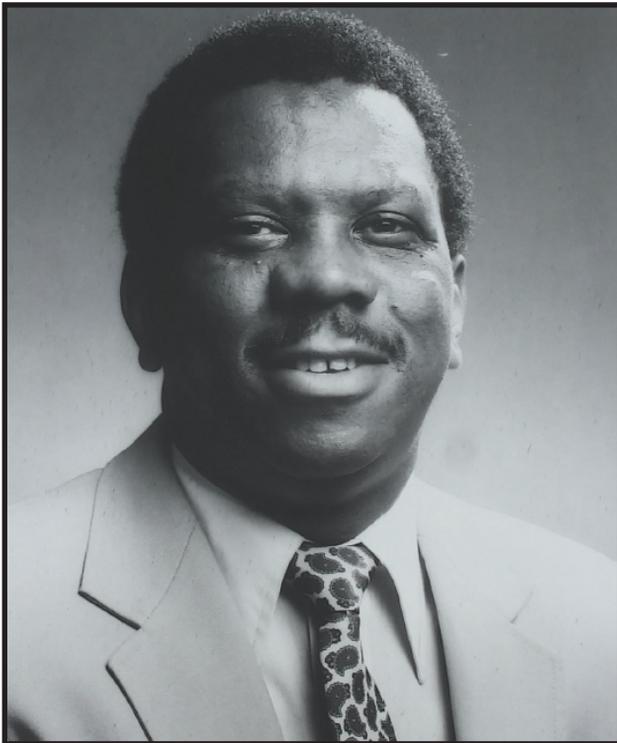


Remembering the Movement & Reminiscing on Achievements: An Interview with Professor Emeritus Raphael Cassimere, Jr.

D. Caleb Smith

Introduction



Raphael Cassimere, Jr. (1942-) is a nationally recognized champion of social justice and civil rights veteran. He received his B.A. (1966) and M.A. (1968) degrees in History from LSUNO (now the University of New Orleans (UNO)). In 1971, he received a PhD in History from Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. He also became the first African American professor of UNO shortly after obtaining his PhD. In 2015, the institution established The Ralph Cassimere, Jr. Professorship in African American History.

His rise to prominence began as an undergraduate student during the heyday of the civil rights movement. In 1960, he became president of the NAACP's Youth Council. Since then, he has held multiple local, regional, and national offices within the NAACP. Cassimere maintained his commitment to human and civil rights while teaching at UNO. He is a recipient of the ACLU's Benjamin E. Smith Civil Liberties Award, the Louisiana NAACP's Lifetime Presidential Award, U.S. State Department's Outstanding Citizen Diplomacy Award and many of other accolades. In the following interview, Cassimere reflects on his early days in the civil rights movement.

Coming of Age During the Brown Era

D. Caleb Smith (DCS): *Thank you for time today, Prof. Cassimere. Can you give me a brief background of your upbringing in New Orleans?*

Raphael Cassimere, Jr. (RC): I'm a sixth generation New Orleanian. My first ancestors on both sides arrived in New Orleans in 1793. My mother's side of the family came from Guadalupe. My father's side came from Saint Domingue in 1793, shortly before the revolution began there. Both sides of my families have been here for three quarters of the time that New Orleans exist. My mother's family, which was the one that I was most familiar with. Most of my consciousness came from my maternal grandmother who was born in 1872. Her mother was a slave in Missouri and had been sold to New Orleans right before or during the civil war. I was always fascinated about how she came down here and found her daughter.

And I remember asking one of my professors about it. He told me that she probably put an ad in the newspaper asking, "Do you know Marie Webster from St. Louis?" Well, my great-grandmother Marie died when my grandmother was about five. So, my grandmother grew up with four or five stepmothers. Her father was literate. He was free before the end of the civil war. I don't know how long he had been free. They always pointed out the fact that they were always were free, which was a contradiction because my grandmother knew that her mother was a slave. But anyway, my grandmother lived until 1966. She was 94 years old when she died. So, I learned a lot of firsthand history from them and a good sense of who we were. She finished sixth grade, which was remarkable for a black woman in New Orleans in the late 19th century. All of her teachers were white. My mother's father was from St. Bernard Parish.

