

Ruth Candler 0:13

Welcome to W and L After Class, the Lifelong Learning Podcast. I'm your host, Ruth Candler. Our guest today is Michael Hill, professor and chair of the Africana Studies program at Washington and Lee. He is also the inaugural director of the University's new DeLaney Center, an interdisciplinary academic center for teaching and research on Southern race relations, culture and politics.

Michael's research focuses on post-World War II African American literature and popular culture, with particular attention to the ways that Black individuals pursue excellence within white institutions. With more than two decades in academia, he has lectured widely and written extensively on African American authors during and since the Civil Rights Movement. His publications include two books, one edited collection, and numerous chapters and articles. A summa cum laude graduate of Howard University, he received both a master's degree and a Ph.D. in English and American Literature and Language from Harvard University.

In this episode, we'll explore how Michael's background, family and formative experiences not only shaped his path as a scholar, but how many of his experiences have prepared him for his work with the DeLaney Center. Michael, welcome to W&L After Class.

Michael Hill 1:27

Pleased to be here.

Ruth Candler 1:31

Our podcast always covers a faculty member's teaching and research interests. You've suggested that your family background might provide some helpful insights to our understanding of your scholarship. Let's begin there

Michael Hill 1:46

Yes. So the first thing to understand in that regard is that I'm a Southerner, and I'm a Southerner from a particular space and a Southerner of a particular sort. When we ponder the notion of southernness, in the 21st century, sometimes it's conflated quite conspicuously with notions of urbanity or with urban centers, like we talk about the South in relationship to major cities that have arisen over the course of 100 years, you know, a century or so, but have come into peculiar focus in the last three or four decades, maybe as far back as a World War Two, the Vietnam era. So when I say I'm a Southerner, I'm a Georgian. But I'm not an Atlantan. I'm not someone who's from one of the major metropolitan spaces I'm not from a cosmopolitan sphere. But all that being said, the town that I'm from Monroe, Georgia, in northeast Georgia, is on highway 78 In between Athens and Atlanta, and that bespeaks something in relationship to my identity. I'm proximate to one of the major public universities in the state of Georgia, Athens and the University of Georgia. But I'm also roughly an hour away from one of the iconic urban spaces within the state of Georgia, Atlanta. And that reality conditions, both the way that I see myself but it also is very deeply enmeshed within the fabric of my upbringing. My family worked, both in Athens, but also in Atlanta. Folks in my family commuted on a daily basis, my grandfather was a waiter, and he would commute on a daily basis from Monroe, an agrarian space, a space intimately associated with agriculture and the landscape and the rural spheres. But he would go from that spot into the urban center and earn his living. And in many ways that cross pollination that kind of back and forth zigzagging condition the person that I am, but no sketch of my character would be complete without talking a bit about my grandmother who sort of anchors my personality anchors my upbringing in a whole bunch of ways and her participation in a kind of southern ritual that was unusual at the moment that she

performed. It is very important in terms of trying to get a sense of my identity, but also trying to understand how compasses are set within my life.

Ruth Candler 4:38

You know, you've I'm so glad that you brought up your grandmother because I've heard you speak of her so many times. Tell us more about her, and how she helped mold the person you are today.

Michael Hill 4:52

So the most basic thing to understand about my grandmother is her status as a rejecter, of the great migration, so, a rejecter of the Great Migration. During the course of the aftermath really of the Civil War, starting as early as reconstruction, but hitting peculiar highs within the early portions of the 20th century in the aftermath of World War One and World War Two, we see massive relocations of the black population from the South to centers in the urban north, the Midwest, as well as the West Coast. So, this is an undeniable fact, of African American existence is that the population radically relocates during the course of that time period. My grandmother was born in 1926. She sits dead in the center of many of those developments. But instead of leaving, like her brothers and sisters did, her father was a farmer who owned farms in South Carolina, owned farms in North Carolina. When he passed, her brothers and sisters all went either to New Jersey, Philadelphia, or to Ohio, right to Dayton. My grandmother decided not to go to the northeast, she didn't go north, she didn't go to the Midwest. Instead, she decided to go further south. So, she decides to relocate to Georgia. And in many ways that streak of a contrarian behavior, right, like sort of going against the grain heading in a direction that other people are not going for reasons that were plausible to her, make perfect sense to her. They were connecting a tie to her career development. But it was also a bit token thing, something else about her that's a little more elemental, right. Like, it's not just about oh, that's the way I see the world. That's the way I understand the world in terms of opportunity. But it's also the way she understood the world in terms of governing her decisions on the basis of her character, right. Like she went after things that made sense to her, she ultimately decided to do things in a way that didn't necessarily always coincide or dovetail with the prevailing norms of the term. But definitely, they may sense in terms of her own moral and ethical orientation. And that truth manifests itself not just in the way that she conducted herself as far as her career was concerned, but also the way that she looked at her family and the complex realities that sat at the center of her family.

Ruth Candler 7:45

So you mentioned growing up in Monroe, Georgia, and it's a place that I've heard you describe as multi layered with respect to southern history and race relations. Tell us about growing up in Monroe, and how you learn to navigate those special challenges.

