

# Penn State founded for working class

In 1988, Penn State Black Caucus President Seth Williams ran for president of the Undergraduate Student Government with three primary objectives: an open university budget, an elected student



representative on the board of trustees and student control of the student activities fund. Williams won the election but was unable to accomplish any of those goals. To this day, no one else has, either.

But Williams did leave his mark. A second-generation Penn State student activist, Williams marched to Harrisburg to oppose apartheid, challenged Penn State for inappropriately disposing of low-level radioactive waste and was twice arrested for demanding racial equality on campus. The second arrest landed him on national television with Dan Rather.

After graduating, Williams attended Georgetown University Law Center and went on to serve 10 years as a Philadelphia assistant district attorney. Following a two-year stint in private practice, Williams was appointed Philadelphia inspector general in 2005.

Voices talked to Williams about what's

"Penn State was created to provide a quality and affordable education for the sons and daughters of the working class, not to be a boutique institution for just the rich. So what's the justification for the tuition rate rising so high?"

changed—and what hasn't—at Penn State since his days in Happy Valley.

**VOICES:** Why push for an open budget in 1988?

**WILLIAMS:** At the time, the tuition rate was rising faster than the Higher Education Price Index, the college version of the Consumer Price Index.

Penn State was created to provide a quality and affordable education for the sons and daughters of the working class, not to be a boutique institution for just the rich. So what's the justification for the tuition rate rising so high?

They're getting all this money from the state and demanding all this money from students, but they have a closed budget. Whether we were pushing for more funding for the recruitment and retention of African-American students or funding for women's studies, we were at a loss because we didn't know what the budget was.

**VOICES:** What reasons did the Bryce Jordan administration give for its refusal to open the budget?

**WILLIAMS:** They didn't think they needed

to. Then lawmakers started saying, "Yeah, you want more money but don't want to tell us how it's spent."

There are certain things in the CIA's budget that we don't want public because we don't want people to know what the CIA is doing. No one could say that there's something so secretive or of such sensitive nature at Penn State that we can't disclose it.

We were able to rally support among everyone—whether they were black or white, from Philadelphia County or Lackawanna County—because the issue resonates with everyone.

**VOICES:** Last summer, President Graham Spanier told the state legislature that Penn State's investment strategies and the terms of its contracts constitute sensitive information and opening the budget would damage the university's "lucrative partnerships with Nike, Highmark, Pepsi, Barnes and Noble and others."

**WILLIAMS:** Is Penn State in the business of just being a free marketplace, an enterprise? Or is it in the business of living up to

its mission as a land grant institution?

Penn State is not Corporate College Inc. It's supposed to be a quality place for the working class.

But there are different ways of interpreting what's in the best interest of the students, and I'm sure he's doing what he thinks is right.

**VOICES:** On what else did you and President Jordan fail to see eye to eye?

**WILLIAMS:** Another big issue was the recruitment and retention of African-American students and faculty. We went to meet with President Jordan, and he didn't want to meet with us.

That was the first time I got arrested in Old Main. I was up on the second floor, sitting against a wall, with my hands cuffed behind my back, staring at the land-grant frescos. That is burned in my mind.

Later, Jordan agreed to meet with us, but then he didn't show up. We walked from where we were supposed to be meeting with him, the Paul Robeson Cultural Center, to the Telecommunications Building and sat down and said we were going to stay until Jordan talked to us. The building was symbolic of our desire to communicate. We weren't cursing or being rowdy. We just wanted to talk.

see *Working class*, pg. 17

## Campus building carries name of controversial figure

by Katie Jacobs

One of the largest buildings on Penn State's University Park campus is named after a communist.

The HUB-Robeson Center, Penn State's student union building, takes its name from Paul Robeson, an advocate of racial and economic justice and supporter of the Soviet Union. Since its christening in 1997, Robeson's namesake building has hosted dozens of rallies for racial diversity, workers' rights and an end to heterosexism, among other things.

A modern-day Renaissance man, Robeson was an actor, singer, athlete and civil rights activist. Because of his political activities and rumored ties to the Communist Party, Robeson was under

investigation by the FBI for more than 30 years.

In the 1930s, Robeson visited U.S. volunteers in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, which fought alongside the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War, and he performed in Wales at a benefit concert for the victims of a mining accident that killed 264 workers.

