

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

AFRICANA & PUERTO RICAN STUDIES: A STUDENT-LED VICTORY FOR MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

LAURA FLANDERS: The right to an education is a fundamental human right, and the start of a new school year is an opportunity to take stock. With so much under attack, from critical thinking to comprehensive history, to class size, teacher pay, and the hard-won principle of a guaranteed quality public education itself, it is worth remembering what progress has been won and how. As one of today's guests has said, the biggest changes in education have come from the bottom up, not top down. A case in point is the fight for the creation of Puerto Rican and Black studies programs in the US in the 1960s and the fight for open college admissions at the City University of New York. Today we're going to look at the battles for a Puerto Rican studies department at one of CUNY's colleges, Brooklyn College, and ask how did Black and Latino students come together with radical whites to transform a campus, a system and college curricula in ways that directly lead us to the present? That's the story told in the 2021 documentary "Making the Impossible Possible," directed by Tami Gold and Pam Sporn and distributed by Third World Newsreel. Joining us are guests who were not only there but central to the struggle. Askia Davis and Antonio Nieves were one of the Brooklyn College BC 19, so-called, who in 1969 were arrested and incarcerated at Rikers for a student takeover demanding open admissions and the establishment of Africana Studies and Puerto Rican Studies department at the college. A former Black Panther, Askia went on to become Superintendent and Deputy Superintendent of Schools in Harlem and the Bronx in New York City. Antonio Nieves was a founder of the Puerto Rican and Afro-American Institutes, which preceded the creation of the departments at BC, Brooklyn College. He's been a pharmacist for the last 30 years, and is currently the Director of Pharmacy for Caribbean Health Outreach, a Jamaican-based organization. Also with us, Sonia Nieto, former Brooklyn College faculty. She's one of the BC 44 whose plight roused the city when they were brutally arrested and detained in a student takeover, demanding their right to self-determination and control over the department they had helped to create. Sonia's 1992 book "Affirming Diversity" was selected as one of the books that "helped define the field of education in the 20th century." To start, let's check out the trailer for "Making the Impossible Possible."

Welcome, all. It's so great to have you with us. Thank you for joining us here on the Laura Flanders Show. Kicking off our, I don't know, new semester with looking back at some important history. As I look at the history of New York in that period where you were all there at Brooklyn College, it was an extraordinary time, and I want to start with you, I think, Askia. The years after the war had seen a lot of population change in New York, but at Brooklyn College, not so much.

ASKIA DAVIS: Well, I arrived at Brooklyn College in the spring of 1968. And Brooklyn College was basically a segregated institution. Not many Blacks, less Latinos, less Asians, and

really not a lot of working class whites, Italian Americans and Irish Americans. So one of the things that we noticed was that we had to really come together, the Blacks and the Puerto Ricans at Brooklyn College, because we really wanted to change things. And so we set about actually doing that.

ANTONIO NIEVES: In 1968, the war in Vietnam was going on. Apartheid was going on in Africa. The struggle in Latin America was going on, the struggle in Cuba, the struggle throughout the world for liberation was going on. When we got to Brooklyn College, the population of the school was 95% white.

LAURA FLANDERS: Was 95% of the population of Brooklyn white?

ASKIA DAVIS: No.

SONIA NIETO: No.

ASKIA DAVIS: And Brooklyn College was a taxpayer's institution. And so all of those Blacks and Puerto Ricans and Asians who were excluded and including the working class Italian Americans and working class Irish, they paid taxes. Their parents paid taxes, but they were excluded from that university. And it was really a travesty. And Brooklyn College at that time in 1968, the average salary of a professor at Brooklyn College was higher than the average salary of a professor at Harvard University. So it was a high quality institution, but it was exclusion all the way.

LAURA FLANDERS: The struggle for Black studies, Africana studies, as it was called in some places, not to mention Puerto Rican studies, was out there in the country.

ASKIA DAVIS: And even were really all over the world and really universities like the Sorbonne. There were a lot of demonstrations going on. And the desire was really to transform education, not just to create departments, not just to open access, but really to really change the fundamental nature of the institutions that we were educated in.

SONIA NIETO: It's carried over 'til today, 50 years later. This is about the changing demographics and about who has power and who does not have power and how it's used.

LAURA FLANDERS: How did CUNY become such a leader in this and so significant?

ASKIA DAVIS: The critical thing I think, is that we wanted to really create a real vibrant educational institution. We've had segregation in New York City. We still have segregation in

New York City in the public schools. So at Brooklyn College in 1968, I would say maybe every day was a demonstration of one sort or another.

LAURA FLANDERS: The fight that you were engaged in could be seen simply as a fight for Puerto Rican and African studies. But what I'm hearing is that this was for inclusive education for everyone. This changed everyone's idea of the community that they were in.

SONIA NIETO: As the people who have been in power see that being taken, they're rebelling. Why do you think there's this, you know, this issue of African American studies the curriculum for high school students. That's because they're afraid that real history is being taught.