Michael Hill 8:05

So, my role my hometown is the county seat of Walton County. Walton County is named after George Walton, signatory of the leader documents within this country Declaration of Independence. Constitution. I grew up in the center of a space that was suffused with that kind of pride, that kind of prominence in relationship to its participation within the signature moments of the unfolding of the national drama of democracy, but I also grew up in a town that was the site of one of the last mass lynchings within the United States, 1946 at Morris Ford four individuals, couples, end up being one a former veteran. That simultaneity, right like that paradoxical reality, introduced me before I read Shakespeare to the notion of negative capacity, right, before I heard of the ability to simultaneously occupy two diametrically opposed positions at the same time. Right. So, you could both be the leading expositor of the notion of natural rights, right? Like you could both be the eloquent articulator of the

notion of freedom and liberty, while at the same moment being the site of some of the most brutal episodes of inhumanity that had ever been witnessed. And that sense of the oxymoronic, right like that sense of the paradoxical lived with me on a day to day basis. It manifested itself in the way that people in my town have segregated themselves by people live in certain spaces in town, and white people live in certain spaces in town. Certain churches, certain social institutions unfolded against the backdrop of a particular fabric, certain rituals unfolded against the backdrop of a particular fabric. One example that sort of drives at home we had two beauty pageants in my hometown, we had a white beauty pageant in my hometown, we had a black beauty pageant in my hometown. That communicates aggressively to a section of your listenership probably in a profound way. Yes. How divided?

Ruth Candler 10:41

Yeah, so let's talk about let's talk about that for a second. So we're talking about the 70s. That's, that's recent.

Michael Hill 10:48

So the truth of life in Monroe is a belated madness in the context of Brown v Board. There's a famous phrase that the achievement of integration should occur with all deliberate speed, right like that, that this notion of deliberate speed was, becomes a meme in academia, right? Like we talk about what exactly is meant by deliberate speed, to give you the timeline with relationship to developmental realities, in a town like Monroe, Brown is decided in 1954. My school, my high school is not desegregated until 1965, 1966, is not completely desegregated, right? Like signifies exists, those emitted 60 years. Those are moments of desegregation that are occurring in the context of small pockets of people who move in. And those are relatives, those people who I know those, those aren't people who I hear about, those are people I'm reading about, those aren't people whose documentaries I later see on any kind of streaming platform, those are people who are sitting in my house and during the course of the holidays, occasionally dribbling out segments or portions of the stories. So much so that the full story of the desegregation of the high school emerged most forcefully, in my mind, four years ago, when I'm sitting around at my grandmother's house during the course of the Christmas season, and one of my second cousins, this is my grandfather's brother's daughter. She's listening to my daughter, and some other kids in the family talk about their school situation. And they mentioned the word desegregation. And she's never told this story before. And she stops them and says, Well, you know, when I went into the school, I went into the school with one other person. And that was how we desegregated the high school. It was just me, one other black person, and hundreds of white students. And the experience that I had during the course of that episode, fundamentally changed the way that I saw the world. What I understood about people's capacity to behave in certain ways, fundamentally adjusted, shift change. So that's where I come from, like, those are the realities that condition not expose facto, right, like not after the fact, retrospectively, but from day one, the way I saw the world, the way I understood the world, you know, growing up, born in 1971, going into first grade and 1977, right, graduating from high school in 1989. You know, those are the years those are the decades that sort of color, the life that I lived, and especially the time that I spent in that spot, and they're shot through so many themes shot through with so many elements connected and tied, not just to this notion of racial reality, but also to broader narratives connected and tied to who I was, that I was also trying to sort out questions of origins, what kind of family situation you come out of, what kind of framework you're born into, you know, those things are intimately clustered and tied, and textured, and how I see myself how I understand myself but also how I navigate a particular version of Southern-ness like a particular way of seeing southern identity.

Ruth Candler 15:01

So, you mentioned storytelling. And that seems to be a theme in your family. That's how you're how you're learning about how those before you navigated such difficult waters. You know, as early as four years ago, or as most as recent as four years ago, your your ideas shifted a little bit. Tell us about the storytelling in your family, and how that not only shapes the way you see the world, but how perhaps your children see the world

