

Profile of our Eighth President

Prior to Voorhees, Dr. Cleveland L. Sellers Jr. served as director of the African American Studies program at the University of South Carolina, where he provided leadership and guidance to students and scholars on an array of topics including: American History, African-American History and History of the Civil Rights Movement.

Growing up in rural South Carolina, in the shadows of Voorhees College, young Cleveland Sellers had dreams that went far beyond the city limits of Denmark. As the 3-year-old mascot for the big school in his little town, Sellers had no idea he would be named president of that very same institution, more than a half century later. He went on to attend Voorhees from ninth through twelfth grades and graduated from Voorhees High School in 1962.

Sellers first became interested in the civil rights movement following the murder of Emmitt Till in 1955. He helped other students organize their first protest during the 1960's at a Denmark, SC lunch counter in support of the Woolworth's Sit-Ins in Greensboro, North Carolina.

Encouraged by his father, he entered Howard University in 1962, but a year later, he left the confines of the university to travel the south and urge African Americans to stand up for their rights and register to vote. He also worked as an advocate for justice and human rights. Sellers aligned himself with veterans of the movement, such as Ruby Doris Smith-Robinson, Fannie Lou Hamer and Esau Jenkins, by joining the student led non-violent civil rights movement. It was during a march across Mississippi that he formed a special bond with the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

February 8, 1968 is a day that will always hold a special place in his heart. On that day, the tension of segregation and fury of oppression sparked a violent mêlée on the campus of South Carolina State University between protesters and state policemen. When the dust settled from the battle, three young men were dead and 27 others were wounded, one of whom was Sellers. It was this type of violence that he had worked so hard to prevent. The incident later became known as the "Orangeburg Massacre."

The police officers involved in the shooting were acquitted. Sellers was the only person arrested as a result of the Orangeburg Massacre. He spent seven months behind bars on rioting charges. During those seven months, Sellers made several life-changing decisions; he decided to complete his education and fight for civil rights from the classroom by educating young people. He also decided to put his life on paper in his autobiography, [The River of No Return](#). Twenty-five years after his sentence ended, the conviction was pardoned.

He continued his education by earning a master's degree in education from Harvard University. He later earned a doctorate in education from the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. As a life-long educator, Sellers has served as speaker, presenter and panelist at numerous conferences around the country.



Dr. Cleveland L. Sellers, Jr.
President of Voorhees College

Sellers is the author of five publications: Preface, Camera Man's Journey (2002); Freedom is a Constant Struggle: An Anthology of the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement (1996); River of No Return (1990); "Education in Our Community" The Carolina Peacemaker (1987); and "Why Historically Black Colleges Should Offer Courses in Gerontology and Geriatrics" Share (1974).

Active in a wide range of organizations, Sellers is a life-long Episcopalian, a distinguished member of the prestigious Kosmos Club, South Carolina State Board of Education, South Carolina African American Heritage Committee, the Organization of American Historians and Southern Historical Association.

His awards and accolades include: 2009 "Preserving Our Places in History" Lifetime Achievement Award from the South Carolina African American Heritage Commission; 2009 Freedom Flame Award from the National Voting Rights Museum and Institute; 2009 Legacy Award from the United Negro College Fund; 2009 African American Male Image Award from Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc., of Columbia, SC; 2008 Instructor Emeritus, USC; 2007 Eagle Scout Award, Boy Scouts of America; 2003 Ada B. Thomas, Outstanding Faculty Advisor Award, USC; 2003 Key to the City of Columbia (SC) Award; 2003 I. DeQuincy Newman Trailblazer Award, USC Chapter of NAACP; and 2003 Diamond Award, Office of Multi-cultural Student Affairs, USC.

In addition, Sellers was awarded an honorary Doctor of Civil Law degree from Sewanee: The University of the South, which is located in Sewanee, Tennessee, in 2009.

Since taking the helm of leadership at Voorhees College, Dr. Sellers has already implemented a number of new programs and projects. Academically, Voorhees has been recognized nationally for its debate team, which made history as one of only two Historically Black Colleges and Universities selected to participate in the first Inauguration Debate Series, which was held at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C. as part of the events celebrating the inauguration of 44th President Barack H. Obama.

Voorhees was also recognized by South Carolina's State Commission on Higher Education as the only HBCU to receive the 2008-2009 Service Learning Award, which honors exemplary academic service learning programs of public and private four-year and two-year colleges and universities.

Because of Dr. Sellers' commitment and vision, support for Voorhees College is growing and constituents are excited about the limitless opportunities his leadership presents for the institution. Since July 2008, the college has already seen a 100% increase in participation and gifts from alumni, faculty and staff.

Sellers has been married to his loving wife Gwendolyn for 38 years, and they have three children: Nosizwe' A. Sellers, M.D., Rev. Cleveland L. Sellers, III (Lumumba), and S.C. Representative Bakari Sellers.