

Jesse Edward Nash, Jr.
1926-2016

Remarks of John J. Hurley, J.D.
President, Canisius College
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Fifty years ago this month, the newest member of the Canisius College faculty was completing his first year at the college. Prof. Jesse Nash had been hired as a professor of sociology and anthropology in the Fall of 1965. His academic interests involved the power structures in Buffalo, particularly as they affected the black community. He joined a sociology department at Canisius that was decidedly not ivory tower, but grounded in the grittiness of the real world. And Jesse's real world experience fit right in with a college that was exploring ways to play a larger role in its community.

Buffalo at that time provided a rich laboratory within which to study culture, human relationships, and issues of racial justice. For example, in 1961, New York State had passed the Metcalf-Baker Act outlawing discrimination in the sale or rental of housing, but its implementation had proven problematic. Blockbusting was all too often the order of the day in Buffalo's neighborhoods. In 1965, the Buffalo News reported the experience of an all-white block in the Delavan-Grider area in which 12 of 20 homes went up for sale within two weeks of an African American purchasing a home on the street. The growing civil rights movement was taking hold in Buffalo's east side as our African American brothers and sisters sought their place at the table when housing, jobs, education and opportunities were being served.

Jesse Nash arrived at Canisius just after a group of Canisius students – encouraged by their Jesuit mentors – had boarded buses for Selma, Alabama in the spring of 1965 to participate in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's famous march. Jesse Nash found on the Canisius campus a small, but growing number of African American students, who needed a mentor – someone who could

help them find their voices at Canisius and in the world beyond. When the students protested outside Rev. James Demske's office about the position of the black student at Canisius, Jesse Nash was there to encourage them to form the Afro American Society and find constructive ways to achieve their goals. To this day, Buffalo attorney LeRoi Johnson, who was there at the founding of the Afro American Society and went on to law school at Georgetown and then on to a great career, credits Jesse Nash for his careful work with students in bringing about change on the Canisius campus.

Over his fifty-plus year association with Canisius, Jesse Nash was committed, determined, prophetic, and challenging, but he was also kind, gentle, courtly and loyal. That Canisius was able to make progress on racial issues without mass protests and violence was a testament to the Jesse Nash way of doing things. As we know, he left the college to become the executive director of the Model Cities Agency. At the time he took the job, he expressed the hope and optimism that marked his life when he said, "I hope the time will come when we will not only have a model city, but a model nation which will make it unnecessary for us to have such projects."

Two months before he was slain in 1968, Dr. King delivered the prescient Drum Major sermon. In it, Dr. King noted that all humans share the drum major instinct: to be important, to surpass others, to achieve distinction, to lead the parade. But Dr. King's sermon was more about humility and service. He urged his congregation to seek greatness, but to do so through service and love. He concluded by imagining his own funeral and what he would want people to say about Martin Luther King Jr. He said that he didn't want a long funeral or a long eulogy and that they shouldn't mention the Nobel Peace Prize or the three or four hundred other awards he had received. Those things were not important. Instead, he said he'd like somebody to mention that

Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others, that he tried to love somebody, that yes, he had tried to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and visit the imprisoned. Above all, Dr. King wanted to be remembered as one who tried to love and serve humanity. He concluded:

“Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter. I won't have any money to leave behind. I won't have the fine and luxurious things of life to leave behind. But I just want to leave a committed life behind.”

I could imagine God's faithful servant, Jesse Edward Nash, Jr., making this same humble request. That one day he would be remembered for his response to the message of the Gospels and for his efforts to love and serve humanity. And so, Jesse Nash: I'll say that you were a drum major. You were a drum major for justice, peace and righteousness; a drum major for equal opportunity; a drum major for the economic advancement of African Americans here in Buffalo; and a drum major for hundreds of Canisius College students throughout the decades who turned to you for wisdom and guidance. I'm honored to give to you this tribute you so richly deserve. Rest in peace Professor Nash!