Michael Hill 15:35

Telling stories rarely emerged from the standpoint of a particular label. People didn't necessarily identify explicitly, according to the notion of storytellers, right. Like there, there are no signs around that sort of say, this is a storyteller. And you know, like that, that's not the way that these situations unfold. But every conversation with my father, my wife thinks this is the funniest thing in the world, that every conversation with my father, you have to set aside 45 minutes for him to get to the point, right, like literally, and he declares, right, like he, as he's, as he declares, he's like, frolic and detour. Right, like he'll say, you know, I'm about to digress, you know, like, it's gonna take me a minute to get there, like, and he will. Oh, yeah, he will, like, grab your beverage and hold tight, right? Like, and that's the whole deal is that, you know, you can't go from A to B, right? Like the shortest distance is not between two points in a straight line. You have to circle around, right? When I first read Emerson, the essay circles, it made perfect sense to me, right? He was like, oh, in order to understand the profundity, you're in order to really get at the depth, the meaning in relationship to human experience, then you've got to take note of concentric circles, right? Like, you've got to look at the way that things circle around. And that's what storytelling is in my family is that it's the process of circling around. Its literally people circling around until they are comfortable disclosing the point to their comfortable disclosing the revelation, but but they never shortcut, the revelation in sacrifice to the process of disclosure, right? Because they believe that storytelling itself is revelatory, right? Like there's something about the storytelling that you know produces an edification, you're learning something, you're somehow addressing something you're connecting to something through the process of storytelling. And I think, you know, going back to that notion of transgenerational contact, one of the great delights of my life is that my children have had an opportunity to meet multiple generations of my family, right like that. They've not only had a chance to see them or hear them on the phone, or through FaceTime and the delights of modern technology, they've literally spent time and houses with no air conditioning, they've literally, you know, felt those box fans blowing hot air from one side of a room to another and them sort of listening to elders offer up thoughts. But they've also been in dialogic exchange, right? Like they've heard those same elders saying, what's going on with you? What's happening with you? Why is your life important? And to me, that factor, right, like that notion of communication, that notion of dialogue is crucial. My grandmother not only redeemed me, from the social circumstances, that could have imperiled me very early in my life, right? Like, she not only went in and said, Oh, I will protect you from those social forces that could potentially, you know, influence or direct the way that things turn out in your life. But she also talked to me. She also exchanged words with me the great rituals of our life stretching now, over the five decades that I've been alive, no matter where I am, since I left Monroe, Georgia at the age of 18. In 1989, we would talk roughly every week and check in. I've done that in Washington, DC. I've done that in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I've done that in Edinburgh, Scotland. I've done that in Paris, France. I've done that all over the world, right, like is checking in with my grandmother and those conversations seems people who listen to them, they're like, Who are you talking to? Is that a friend of yours is that an age group peer of yours, because we're cutting up, like, every time we're having those conversations, we're cutting up. And she's like, why get on out of here, and you know, like, and but that notion of an exchange, right like that notion of serious anchoring, which occurs on the basis of truths, and values and experiences that she occupies. But at the same moment, a recognition that you can stretch the

engagement with those things across multiple registers, multiple emotional registers is not some sort of somber, I think too often people have this notion of pontifical gestures, where people are pounding their fists on tables, and you need to understand like, that's not the way my grandmother operated. You know, as a, as a classroom teacher, she didn't operate that way, as a grandmother, mother, she's incredibly witty, sharp, and very, very funny, in her own way. And all of those elements, all of those things are part and parcel of, of what she poured into, not only me, but really her community. And that's, you know, very important as well, she didn't see this as an activity that was confined to her family. She literally saw herself as civically minded and civically oriented in pretty pervasive ways.

Ruth Candler 21:46

So it sounds like it's the depth of conversation with, with humor sprinkled in.

Michael Hill 21:52

Oh yeah, you know, but make no mistake, make no mistake, she's got an exceptional discipline. And she does not tolerate the idea that you are not operating to your potential. Right, her mindset is very deeply organized around the notion of potential and she sees individual's potential in unique and discreet ways. She does an exceptional job of individuating Her reactions to folks. But once she determines your potential, once she sees what it is that you're capable of doing, that becomes the standard that she holds you to.

Ruth Candler 22:35

You gave an example, once of you coming home with what it was a 96 or 97 grade on an exam, and where if it had happened to maybe somebody else, she would have congratulated them. But for you, she wanted to know why you missed those few questions.

Michael Hill 22:54

Yeah, that's it. She's like, where are the other three points?

Ruth Candler 22:57

We you also came of age in an interesting time in America, one that you've described as a referendum on the Civil Rights Movement. We're well aware of the importance of the civil rights movement in America, but tell us what you mean by referendum on the civil rights movement.

Michael Hill 23:18

So, King was assassinated in April of 1968. And when King was assassinated, the first wave of the civil rights movement, right, like the formal contours of the civil rights movement, come into incredible focus, we take stock at that moment. And when you start taking stock, you got the 1965 Voting Rights Act, you got the Fair Housing Act, you got other civil rights acts that have been passed across the 1960s. And the promise associated with the Reconstruction Era in America, the promise associated with the era immediately following the Civil War 1865 to 1877, the promise associated that moment, the Reconstruction Era amendments, the 13th 14th and 15th amendment, that aborted project of liberty has been restored 100 years later, right? Like right at 100 years later, we're in the context of the civil rights movement. And the elders who participated in that movement have accomplished what they set out to achieve. It's not that equality in practical and emotional turns has been accomplished within the country it is just that the infrastructure is there. You know, we now have the right to vote we now have the prohibition of discrimination in public places. These things are a matter of record. And after King's assassination, you have a 20-year period. I was born in 1971. So just three years after King's assassination, you have a 20 year period where people are testing the accomplishments and the

