind!!! 3X

In 1971, the newly formed Black Student Union at the University of Idaho presented a document of rationale for a cultural center space. Apart of the rationale was to have a location that would “function...as a coordinating center for Black life on this campus”.

What was described in that document was a call for what I believe is a “sovereign” space. I define sovereignty in this context to mean, supporting and/or establishing Black-lead and managed initiatives, organizations and units within the university. These activities and spaces are sacred and center Black joy, excellence, thriving, and flourishing.

Those visionary students in the early 1970’s stated that the Black cultural center would serve as a meeting place to discuss BSU’s activities and management, provide academic assistance, financial aid assistance, and much more. They also requested space for their officers and their advisor. Although they did not use the terminology, they understood the importance of having a Black sovereign space at UI.

While they were able to secure two different locations over the years the first being the old College Master's house. Located at 706 Deakin Avenue which is the current location of the UI bookstore and Starbucks. And later moved to the Canterbury House, which was Episcopal Student Center, the area in which the Theta Chi fraternity house now stands. However, in 1973 the Black Cultural Center within the Canterbury House was demolished. Because white colleges and universities were not made with Black people in mind, UI was able to demolish our sovereign space without replacing it.

It was only after a chance conversation with Ms. Jessica Samuels during my first semester at UI that this history of having a Black cultural center was rediscovered. On Friday, December 11, 2015, at 8:01 p.m. Ms. Samuels sent me and other Black faculty and staff documentation that showed that the history of having both a Black Student Union and cultural center went back nearly 50 years.

Armed with that information almost five years later, when President C. Scott Green and Dr. Yolonda Bisbee asked me what things the administration could do to show that Black Lives Mattered on campus. Reestablishing our sovereign space, the Black Cultural Center was at the top of the list.

During the fall of 2020, the then BSU president Alphonse Crittendom who also served as my intern, completed the application for the Black Cultural Center. Although it was not easy Alphonse and the rest of his team made it happen. It is because of the advocacy of Black organizations on campus such as the Black Faculty & Staff Association and the Africana Studies program that we now have this sovereign space along with its director.

¹ This speech was given on March 21, 2022, at the University of Idaho’s Black/African American Cultural Center’s Open House and Grand Opening outside of the Idaho Student Union Building room 305.

A special thank you is in order for the tireless leadership of President Green, UI Chief Diversity Officer-Dr. Yolonda Bisbee, former ASUI president Lauren Carlsen, KT Turner, Ms. Jessica Samuels and Dr. Lynda Freeman.

Students please do not take this for granted. This space was fought for in the midst of the Idaho state legislature defunding higher education institutions for supporting diversity initiatives. Many put their professional reputations and capital on the line so that you can have a director and space. Honor their work by committing to making the center the sovereign space it is destined to be.

I will conclude with this note that I journaled last year²:

Two weeks ago, I was notified that along with being allocated dedicated space to reestablish the Black Cultural Center on our campus. We had gotten the go ahead to hire a director to lead the center. These were two initiatives that I conceptualized and lead. After hearing the news, I went on a walk. As I was walking, it was like I heard a voice say hush harbor. I had heard of the term but didn't know what it meant. So, right there I stopped and googled what it was. And I found out that hush harbors were hidden places, sacred spaces, holy places where our enslaved fore parents gathered and used coded language or songs to strategize for their freedom.

In closing, the gospel writer, Richard Smallwood pinned the words:

This world sometimes seems cruel and cold
And pain doth pierce my very soul,
But there's a place, a secret place,
A place where I can go.³

So, it is my hope that as long as there is a University of Idaho there remains a Place of Black Sovereignty.

² Paragraph previously appeared in the article: Freeman, Jr., S. (August 5, 2021). The Future of Black Scholars. *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*. <https://diverseeducation.com/article/221712/>

³ Smallwood, R. (Lyricist & Composer). (2002). A Secret Place [Recorded by Karen Clark Sheard]. On "2nd Chance". Los Angeles, CA: Elektra Records.