In November, students marched through the HUB on their way to Old Main, where they demanded that President Spanier sign on to the Designated Suppliers Program to ensure that workers producing Penn State apparel are paid a living wage and afforded the right to democratic representation.

Anti-sweatshop activist Doug Baldwin

see *Robeson*, pg. 17



Photo by David Silberman

## from Working class, pg. 16

Instead of coming to speak with us, Jordan sends in the state troopers. Then I'm on TV with Dan Rather. Three hundred people went into the building. Most students left to avoid arrest. Eighty-eight were arrested.

We were also involved in divestment from South Africa. Our motto was, "Apartheid kills and Penn State pays the bills." The administration maintained that keeping the money in South Africa actually helped South Africans, which was a moral-bankrupt argument.

**VOICES:** Turning even 100 people out for a social justice rally is unheard of on campus today. Was it difficult to mobilize students around those issues in the late 1980s?

**WILLIAMS:** We were like a lone voice against the wilderness. Everything in Central Pennsylvania was pro-Penn State. I wasn't anti-Penn State. I love Penn State.

My dad went there in the 1940s, after World War II. He was one of 12 African-American men, all varsity athletes.

There was nowhere for them to live on

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campus. They weren't allowed to get their hair cut in barbershops in downtown State College. They organized sit-ins to protest the inhumane treatment of guys who had been willing to give their lives for this country in WWII.

I understood the history of the place. If there are inconsistencies, then it's up to us to make things right. It's not that I hated Penn State. I thought it had an opportunity to be an even better place.

My parents taught me that either you're willing to work to correct things if you see injustice, if you see problems, or you forfeit your right to complain about them.

We would do things that were entirely legal. But if you have so many people doing this legal thing, it can shut the system down.

**VOICES:** Can you give some examples?

**WILLIAMS:** We had 300 or 400 students go down to the intersection of College Avenue and Garner Street. The students

were split into four different groups, and everybody was just walking with the light. When the light turns green, they're walking. Nobody's jaywalking because everybody's going with the light.

We had about 200 students go to the bur-sar's office. Everybody asks for something they have to give you that's free, like a copy of your bill. There are three tellers and 200 people asking for the same thing. It shuts everything down. Nothing that was illegal, nothing to get students in trouble. Students were asking for something that was legitimately theirs. But it shut the system down.

If you see things that you think need to be changed, it's up to you then and there to fight for what you think is right. And you can have a great time doing it.

A lot of students choose to go out and drink. That's cool. I'm not saying don't have fun. But I hung out with guys trying to change the world. And that got me as many

girls as the guys on the varsity football team. My activism also helped me get into law school.

**VOICES:** Two decades after you left Penn State, the budget still isn't open. Tuition is still pricing out the working class. Women, folks of color and the gay community are still underrepresented and discriminated against. What, if anything, has changed?

**WILLIAMS:** Penn State has become a much more open institution than when I was a student, and a lot of the things I protested for actually became reality, like a vice provost for educational equity and African-American and women's studies.

Penn State is a good place, but it can always be better. And if it isn't living up to its mission, then we should try to change that.

If I could have any job, I would like to be the president of Penn State. Not that I want to be president of any university. Being the president of Penn State would be a great opportunity to impact the lives of the working class, those often forgotten about in the shadow of life.

**VOICES:** Any parting words?

**WILLIAMS:** Fight on State!

## from Robeson, pg. 16

said it's unfortunate that the university administration doesn't pay more heed to Robeson's legacy. Penn State, he said, is more interested in satisfying Nike and its other corporate partners than in doing right by the workers who produce the university's apparel.

"Universities have shifted away from centers of learning to being corporations," Baldwin said.

Robeson was sharply critical of racism and, in particular, lynching. In 1937, he founded the Council on African Affairs with Max Yergan. The first of its kind in the United States, the council focused on providing current information to the United States about Africa.

Over the years, there have been many charges of racism at Penn State. In April 2001, students rushed Beaver Stadium field at the Blue and White game to protest the administration's foot-dragging in the wake of racist death threats. The university responded by arresting 26 protestors. In February 2005, 150 students gathered at the HUB-Robeson Center to again protest the university's failure to respond to acts of intolerance.

The Paul Robeson Cultural Center was established by black students at Penn State in response to a "chilly climate" on campus,

according to Toby Jenkins, the center's current director. Its main mission is to provide a safe space where cultures can be celebrated, Jenkins said.