The couple met at a dance. My grandfather was a musician. He used to play what I suspect was rag time and maybe early jazz. They married in 1891, had 12 children but only seven of them survived. My mother was the youngest child. So, I was my grandmother's second youngest grandson, I think. She had 42 grandchildren. I was maybe 38 or 39th. I was born during World War II. I grew up during the heyday of racist segregation came of age with the *Brown* decision.

DCS: *How did your parents view your civil rights activism?*

RC: My mother was afraid, but very supportive. She was a member of the NAACP. My father because he worked in the St. Bernard Parish, which was the stronghold of judge Leander Perez, the segregationist. My father supported but did not join initially because he couldn't afford to lose his job, but eventually he joined. But overall, my family was very supportive. My oldest brother had been a member of the NAACP before I was. My sisters and brothers were members. My little sister was actively involved. My wife had relatives who were involved cousins. It was mostly a family affair.

DCS: *Can you reflect on the Brown decision and your reaction?*

RC: I can tell you exactly when that decision was announced, May 17th, 1954, Linda Brown, the named plaintiff and I are the same age. Both of us were seventh graders. I remember I was in my seventh-grade class. The teacher was the ranking teacher. So, she was the only teacher who had a telephone in her room, the phone rang, and she smiled.

When she got off the phone, she was smiling and trying to tell us the impact of the decision, which I don't think any of us really understood. Then, the principal came through the hall and he was telling all the teachers. Even though my parents were registered voters and socially conscious, they didn't know anything about the *Brown* decision. I was 12 years old. I lived in a racially mixed neighborhood of poor working class, blacks and whites. I wondered if my white neighbors, who had to pass up my school, were going to be going to my school with me. Of course, they didn't. They gradually began moving out of our neighborhood into neighboring St. Bernard Parish, which was more heavily white. So, I began to follow the news reports such as *Jet* and the *Louisiana Weekly*.

My sister used to get to Pittsburgh Courier and the Chicago Defender. We followed the news to find out when were they going to desegregate the schools and I they never did. Then when I was a junior in high school, this school LSU New Orleans [now the University of New Orleans] opened on an unsegregated basis.

DCS: *Did the Brown decision lead you to joining the movement?*

RC: Indirectly. My first of the protest was against the signs on the buses and the street cars. But when I was offered a chance to get involved, I declined. I didn't plan to go to the NAACP meeting I had committed to in July of 1960. I was at the library with the person who invited me and we walked to A.P. Tureaud's office about a mile away. I saw a lot of people from UNO there. And I got elected vice president

that night. I hadn't even joined. I didn't join until a week later. So that was kind of by happenstance. And it kind of drew me into the movement. The interim president was someone that I knew. He went to St. Augustine High School and I went to Clark High.

I was vice president and he put me in charge of the voter registration campaign. Before we got involved in direct action, we got involved in trying to increase voter registration in advance of the Kennedy - Nixon race in 1960. So, that was my direct action outside of the streets. I didn't participate very much in the first sit in because that was more or less led by the chairman of CORE and the president of the youth council at the time. The agreement was that they [CORE] would supply the sit-in demonstrators and we would picket, which we did. We picketed on and off and by that time I had become president of the Youth Council.

The Movement Years

DCS: *When did you become president of the NAACP Youth Council in New Orleans?*

RC: November of 1960.

DCS: *How old were you at the time? Where you in college yet?*

RC: I started college at age 17 in 1959. At the time, I was 18 and a sophomore in college. As a student, I organized a boycott because the Morrison Company operated the cafeteria here, but they did not allow blacks in it. We went in several times and we were not served, but there was a stand-up snack bar where everybody ate. But because of the sit-ins that had begun at Fisk and other places we looked at our situation differently. We questioned "why are we eating at a snack bar when the people who operate it won't allow us in cafeterias?" We organized a boycott of the snack bar, which was pretty effective. And again, we were still operating the boycott when I got elected president of the Youth Council.