LAURA FLANDERS: Just to put a pin on it, the reaction of the police and the security administration if you will, to your mobilizing was pretty extreme.

ANTONIO NIEVES: We presented them with 18 demands, two pages. We presented the demands to Brooklyn College and to President Kneller. They were rejected and sometime in May, our houses were raided at 4:30 in the morning. These raids were not anything new, and it was just to destroy our desire to educate ourselves. That's the whole goal. The demands for 18 year olds, 19 year olds, 20 year olds to be demanding these things was very brazen at that time.

ASKIA DAVIS: They had infiltrated the Black and Puerto Rican students with a cop. The police department occupied the campus of Brooklyn College before they arrested us. Several days before they arrested us, police on campus, which was a no-no all across America back in 1968. But they stayed on campus at Brooklyn College.

We were at Rikers Island. Still the most notorious penal institution in New York City, even today. And Shirley Chisholm, who had been a Brooklyn College student two decades before us, who was now a congresswoman, she organized the community to get us out of jail. They said Shirley Chisholm sent pastors out to protect us because there were threats to our lives while we were even in Rikers Island from the guards at Rikers Island. And it was not just white guards, there were also Black guards who did not, correction officers who did not appreciate the fact that we "had the opportunity for a college education that they did not have, and we threw it away."

ANTONIO NIEVES: Education is the key to success. And if we're going to be successful in life, you have to have an education. You cannot be un-woke. Un-woke doesn't work. If you're un-woke, that means that the history will repeat itself and you will be victimized again. We want an education, we want an education that tells us where we came from, what our contribution to America was.

LAURA FLANDERS: Coming to you, Sonia, clearly the fight was this important. Why? Why is it so important to have multicultural education?

SONIA NIETO: I've always been so committed to multicultural education, because it is about more than ethnicity. It's about more than race. It's about more than gender. It's about more than social class. It's all-inclusive. Gender studies, disabilities studies. These all came from what started as, you know, really the African American push for equality. And it's become much more inclusive over the years. And so I think people who feel threatened, it's because they see that their power is diminishing.

LAURA FLANDERS: Tell us what happened in those first years of fighting for the departments.

SONIA NIETO: Right, so I got to the Puerto Rican Studies Department in 1972. So my time, I was in the second iteration of the struggle for Puerto Rican studies. The administration wanted to control everything. They wanted to control who we hired, the curriculum, everything. The major struggle was about appointing a chairperson for our department. And that's when we, you know, we took over the president's office. A year later, we took over the registrar's office, and that's where we had arrests. We had... I was one of 44 people arrested, three faculty members, 41 students. And when we got back to campus after being held overnight, there were 2,000 people waiting for us at Brooklyn College at the campus. And we walked in shouting, —

- [Sonia And Tony] "BC 44. We've come back to give you more."

LAURA FLANDERS: There is kind of an aspect of this story that is about filling the gaps, but the other aspect is about opening the gates to everyone. And that was a core part, albeit a short-lived part, but we can get to that. Talk about how that came about if you would, Askia.

ASKIA DAVIS: In those 18 demands, we demanded that Brooklyn College be open to graduates of the New York City public schools without a focus on race and class. And that was a big important step. Brooklyn College was the first of all the city university campuses, their board of higher education was the first to declare support for open admissions, because we were just that determined, and they saw it. Once we succeeded in getting open admissions, what happened is, right away, City University's budget was reduced. So you had so many tens of thousands or more students coming into City University and they reduced their budget.

LAURA FLANDERS: In that era, between 1970, when you got open admissions in '76 when the budget crisis gave them a pretext to end it, what happened? What were the results that you saw, Tony?

ANTONIO NIEVES: When we got the demands started in 1969, we sent out requests for people in Puerto Rico and people in the African diaspora to come and teach as professors. And so we hired Sonia Nieto. We had more inclusion, we had more Puerto Rican students, we had more Black students, we had more white students, more white students. We had the Irish students and the Italian students and the Asian students. And so the diversity is what we brought to the campus. And if you want to have a society progress, you have to have diversity. Anytime that you have one sector of the society dictating what the rest of the society's going to do, the whole society's going to fall and go downhill, just like the Roman Empire.

LAURA FLANDERS: I was just struck by the statistics that I'd seen that by '76, you were on verge of having a majority so-called minority student body. That's a transformational change. I mean, Sonia, again, coming back to you, these struggles around self-determination had a pretty big idea of self. That open admissions piece was critical as was the self-determination fight over the right to appoint their head of the department. As you look back on it now, what do you think are the lessons that you would bring for students today and activists today?

SONIA NIETO: I was privileged to work with so many students who became bilingual teachers and who were very committed to the struggle. And that was better than just getting people in who can say, "Cómo está usted?" you know, in Spanish and became bilingual teachers. Because at some point, you know, the schools, the public schools started taking anybody who could speak Spanish. And that's not the only thing that we wanted. We wanted people who were committed to the community, who knew their own history, who understood the culture, and who were willing to work in solidarity with others.

LAURA FLANDERS: Askia, you want to come in on this?