"An intellect, a superior athlete and an extraordinary humanitarian," Robeson was an ideal person to name the center after, said former director Lawrence Young.

He was also a highly controversial figure, thanks in large part to his affinity with the Soviet Union. He often spoke of his visit to the country in the 1930s.

"In Russia I felt for the first time like a full human being," Robeson said. "No color prejudice like in Mississippi, no color prejudice like in Washington."

Robeson became very vocal about his support of the Soviet Union, once reportedly saying that "anybody who lifts his hand against it ought to be shot."

When Joseph Stalin died in 1953, Robeson wrote a eulogy to him titled "To You Beloved Comrade."

"The Communist Party gave Robeson the status and voice that the American government refused," said Grace Hampton, head of the Department of African and African American Studies at Penn State.

The U.S. government became suspicious of Robeson's support of the Soviet Union.

see Robeson, pg. 18



# PSU professor serves community, world

by Theodros Tesfayone

Many of the professors at Penn State are leaders in their fields of study. Not so many are Nobel laureates.

Dr. Richard Alley is. Evan Pugh professor of Geosciences and celebrated glaciology expert, Alley serves on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which was named co-recipient of the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize.

Though his work takes him around the globe, it also connects him to the community.

"Mostly I do my job, which is to teach, research and serve," Alley said. "That means sharing what I learn and enjoy with community groups and students, as well as the Senate, House of Representatives and White House."

Alley said that change will only happen when people and institutions at all levels become concerned about issues of energy and global warming. So he spends a good deal of his time trying to generate more interest in climate change.

Though an expert, Alley is plain spoken and able to simplify the otherwise complicated issues surrounding global warming that he spends his time researching.

"I love learning how the world works and knowing that the results are helpful," he said.

Alley was lead author of one of the 11 chapters of the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. He also helped in summarizing all of the material into the technical summary and then synthesizing further into the summary for policymakers.

Despite his busy schedule, Alley finds time to coach youth soccer and tend his garden. When he's looking to relax, he writes songs and plays folk guitar.

Alley is also quite the writer. He has written a couple of unpublished children stories, as well as text books for his classes.

His book *The Two-Mile Time Machine: Ice Cores, Abrupt Climate Change, and Our Future*, released in 2000, was picked as the science book of the year by the Phi Beta Kappa Honors.

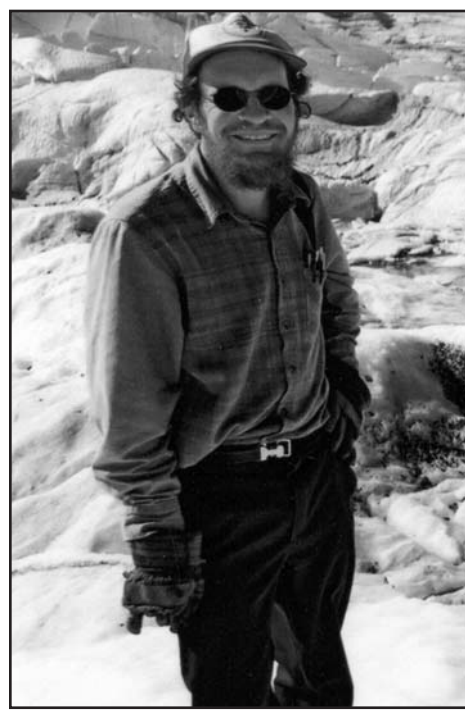


Photo provided by Richard Alley  
Evan Pugh Professor of Geosciences Richard Alley is a member of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which was a co-recipient of the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize.

from Robeson, pg. 17

His films and recordings were removed from circulation and his passport was revoked in 1950. He was questioned about being a communist, even though membership in the Communist Party was legal in the United States. Robeson denied being involved in the party. He remained under FBI surveillance until 1974.

"All major writers and thinkers were accused of being communists, because communism talked about equality of rights," Hampton said. "He did not disavow America."

Robeson wasn't just interested in helping blacks and the working class. He befriended Solomon Mikhoels and Itzik Feffer, the heads of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in the Soviet Union. Robeson remained concerned about the welfare of Jewish artists and paid tribute to Mikhoels and Feffer at a concert in 1949.

"There's been a tendency for people to feel like you have to choose between your own community and others'," Jenkins said. "Truly great leaders are concerned about both."

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