So, in the Fall of 1960, we went back to A. P. Tureaud, the lawyer who had desegregated LSUNO and we complained about not being able to go into the cafeteria. He wasn't concerned about that. He said we were not in school to socialize, but to get an education, but he did write to the administration and threaten to go back into court. And at the same time, there was a separate faculty wing of the cafeteria. There were a lot of faculty that didn't know that black students could not eat in the student cafeteria. Then faculty put pressure on the administration, and they told the Morrison company that either you serve everybody, or you surrender your lease and they did. They surrendered the lease and the cafeteria was closed for about two

months. They reopened it in the spring of 1961 and brought in a white guy from Mississippi to run the cafeteria. He was a retired military sergeant and had been a cook in the service. He was strange, but very fair minded.

If we had any problems, we could go talk to him. He hired the first black cashiers because before then only blacks who worked in the cafeteria were cooks and servers. So, we had a good relationship with him. From that point on, the cafeteria was desegregated. Blacks and whites could now eat together in the cafeteria. Then, we went to the administration and asked them for permission to form a college chapter of the NAACP. We expected resistance [laugh]. I didn't find out until later that administration gave us all of the paperwork so that we could form a chapter of the NAACP. Administration didn't tell us, but they were glad and thought that there needed to be a black organization on campus. White fraternities and sororities were already on campus. There was nothing here for blacks. So, they were happy. I found that out about five years later. But because we didn't get any resistance, we didn't follow through. So, it wasn't until 1967 that we formed the college chapter. By that time, I was no longer in the Youth Council, because once you passed 24, you moved up. I was the first interim president of the UNO college chapter, which was fully integrated. Faculty members were involved. We formed the first black history program, college. We still had the Youth Council in the city and now the college chapter. The two worked together. I was working on my master's degree at the time.



DCS: *Why did you decide to get a PhD in History?*

RC: The Vietnam War. It took me a long time because I changed majors from pre-med to history. I also got very, very caught up in the movement. I finished in the fall of '65. I didn't know what I was going to do after. And, then I was told that I was vulnerable to the draft. So, I took the test for the Peace Corps and got an assignment because I was fairly fluent in French. I suspected that I was going to be sent to Senegal. Then, I learned that being in the Peace Corps only gave you a deferment. So, I decided I better get back in school. I started the master's program in fall of 1967, and I finished it in three semesters. Then, I was told that I had been reclassified as 1A and I knew could be shipped off immediately. The draft board tried to get me in '63 but I couldn't be processed because I had been arrested during my first sit-in and the case was still open.

So, the guy who directed my MA thesis got hired as a chairman of the department of history at Lehigh. He asked me if I wanted to come to Lehigh with him. I had never heard of Lehigh [laugh]. Then, I looked it up and said, "Wow!", it's 85 miles from New York. So, I said, yes. So, he got me a fellowship to Lehigh, but then after I got the master's and I'm reclassified to 1A and I said, "oh Lord, what am I gonna do?"

By chance, the first black appointed to a draft board was the former principal of my wife's school. And, I appealed and told the board that I could fight for my country by furthering my education because I have a fellowship to go to Lehigh. My parents could not afford to send me. So, he said, "well, can you prove that?" I said, of course I could. At the time, I was working as a field representative for the NAACP that summer. So, I was in and out of town. My sister, who was one of his students, brought him the letter offering me the fellowship and they gave me another deferment. So, if it hadn't been for the Vietnamese War, I probably would've stopped school like a lot of people and start work in the post office.

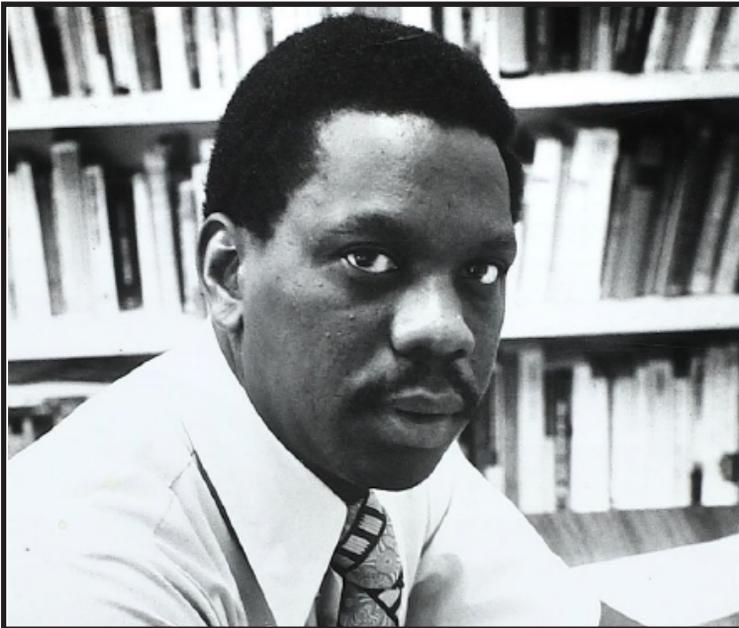
DCS: *How did you maintain a connection with civil rights movement during your doctoral studies?*