achievements, they are looking at the society to determine whether the things that they've been working for, what kind of harvest is going to read, right, like we've got the seeds in the ground, we understand that is peremptory, we understand that there's a preliminary gesture that's unfolded, but we want to know what that harvest is going to be. And in many ways, my generation is the harvest, right? Like 1971, from 1971, to the mid-1980s, when I go into high school people are looking, and only later do I begin to understand that one of the reasons that people in my family are looking so hard is because they're trying to determine exactly what has happened, if anything, especially within the context of the South. They want to know, where are we? Here's this eloquent attestation, of human possibility that's been articulated by King across decades of leadership, even as a young man, right. He's like, two decades really, of leadership. But even as a young man, he's laid out that possibility. And now folks want to know, everyday folks want to know, people who are in the middle of that struggle, they want to know, what does this mean? And they're measuring that their yards sticking that pretty explicitly within the context of their children and their grandchildren? Right? Like they're looking at those things, and trying to figure out, how are my children living their lives? How are my grandchildren living their lives? Is it the same? Is it different? And growing up in that time period, certain themes began to emerge. We were aware of our elders keeping score in particular areas, one, educational opportunities, right, like they want to see what happened specifically in relationship to secondary school education, but also in relationship to colleges and universities, what was taking place on that front, too, they wanted to understand what was going on, from the standpoint of quality of life. So much of what was connected and tied to the Civil Rights Movement had to do with quality of life issues, housing, social access, these are things that are connected to quality of life, can you go into a store and buy the clothes that you want? Can you go into a restaurant and eat the food that you want? Can you operate on the basis of whatever economic aptitude you have? Right? Like, if you have the money to have these experiences, can you now gain access to those experiences on the basis of the social norms? Right, like social rituals that can make you have the money, right? Like you're not asking someone to pay for your dinner? You're not asking for someone to pay for you to participate within the world of an amusement park, you're just asking, will I be able to access these spaces? Those notions, those postures of vigilance were unfolding. And you can see them pretty explicitly both in national narratives. But also, I would say, in the world of my community, I didn't know it at the time, but the image is of a neighbor looking out of a window and assessing the scene, not just on the basis of the tableau of children playing, but on the basis of tea leaves. I like those children or tea leaves that she's looking at and trying to read the future through them. I like she's trying to understand what fate does this portend? What kind of answers do we have? And quite frankly, two things erupted in the world of the 1980s that radically reconfigured the way that people were understanding, right, like that referendum, right, like, and on the face of it, it didn't look like it had anything to do with racial oppression. It didn't look like it had anything to do with the prior racial reality. But those two things erupted one drugs and two, the teenage pregnancy crisis, right. Like these are two things that erupt and as people are trying to assess how their communities are functioning, what it is that they're seeing, those are two things that began to be very powerful and very strong indicators that are controlling and influencing their conclusions.

Ruth Candler 30:08

So Michael, those, those two things that you just mentioned, drugs and teen pregnancy, bring me back to a conversation about your grandmother again. And her helping you navigate those waters in a time in your life where there was a lot going on around you in your teenage years. Tell us a little bit about that, you know, you talked about the referendum on the Civil Rights Movement. And the two things in the 80s with drugs and teen pregnancy, how did your grandmother fit into all that?

Michael Hill 30:43

So my grandmother materializes, these concepts. I didn't know it when I was born. I wasn't aware of it at the time, but my grandmother forms a safety net that, you know, buffers me from the consequences of teenage pregnancy. You know, my parents were both teenagers, when I'm born, they're never married, right? Like they never get married. That's not the version of a family that I experience. Both of my parents are in my life, they are incredible supporters of me, in very explicit ways. My mom just celebrated her 70th birthday. My dad is an incredible example of moral seriousness both in terms of the professional Odyssey that he went on as an attorney in the latter stages of his career serving as a public defender, but when I was born, in '71, they were very vulnerable. Right, they're still in high school, they're still trying to figure out what their life is going to be. And there's a particular fate in mind for them, right? Like there's a particular destiny, there's a statistical destiny, right, like so by '71 the Moynihan Report has been out there for a while, you know, and they were like, Yo, this is this the way that this story is supposed to end, statistically, the odds are not in your favor, right. Like, that's what Moynihan is saying is look, the odds are not in your favor. And my grandmother stares there in very concrete ways, and says that conclusion will not determine this child's life. That's not the force or factor that's going to ultimately determine the conclusion to this individual's set of possibilities. And for her, that posture, constituted the only available reaction, right? Like she didn't see, oh, I got four or five different choices. For her that degree of resolve, manifested itself immediately, and pretty much piloted things from that point forward. And in my mind, especially as I emerged in my teenage years, she colored my understanding and assessment of broader narratives of sociological realities within black communities. When I ran into different narratives, connected to black life and black fate and black destiny and black possibility. I always had to read them through the lens of my experience, but particularly through the lens of my grandmother's operation in order to make success possible, not only for me, but also for other people, right, like she made it possible for my father, she made it possible for other members of the community who found themselves in similar situations, she attempted to produce hope, where dominant narratives suggested no hope could exist, and her behavior in the face of teenage pregnancy in the case of my birth, but also in the face of drug addiction, and the way that in a community, but also in our family, the way that those realities hit and they hit, right like they hit not next door, they hit directly at our house, amongst people I grew up with and spent very close time with, but my grandmother's reaction to those things, alerted me that you have a choice, even in the face of very dramatic challenges, even in the face of you know, pandemic level, right? Like some people use terms like genocide, to describe what's happening in relationship to drugs, not just from the standpoint of addiction, but also in the context of the role that drugs play in mass incarceration. You know, people are talking about these things. And again, stuff hits home, right? Like, isn't it when he's talking about, like, around the block or down the street, or I heard a story of, you know, I heard tale of some, like, nah, this stuff is like, right here in the crib, and my grandmother's like, Nah, you know, I can't do anything about decisions that have already been made. But I got every control in my life over how am I going to react to this.

