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- News**
- [Candid Campus](#)
 - [Being There](#)
 - [Releases](#)
 - [MHC in the News](#)
 - [Commentary](#)
 - [Milestones](#)
 - [Photos](#)
 - [Videos](#)
 - [Notices](#)
 - [Vista](#)
 - [CSJ Archives](#)



- In Focus**
- [MHC 2010 Plan](#)
 - [SAT Policy](#)
 - [Dean of Faculty's Report](#)

[Virtual Tour](#)

[Hurricane Katrina](#)

[MHC Happenings](#)

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[Facts About MHC](#)

[Sports Schedule](#)

[Odyssey Bookshop](#)

"Reconstruction and Restitution: Civil Rights and Lasting Wrongs"

Civil rights activists Ben Chaney, Nina Black Zachary, and Susan Orr-Klopfer spoke Thursday evening, March 9, in Gamble Auditorium, about the history of the American civil rights movement and the present state of civil rights in America. The panel discussion, titled "Reconstruction and Restitution: Civil Rights and Lasting Wrongs," was part of the Weissman Center for Leadership and the Liberal Arts' spring 2006 series, *Acts of Reconstruction*. Lois Brown, director of the center and associate professor of English, noted that the speakers were on the front lines of contemporary American civil rights work and that their efforts were crucial to the ongoing state and federal moves to reconstruct civil rights-era crimes that many hope will finally dispense justice and bring closure to many prominent and lesser-known cases of the period.



Ben Chaney, brother of civil rights activist James Chaney, speaks at MHC.

Nina Black Zachary is the granddaughter of Adlena Hamlett, a fearless civil rights worker who was murdered in 1966 at the age of 78 by the Ku Klux Klan. Hamlett was returning home from Jackson, Mississippi, where she had testified about voting rights violations when she was killed. Zachary has spent her life as a teacher and advocate of voting rights. She preceded the discussion with a remembrance of her grandmother.

Panel moderator Françoise Hamlin, a history professor at University of Massachusetts at Amherst, opened the discussion by asking the speakers to talk about their lives in connection with the civil rights movement. Chaney described how his brother, civil rights activist James Earl Chaney, was murdered with fellow civil rights workers Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner in June 1964. Chaney discussed his coming of age during the American civil rights era; he had been arrested 21 times by the time he was 12 years old as a result of his participation in nonviolent demonstrations against segregation and oppression of African Americans. Chaney is the founder and president of the James Earl Chaney Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to voter registration, the protection of equal rights, and the defense of human rights.

Zachary, a young girl when her grandmother was murdered, spoke about her grandmother's tireless crusade for voting rights. On one occasion, Zachary accompanied her grandmother to the voting booth, where white poll workers tore up her ballot. She recalled asking, "Grandma, why are they so mean?" Unfazed, her grandmother said, "It's my constitutional right to vote. And I'll come back again and again." Zachary also talked about attending her grandmother's funeral, and the family's decision to have an open-casket service, despite the fact that the killers had dismembered her grandmother's body.

Orr-Klopfer is a journalist and author of *The Emmett Till Book* and *Where Rebels Roost: Mississippi Civil Rights Revisited*. She talked about moving to rural Mississippi several years ago when her husband, a psychologist, took a job at a state prison. She described herself at that time as "a Yankee, not well-educated in civil rights." Finding herself in the crucible of the American civil rights movement, she immersed herself in its history, particularly in the unsolved murders of African Americans in the South during the civil rights era. She spoke about the mysterious disappearance of papers documenting civil rights violations, and her ongoing confrontations with state officials over the production of materials.

Turning to the present, the panel discussed the importance of education and information, and the need for a vigilant and careful media that does not simply report facts that are fed to them. Chaney said, "The good and the bad parts of history must be shared so that we can learn from the past." Chaney and Orr-Klopfer also spoke of the changing face of racism in America. They described the "institutionalization of racism," as isolated incidents of bigotry are overshadowed by a perpetual and subtle bias in our society.

The panelists agreed that voting is critical for civil rights to flourish. When asked what young people could do to support civil rights, Zachary answered, "Be educated and vote." She described taking voting machines door to door and her disappointment at the apathy she sometimes encountered. "Some people would tell us they were too busy cooking or ironing. They had given up," she said. Chaney lamented the low voter registration figures for high school graduates. One of his primary projects is to re-create the Freedom Rides of the 1960s. Every summer, he trains people to register voters, and travels with them on buses to important sites of civil rights history throughout the South. This summer he plans to re-create James Meredith's 1966 "March Against Fear" from Memphis to Jackson.

Above all, the speakers stressed the need for action. "I believe in confrontation," Chaney said. "If you see a problem, you've got to do something about it. Don't wait for someone else to do it. Positive change happens when people confront the problem."

The event began with a performance of gospel songs by Nashema Crews '06, Becky Denoncour '09, Amy Doherty '06, and Cydney Forrest '07, members of the MHC a cappella group Voices of Faith.

Related Links:

[*Acts of Reconstruction, Spring 2006 Series*](#)

[Susan Orr-Klopfer - Journalist and Author](#)

[James Earl Chaney Foundation - "Mississippi Burning" Case](#)