RC: Well, when I came back in 1970 to finish my dissertation, I got actively involved with the NAACP again. I began working with the political action committee and we began plans for the redistricting the legislative seats for Orleans Parish. Several of the predominantly black districts that we drew up went into plan.

DCS: *Can you revisit the reaction of students and faculty when you became the first black instructor at UNO?*

RC: Well, I taught as a teaching assistant, and I was the first black to do that. Then, while I was in graduate school, the chairman of the department, who had been my undergraduate advisor, brought me in, as a visiting instructor when I was hired in '69. Then, of course, I got favorable reviews from the students. Then, he offered me a job in the spring of '71. I hadn't finished my dissertation yet. He told me if I don't finish the dissertation, you'll come in as an instructor for \$3,000 less. So, I came in with my dissertation finished in the fall of '71 as an assistant professor. In the fall of '71, they must have hired almost 10 blacks and three in my department. They hired three or four people in the education department. The English department hired three black people. So, it was very, very optimistic atmosphere at that time...

RC: But at the start of my first class, two students walked out, went back to the department and demanded a transfer for obvious reasons. They didn't get a transfer, didn't drop the course and got F's. But you know, it was a great class because I only had one black out of more than 30 students. That bothered me for a long time. Then, maybe about 15 years later, I thought "only two left, but the others stayed." You know, you always think about the one negative. One of the guys who stayed became Dean of the engineering college. He introduced me when I did the university Founder's Day address. So, every now and then I get nice compliments from some of those early students.



DCS: *Can speak about your instruction as a professor at UNO?*

RC: First of all, I infused African American history in all of my courses. I'm really kind of baffled about the 1619 Project. In my survey of American history, the first course I taught, the very first lecture was titled "Before it was called America." I talked about the Native Americans. The second lecture was on Pre-Columbian Africa. The third lecture was called the "European Age of Discovery." and I had the themes interacting. I didn't have much resistance with that. And, in my Louisiana history class. I talked about the first Africans, how they came and so forth. Then, about five or six years after I got here, I started teaching a course called African American slavery. I'd go back to the beginning of slavery and antiquity.

DCS: *You mentioned that you were baffled about the 1619 Project.*

RC: Yeah, because I taught that stuff 50 years ago.

Reflections

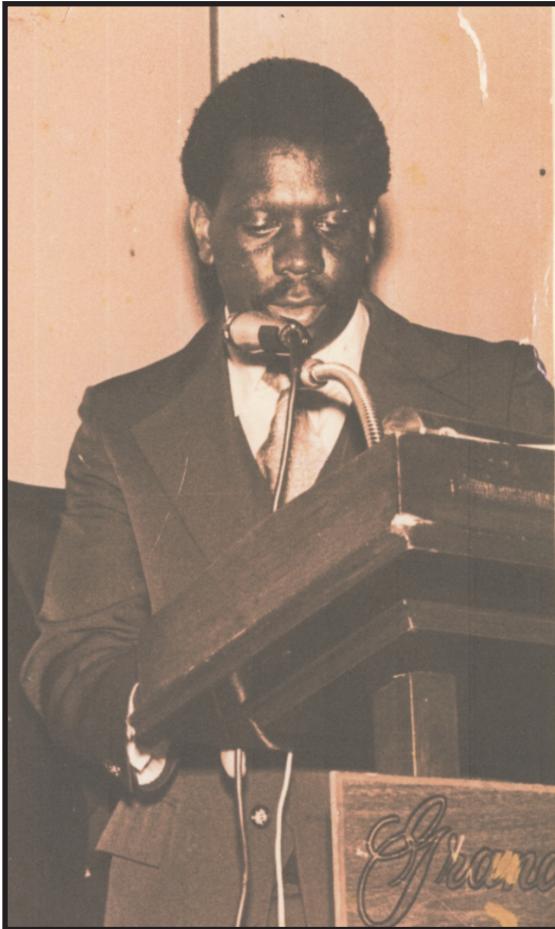
DCS: *What positions did you hold with the NAACP throughout the years?*