ASKIA DAVIS: I would say 80 to 90% of the students who were involved in that initial struggle for open admissions graduated. We were able to really stay focused, you know, focus on the education as well as focus on changing Brooklyn College as well as focus on really enhancing opportunities for our community. A lot of the students that came into Brooklyn College and the other colleges, they needed support, because if you're coming from a very weak public education, you have to make up ground. And so they had courses to support those students coming in so that they could be prepared to take the college level math, the college level English, et cetera. And they backed away from putting the resources into those things because, you know, this struggle is not just a struggle about inclusion. It's also a struggle about resources. I would dare say that there have been tens and tens and tens of thousands of Blacks, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, et cetera, who would've not had an opportunity for that education, who have not only come to Brooklyn College and graduated along with Italian Americans, Irish Americans.

LAURA FLANDERS: Tony, coming to you on this question of teachings for students and others today.

ANTONIO NIEVES: We were desperate and we took desperate measures. And so the same thing exists today. And the only way to get organized is in a community level. I belonged to so many organizations when I was at Brooklyn College. Not only, I was not a member of the Black Panther Party. I worked with the Black Panther Party, I worked with the Young Lords, I worked with any progressive, SDS, any progressive organization that talked about the interest and the liberation of people that we speak of in America. As Sonia said, we need to live up to those ideals. And that was the whole purpose of the struggle back then. Equality and egalitarian between the people or amongst the people.

LAURA FLANDERS: Sonia, same question for you. Looking at the threats today and the lessons from the era that you were active, what are your conclusions really?

SONIA NIETO: My conclusion, my major conclusion is that we need to keep this up, and that I am so grateful that there's so many young people who are carrying the torch, you know, that we started with so many years ago. And certainly I was not brought up to be, you know, revolutionary, even an activist. I was not brought up that way. It's something that I had to learn and that I had to teach to my children. There's a little clip of the film where they're in the preschool that was sponsored by the Puerto Rican Studies Department of Brooklyn College, and there's my little girl. She was three years old, and she went to that school. So it was about changing institutions. You know, it really was, and it's still the case. We have to work on educational access and equity. We need to change the curriculum. These are the same issues that we were fighting for so many years ago, which is not to say that we're still back there. I think things have improved somewhat. But in other ways they have gotten worse because of right-wing interests and because of fear of losing power. The demographics that we have now are so different from the demographics we had 50 years ago, and they will continue to change. And so people need to get used to that, and they need to realize that they have to share power. That's what it's about.

LAURA FLANDERS: I end these interviews by asking our guests what the story will be that the future tells of now. Do you have a quick sense of what that might be, Sonia?

SONIA NIETO: I think the future will say that no matter how hard they try to put us off, to not have us be involved and make a difference, but we always have to go forward with a clear view of what it means to live a liberated life, to live a life of solidarity with others and to live with the goal of service to others.

LAURA FLANDERS: What about you, Tony?

ANTONIO NIEVES: As Sonia Nieto, building on what she said, the youth. The youth are carrying the torch, and they're doing a wonderful job. Wonderful. I really, really have a lot of hope for the future just seeing what these young kids are doing out in the streets.

LAURA FLANDERS: Askia, to you.

ASKIA DAVIS: There's going to always be that need to continue to struggle, to perfect, to create a more perfect union, as they say, a more non-racist institutional environment, a more non-misogynistic institutional environment. Those are the things that we need to do. And I see the whole educational situation tied up at the larger legal institutions of America, but the economic institutions. It's all intertwined. And I think young people today, in 30 years from now, they're going to see this even more clearly than we ever saw it and are going to act on that. So I'm very optimistic about the future. America is going to be the great nation that we want it to be.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, in order to make the impossible possible, you have to have optimism, and you have to have imagination and vision and fight. And I appreciate all of the work that you all did and encourage people to check out the film "Making the Impossible Possible." It's been a pleasure to have you with me on the Laura Flanders Show.

ANTONIO NIEVES: Thank you very much.

ASKIA DAVIS: Blessings.

SONIA NIETO: Thank you.

LAURA FLANDERS: The first time I ever heard of a language being banned, it was Irish by British authorities trying to assert British rule over the island of Ireland. In the 1980s when I was in the north of Ireland and the so-called Troubles were at their height, British prison guards did their best to stop political prisoners on the nationalist side from speaking that language. But those prisoners taught each other the language and much more besides. The teaching of their cultural history, I think had a lot to do with the fact that those cities of Belfast and Derry at the time on the nationalist side were plastered with pictures of political struggle from Nelson Mandela and Steven Biko to Leonard Peltier and Dr. King. Those were global cities in those days, conscious of the ways that their culture connected them to struggles around the globe. And that's what cultural education can do. Not divide people, but connect. It's just possible that knowing more makes all of us smarter. It's called an alliance, after all, that starts with that word all. Could knowing more make us smarter about our own personal history as well as others? It could certainly teach us about who is part of our all. For the Laura Flanders Show, I'm Laura. Thanks for joining me. 'Til the next time, stay kind, stay curious, and thanks.

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