Ruth Candler 35:43

What a lesson for us. All right. Yeah. Thank you for helping us understand that a little bit better. You touched on this a few minutes ago, but your research explores the way black individuals often excel in traditionally white spaces and institutions. Would you expand on why that research is so important and how it connects to your actual life experiences?

Michael Hill 36:07

Sure. Today, we talk about the notion of excellence and especially the phrase Black excellence, there's a hashtag or Instagram frameworks is connected to this notion of Black excellence that people use. Black

excellence is a fairly widespread phenomenon. People from time to time will talk about, oh, Black excellence, Black excellence, hashtag Black excellence. Serena Williams, different figures associated with superlative achievement are connected or tied to this notion of Black excellence. I came of age, in a moment, suffused with Black first. So even eight decades into the 20th century, we still having Black first, the first Black person to coach an NCAA winning basketball team. John Thompson. So when John Thompson's Georgetown Hoyas win when you hear the subtext is the first black coach to win. Fast forward to 21st century, Obama gets elected. And when Obama gets elected, the first Black president of the United States, so we're still operating within the realm of a referendum, right, like going back to this notion of a referendum, right? Like, that's the pervasive notion of a referendum sometimes, like, oh, Black excellence, right? Like all these accomplishments, all these achievements, but one of the fascinating things that I also grew up with the context of the affirmative action backlash, right, like, so people were saying, you won. But it must have been, because you receive a preferential treatment, you won, you achieve these things, you accomplish these things, but it must have been because you were given special treatment. Basketball goals are 10 feet high, you can write like, what treatment you can receive that allows you to win a basketball game, right like, it was pretty interesting to me as a rabid sports fan, probably inveterately, watch all kinds of sports. But then I started to see it in cultural realities, as well. And the most dramatic example of it to me was in 1993, when Toni Morrison wins the Nobel Prize for Literature, the first American writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in quite some time, right? Like, it's not like we have, like 70,000 American writers who win the Nobel Prize for Literature. Toni Morrison wins a Nobel Prize for Literature. And instead of uniform hailing of her accomplishment, some people said things like, Oh, she only got the prize because of affirmative action, that people in Switzerland were somehow engaging in affirmative action. And I was trying to understand why weren't people happy that Black people were accomplishing things, right? Like why weren't people uniformly celebrating the accomplishments of Black folks and black folks with break through or have a racial first when they would break barriers? Why was there murmuring sometimes that their accomplishments, their achievements weren't quite the same as when somebody else would achieve those things because, you know, the playing field has been changed. And so that became fascinating to me. I'm a scholar of English first and foremost, right? Like, that's where my training is. That's where I spent most of my time. So, my project was looking at Black prize winning, right, like African American authors who won major prizes, specifically in fiction. How did their experience accomplishing these things in the overwhelmingly white publishing industry in the overwhelmingly white world of judges and prize grantors, how were they able to make these breakthroughs? What kind of experiences that they have? And what lessons can we learn from contemplating their ability to succeed, and from that early moment, unfolded, a set of case studies of Black individuals accomplishing excellence within the context of majority white institutions. Like over and over again, we see Black individuals going into majority white institutions and accomplishing incredible feats. And I felt that in the 21st century, particularly, as we were moving into a more mature phase of desegregation, as we were moving into a more mature phase of what ultimately became the DEI revolution in higher education. We were ignoring prior moments that could teach us that could give us some very important insights about how this process could go. And what each entity both Black students, teachers, staff, members, community members, but also what white majority institutions and the people who feel them what they might learn from prior instances, it's not like we're starting from scratch, it's not the first time that we've gone through this drama, it's not the first time we've gone through this ritual. But quite often, individuals on both sides behave as if, oh, this is the this is the new thing. I have never seen this before. This never happened before. What are we gonna do? Like now, you know, this has happened, it's happened to scale. And it's happened in dramatic ways in different spaces.



Ruth Candler 41:45

Yeah, it's interesting that you said that we're entering a mature stage of it. And that's a fascinating way to look at that. In what, in what ways has this research and your life experienced influenced your teaching and mentoring of undergraduate students?