RC: I was president of the youth council for six years. Then, I was the state youth president for three years and I was the regional youth chair for two years. Region six included the southwestern states such as Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas. I was the initial youth regional chairman from '63 to '65. I served as parliamentarian of the New Orleans branch, the state conference and the regional conference. I chaired the national convention sessions. I was the title seven coordinator for New Orleans branch in 1965. I was the voter registration director for the youth council in the branch in '67 and '68. I served as the, "Get Out to Vote" campaign coordinator for Ernest "Dutch" Morial mayoral campaign. I served as the state coordinator for the "Get Out to Vote Campaign in the Duke Edwards runoff in 1991. That was very, very important because I remember there were so many people, particular whites, who were frightened about the fact that he might win.

DCS: *Can you describe one of your most memorable moments during the movement days?*

RC: The election of Ernest "Dutch" Morial as the first black legislator in the 20th century. Morial was the former president of the NAACP. I was president of the youth council while he was president of the adult branch. In fact, before then he had been one of the advisors to the youth council. He resigned in 1965 to become an Assistant U.S. Attorney. He still had his office in the Claver building where the NAACP and the Urban League's offices were. In the early part of '67, he indicated

that he planned to run for a district seat for the legislature. He asked me would I be interested in running a voter registration campaign in that area to increase the voter registration. So, we applied for funding from the national NAACP to run a voter registration campaign. I was a graduate student here when I got the position as director of the voter registration campaign. We got funded from the NAACP national office for I guess, six weeks. We did such a good job. Morial got us more funding from the V.E.P. [Voter's Education Project]. That's when I met Vernon Jordan of Atlanta. He was the head of the V.E.P. Then, Morial ran as the candidate, I coordinated the get out to vote campaign and we won in the first primary. Nobody expected that. He got elected to the legislature in 1968, the first black legislator in the 20th century.



Then, Morial became a juvenile court judge and then the appeals court judge. And I remember him calling me and asked, “if I run for mayor, would you support me?” I replied, “well, do you think you can win?” This is in 1976. He said, “if I run, it is because I think I can win.” So, in ’77, he announced that he would be a candidate for mayor. I organized the get out to vote campaign. He came in first, which shocked most people, including me. Then, of course, I coordinated to get out to vote campaign in the second primary. And he won. That was in November of 1977, but he wouldn’t take office until May of 1978.

DCS: *Of all the accolades you have received, which awards have been the most humbling?*

RC: Probably the 1984 UNO Amoco distinguished undergraduate faculty teaching award that I received. Now I said I was humbling because I had been nominated before, but I was denied previously. I suspect that I was denied because of my previous NAACP activism, but I don’t know for sure. I was rejected for an award within the LSU system twice. So, me receiving the Amoco award was very important because my mother was still alive. The ceremony was special because it was the last public place that my mother-in-law went to. She died in March of ’85. A number of people from the NAACP attended the ceremony.

And a close tie to the Amoco award would be the Seraphia D. Leyda Teaching Fellowship award. I was one of the three initial fellows. That was very, very important because I had been here for a while, and I had been turned down for promotion. I was at a point where I really needed some kind of reinforcement. And, I had very strong support from my department, and individual letters of support from people across the campus. I got the Leyda in 1996.

DCS: *If you can give a message or advice to the young social justice warriors, what would you tell them?*

RC: Remember what Frederick Douglas said “Agitate, agitate, agitate!” I used to ask my students “Why are you guys so quiet? Why aren’t you protesting?” You gotta be pushy. Somebody has to push. Somebody has a stir pot. Don’t be afraid to get started by yourself, but you gotta be right. And you have to stand up.