



ILLINOIS

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

LETTER OF SUPPORT FOR THE NOMINATION OF DR. DORIS A. DERBY FOR A 2016 UIUC LAS ALUMNI ACHIEVEMENT AWARD



April 15, 2016

Dear Colleagues:

The LAS Alumni Achievement Award “is given to the alumnus or alumna who, by outstanding achievement, has demonstrated the values derived from a liberal arts and sciences education.” Among the categories considered are “outstanding professional achievement; creative achievement; worthy cumulative performance through the years; or recent acknowledgement by community or professional peers.” As a unit in the College, the Department of African American Studies is pleased to submit this letter of support for the nomination of Dr. Doris Derby for this honor. In our view, Dr. Derby exemplifies the highest standards summarized by a motto that reflects the history of our field of study and is consistent with the mission of LAS: “Academic Excellence and Social Responsibility.”

Dr. Derby’s family is originally from Bangor, Maine and she grew up in the Bronx borough of New York City. She became active in the local chapter of the NAACP as a 16 year old student. She graduated from Hunter College. As an educator, she taught public school in New York City and eventually earned an M.A., as well as a Ph.D. in Social Anthropology from the University of Illinois. She also worked in the University System of Wisconsin for ten years. In 1990, she joined the University System of Georgia at Georgia State University as an Adjunct Associate Professor of Anthropology and the Founding Director of the Office of African-American Student Services and Programs (O.A.A.S.S.P.). Her department's achievements included the retention and graduation of

a vast number of African-American students, as well as the enhancement of cultural and educational ties between African, Caribbean, Latin, and African-American students and the community at large. She also co-founded the Performing and Visual Arts Council (P.V.A.C.) at Georgia State in 2008. She retired from Georgia State in 2012 after 22 years of service.

As an activist, she worked with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the movement which was founded after the student sit-ins by students from North Carolina A&T University in 1960 and which spread to other campuses across the nation. From 1963 to 1972, she served as a SNCC Field Secretary in various capacities in Jackson, Mississippi and worked in the Council of Federal Organizations (COFO), the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), the Poor Peoples' Corporation (PPC), and the Headstart Program of the Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM). During this period she worked on preparations for the Freedom Summer (during which three SNCC volunteers were killed in Philadelphia, MS), taught in various educational enrichment programs, and promoted local arts and culture.

Dr. Derby's relationship to the University of Illinois has its roots in the Civil Rights movement. During her time in Mississippi she met faculty from Illinois including Demetri Shimkin, a well-known professor of anthropology, and Victor Uchendu, former director of Center for African Studies. After discussions with them, she made a decision to enroll in the doctoral program to pursue a PhD in anthropology at Illinois.

Over the decades, her life and work have been highlighted in many books, publications, exhibits, video, and public art installations. Her photographs are in *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* (2010), to which she also contributed an essay about her experiences in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement. She is co-producer for a 2015 documentary "Dirt and Deeds in Mississippi."

Dr. Derby has a long-standing relationship to the University of Illinois. In addition to her PhD in Anthropology, Dr. Richard K. Barksdale, a noted professor in the Department of English and UIUC administrator, was her cousin. As a graduate student at Illinois, she participated in many campus activities, including a performance directed by Max Roach and Abby Lincoln, visiting scholars at the Bruce Nesbitt African American Cultural Center.

During 2015-2016, she has been instrumental in exploring opportunities to lend support to the mission of the University of Illinois, especially in the areas of African American Studies, Anthropology, and in the arts. In March 2016, she was gracious enough to meet the group of 50 Illinois students participating in the 2016 UIUC Civil Rights Pilgrimage. She suggested that the itinerary be revised to include at Paschal's

Restaurant, an important historical site in Atlanta where many important discussions of strategy, and where she joined us for dinner.

When asked to share some of her “backstory” in an oral history interview, Dr. Derby responded with this:

In college I was trained to be a cultural anthropologist and educator. However, as a youngster growing up in New York, from early on I saw my mission in life as one who would identify, document, associate with, and learn from black artists, dancers, writers, musicians, actors, poets, and historians to gather information and get it out to our people in whatever form I could because it was sorely lacking in our community and wasn't readily available in mainstream textbooks, magazines, newspapers, movies or on TV. In addition to gaining wisdom from my elders and extended family members, church and community members, I knew I needed multiple resources to draw from and learn about black history, our contributions to America, and to learn about our glorious African past. I first became aware of African culture in elementary school because my great aunt was a missionary in Liberia, a pioneer, and she wrote letters to my grandparents about her work, which they shared with me. This inspired me to learn about Africa from as many sources as possible. From junior high school on, I sought out and was exposed to black cultural thought and cultural output. I was around black artists, dancers, writers and intellectuals from the U.S., Caribbean, and Africa. I frequently visited Harlem where my aunt lived, and where there was the Liberation Bookstore, the Schomburg Library Collection, the Harlem YMCA, where I studied African Dance in the Katherine Dunham Dance Class, and the Liberation Day Parade—all in the interest of gathering information for our people.

Her life, her work, and the words above can inspire students at the University of Illinois and other institutions to pursue the same high standards of “Academic Excellence and Social Responsibility” that are revealed in Dr. Derby’s life story and her life work.

If I can provide additional information, please do not hesitate to call on me. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Ronald W. Bailey". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the word "Sincerely,".

Ronald W. Bailey, Ph.D., Head, Department of African American Studies
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