Michael Hill 42:05

Every way, from the moment that I stood in front of a college classroom, part of my motivation was grounded in the belief that you pay forward the foundational experiences that you've had in your life. So many of those took place within the context of my family, as I alluded to before, but I would be remiss if I ignore the folks who are in educational institutions in Monroe, Georgia, poured, essential portions of themselves into who I was. And they imbued me with a deep appreciation for what an inspired teacher can accomplish, what an inspired teacher can't convey what an inspired teacher can give to individuals within the context of the classroom. And that space is very important, right? Like, they told me, and I also began to believe deeply myself that the classroom is a special spot, right? Like certain things happen in his classroom, that can't happen anywhere else in society, right? Like it's unlike any other space within the society. And over time, my belief in that my convictions about that have grown deeper and deeper, there's a sense of what we call a sacred trust. In my syllabus, every year, I include the notion of stewardship, right, that and it's not a stewardship outside, right, like that's a different kind of stewardship, we're talking about the stewardship of your obligations and responsibilities within the context of the classroom. That's not only about your individual growth and development, but it's also about the collective growth and development of everybody including me, right? Like, I'm not going to be my best self, I'm not going to arrive at the destinations that I could potentially reach unless you participate fully, unless you come along on this joint venture. And in many ways, that has been the harvest not only of family experiences, but it's also been the harvest of courageous instructors throughout my life, who have made alive the possibility for walking through what I call repositories of wonder, right, like repositories of exalted possibility, right? Like that's Dickens's resonant title, great expectations, right? Like, what do we do in order to get there? How do we activate? How do we make real great expectations?

Ruth Candler 44:51

So Michael, there's not a conversation that we have that I don't walk away with something that I'm pondering, and you know, our students are so fortunate to learn from you. I'd like to, I'd like to shift our conversation slightly to talk about your current role with a Delaney Center. The Center Honors Ted Delaney, who was a beloved, beloved history professor at W & L. It offers the W&L community an opportunity to engage in a multifaceted examination of southern culture and history. And I know that your time at WL overlapped some with Ted Delaney, would you tell us a little bit about him and how this initiative came about?

Michael Hill 45:37

Sure. So the learning center born in the context of the spring of 2022, the context of its formation, inextricably tied to the notions of the name change, the base around name change, and as the university wrestled with complicated truths associated with diverse opinions, connected tied to the notion of name change. Its common reaction in every instance, was a resolved tie to truth teller, right like regularly, the university landed upon truth telling as an imperative as it moved forward. No matter what issue you touched upon, or you tied to, it all came back to the idea of truth telling. And to me, the Delaney Center's birth out of that is probably the most apropos aspect of it, is because Ted spearheaded the attempt to tell the truth about W&L in the most layered, comprehensive and productive and constructive way that could be imagined, and that's Ted's legacy, right? Like when we make legible who

he was as a person, and what he did for this institution, he will go down in history as a profound contributor to a signature moment, the same eras that we've been talking about in relationship to massive transformation of the country, from the era of segregation into the context of desegregation, massive transformations of the country, in the context of the growth of the black middle class, the emergence of Black faces in spaces that they heretofore have not occupied, right, like his time, and his life, dovetails and coincides with those realities. And his service ethic takes a unique and a peculiar form that is inspirational to me, the way that he goes about doing the work of serving the community, because he doesn't contribute millions of dollars to the university. That's not the way that he performed service. That's not the way that he's on it, he's not gonna be up on the Benefactor's Wall from the standpoint of the dollar amount of contribution that he gave. However, however, if we overlook the kinds of contributions that Ted Delaney makes, right, like if we overlook the kind of service that he offers, then we overlook the fundamental elements that sit at the center of very transcendent possibilities for change as far as the university is concerned. And in many ways, I feel that Ted's surfacing as a namesake of a center concretizes decade's worth of effort. And it resonates incredibly for me, because I've seen overlooked individuals of that sort, in southern locales my whole life. I've seen people who are doing versions, analogous duties, deeds and responsibilities. toiling away in obscurity are often not being recognized as engines of change. And for me, Ted's example, not only relates to this notion of institutional evolution, you know, from the standpoint of curricular preoccupations, what courses he taught to students like literally introducing courses that had never been taught on the campus of W&L before. Also the way that he attempted to rally intellectual destinations to bring his peers to a space of intellectual destination, around certain kinds of inquiry. Ted is instrumental in the formation of what is first the African American Studies program here at W&L and then Africana Studies program here at W&L. And at the end of the day, those kinds of predispositions help us to activate the next chapter in our evolution as a small liberal arts institution. But what should never be overlooked about Ted Delaney is that he's a homeboy, right? He's from here in Lexington. He's somebody who sutures together the campus and the community. And to me, that's a dramatic element that is equally important when we look at his portfolio, especially the way that he inspires us and is certainly central to the way that I imagined the Delaney center moving forward as intellectual destination that serves students as a space for gathering around faculty and staff who are interested in looking at these issues, but also that it is a community outreach project.

Ruth Candler 50:59

Well, I know that there are probably a lot of alumni that are listening to this that have smiles on their faces remembering Ted Delaney. We've talked quite a bit today about the larger social forces in America shaping who we are and who we might become. I'm curious to know more about how the Delaney center encourages our students to reflect on those questions.

Michael Hill 51:24

So two major things that I would identify one, inform yourself about the past. The Delaney center is deeply invested in the notion of not only investigating W&L's past. Right now, we have five students working on a project tied to desegregation and black women, where they're literally looking into the black females who entered this campus in the context of W&L's broader coeducation effort in the mid-1980s. Ironically, those individuals are not on the public record. They are not documented as participants in that effort. So when we talk about co-education is really in the context of their absence from this discourse. So we have students right now who are seeking as aggressively as possible and through partnership with our colleagues in the institutional history office, to learn how to perform oral history interviews, and also to perform those oral history interviews. Educating yourself about your past, right like trying to be as intentional as possible, trying to be as explicit as possible, incredible

opportunities to interact with the founding members of the Student Association for Black Unity who are constantly on our campus giving of themselves telling their stories, trying it as much as possible to generate financial opportunities for our students, so that whatever it is that they would like to do, they'll be able to do so. But in addition to learning about your past, what we're also trying to accomplish within the context of the Delaney Center is a posture of civic awareness. Much of the programming tied to the Delaney center, presupposes that democratic progress will hinge upon a certain set of civic competencies, we have to have the ability to interact with each other in communities in a productive and constructive way, notwithstanding the fact that we have different outlooks. We cannot continue seeing the world as polarized, and therefore concluding that there is no opportunity for cooperation, there's no opportunity for partnership, there's no opportunity for collaboration. We are going to have to restore the notion of a public square where we can look at one another across the metaphorical space of a shared ground and reach some sort of a common good that each of us can participate in and each of us can strive toward. In the context of the Delaney center. What we want to do is to yoke together an exposure to the past, right like visiting civil rights site in the sites in the context of our DC Saturday programs going to Lyburn Downing going to the Robert Russa Moton Museum, going to the Booker T. Washington National Monument. We want to suture together that exposure to the past with conversations that invite individuals who hold different perspectives who hold different outlooks to talk to each other about what it means to wrestle with these elements of our past. What does it mean to grapple with the details associated with our past and that is a ritual, a set of protocols, that we want to introduce our students to via the Delaney center. But it's also a set of protocols that we think can travel, right. Like we think that it has efficacy beyond the world of our current enrolled students both in the undergraduate side, but also on the Law side,

Ruth Candler 55:23

So in addition to the black women and desegregation project, and some of the events that you just mentioned with the Delaney Center, are there any other projects that you're working on?

Michael Hill 55:38

Sure, um, right now, my scholarly interests fall on the adolescent, especially the figure of the black adolescent, really interested in what the black adolescent tells us, when I began to project I was, in the last decade of the 20th century, right like this, the mid 1990s. And the riddle of Emmett Till, was still incredibly present, both socially but also, within academic terms. Not a lot had been written about Emmett Till, like we knew of Emmett Till he was a touch point, but not a lot in the latter portion of the 20th century have been written about Emmett Till, almost by tacit agreement, almost as if this wound is too painful to return to with any degree of intensity, and for a sustained amount of time, it was almost as if we had touched upon, but we had never tarried, we hadn't dwell in that space. And so Till was the dominant figure that I evoked in the context of my investigations of black adolescence, right. Like I was looking at Emmett Till looking at a figure who subsequently emerge, Claudette Colvin, who's connected to the Montgomery Bus Boycott says a rejected suitor. Right. They say she she's not a good plaintiff in the case, because she has a child out of wedlock. When we look at the 21st century, and especially when I began to return to the project and 21st century, Trayvon Martin comes into focus immediately. And the name of the project tentatively is whether veins of democracy, you know, Black adolescents and African American novels, from 1936, to the 21st century. And my contention is basically just that the adolescent when we look at the black adolescent, especially the way that has been depicted in literature, it tells us something about the temperature of hope in our society, right, it tells us something about the temperature of possibility within our society.

Ruth Candler 58:01

So before we wrap up our conversation today, I'd like to bring our conversation to a more personal level. Some of our listeners may not know that your spouse is also a member of the W&L community. You are married to Professor Lena Hill, who began serving as provost in July of '21, after serving as dean of the college. What has it been like to pursue your careers in academia together.

Michael Hill 58:28

It is incredibly beneficial. As you can imagine, dinner table conversations, as our children say, often devolves to shop talk. So we're constantly debriefing, we're constantly offering perspective, we're constantly sound boarding. And the thing that I treasure the most about that is it's literally an endless feedback loop. What does it mean at one o'clock in the morning, that I can come up from my cave, and read a paragraph of a literary critical treatment of a cultural studies assessment and be like, Yo, where are the gaps, where are the holes? What's your reaction to this? What it means is that I can have in house reactions at virtually any time or day or night to professional decisions and professional possibilities and have the benefit the wisdom of counsel that is sought after nationally and internationally, you know, people who literally come and say, hey, you know, a lot about stuff, and she's traveling to all those spots, but I get that just on the ride to the grocery store, going to grab some bread and I was like, oh, you know, just you get the degree and the benefit of virtuosity that is, right. Like that's not some one thing that you can acquire easily elsewhere, you would have to seek it out, you have to try to find it. And in many ways that's been the arc of our career together. I've been I began my career in a position where we weren't working together. And then our second institution, we work together in the same department at the same level, right? Like we were literally at the same level. And the kind of choreography that we ultimately produced makes me proud, right, you asked me earlier about, you know, what is it that you think you've accomplished in the context of the classroom? Or what is it that you think you've accomplished in the context of research? Again, that's for others to determine. But what I am proud of, is what we've accomplished within the context of our marriage, right? Like what it is that we've accomplished within the context of our growth and simultaneous arrival at personal aims and ambitions within the context of our career, because we did that together. And it's indisputable, right? Like, it's not a thing that either of us would contest is that what they say is true. We are the Hills, not one Hill. But both.

Ruth Candler 1:01:33

You've also described yourself as citizens of the university, which I really thought was interesting. I want to touch on another aspect of your family's story. And know that you are parents of two children with sickle cell anemia, and that you are passionate about building awareness of the disease and funding for the research for a cure. Can you share a little bit about how the disease has affected your family?

Michael Hill 1:02:00

Sure. I mean, the most immediate impact is, our kids had a form of the disease, where its impact registered most vividly in their brains, that was the area of sickle cell disease is often associated with pain crises, and the pain crises are located a localized in different portions of your body. So some people have pain crises. And when I say pain crises, this is morphine level pain crises, like you have to go to the doctor literally have an IV placed and receive some sort of pain remediation through an IV drip. blessedly, our children never experienced pain crises and localized portions of the body, but their susceptibility to disease and manifestation of disease for them was in their brains. So our daughter, Caitlin had a stroke very early in her life, and subsequently was experiencing transient ischemic attacks, temporary moments where she would lose muscle function, temporary moments where she would lose different functions associated with parts of her body, she couldn't feel her hands or she couldn't feel her

feet at certain moments. That's day to day lived experience. And what's fascinating, and this goes back to my grandmother, you can't evade sickle cell, right, like a first because my wife and I are such a great team, we thought we might be able to outsmart the disease, like oh, you know, tactically, we're gonna, you know, like ambush sickle cell around the corner, but you can't outsmart the disease. And the fascinating aspect of it is, people look at our kid and they were like, your kids are sick? And I like, yes. The kids don't look sick. You know, like, because on a day to day basis, you don't see the manifestations of it. But very quickly, our kids are on chronic transfusion regimens. So once a month, once every five weeks, they had to go to the hospital to receive blood transfusions. So initially, they got these through IVs. Subsequently, they got them through ports that had to be surgically placed. And you have to access those ports every month, in order to perform the exchange transfusions, sickle cell, attuned us to what it meant to parent in a very careful way. You have to listen to your children, and you have to behave towards your children with an awareness of their independence. And very early on, we had to make a decision about how our children would handle sickle cell with others and our decision was going back to another thing that emerged in this conversation, tell the truth. Hiding stuff not going to help anybody. So we told our kids look, as soon as you possibly can let people who are in your circle will know that you have sickle cell. And the way that we institutionalize that is that every year, for most of the time that they've been in school, they do a presentation to their class, telling them about their sickle cell disease, what it is, what kind of treatments they go through, because a lot of times their friends will see them going into the hospital and emotionally for youngsters they're trying to figure out what's going on. How should I react? What should I do? They look like they're in good shape. You know, from day to day, my calls out they're playing soccer, Caitlin's playing basketball, she's, you know, engaged, but then from time to time, we'll hear that they're in hospital, how should we react? How should we respond? Like, tell the truth. You know, that puts the truth out there. And that's important. That's important as well, but also, very early on our kids had profound thoughts about what it meant to operate in the world as someone who has sickle cell, not only from the standpoint of educating people, but also you know, especially in Caitlin's case, using her talents, her creative writing, in order to express until stories of her experiences, but also to use her voice to advocate. I firmly believe that for both Caitlin and Michael Carl, their leadership abilities arose. Because at crucial moments, they stood up and declared not only what their experience had been in relationship to sickle cell, but also how others should behave in a world where sickle cell exists, because they would stand up in audiences from the time they were 10-11 years old, and make those kinds of declarations and make them you know, in the face of potentially frustrating or potentially contentious debates. I mean, people are having big conversations about what's going on. And they're sitting in the middle of those conversations and declaring, hey, we live with this too.

Ruth Candler 1:07:15

You shared a video that you all had done for Caitlyn, and it's called Caitlyn's Kid Captain video. With your permission, I'd like to post that on our website so that others can learn to I find it incredibly beneficial. To see that and to hear your words and Lena's words. By all means. So Michael, I have very much enjoyed our conversation today. Thank you for joining us. Thanks for having me. And thank you to our listening audience for tuning in today. At the end of every podcast, I end with a suggestion to visit our show notes on our Lifelong Learning website. And today, it's an emphatic suggestion will not only have Caitlin's kid Captain video but will also have more information on sickle cell anemia for you to learn about this challenging disease. Take a look and until next time, let's remain together not unmindful with the future.

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