

AHA Advocate Talk: Charles Payne



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Samantha Ellison: Could you tell us a little about your journey and how you ended up here at Ball State University?

Charles Payne: Well, I was born in the first half of the 20th century, and I grew up in Mississippi which means I grew up in legal segregation. So everything in my community, schools, churches, everything we did was in black communities. Unfortunately, the businesses were not in the black community. They were outside the black community. My parents were educated and my father was a county agent. If you live in the rural area, you know what I mean about county agent. They work with farmers. He had a masters in agriculture and my mom was a first grade teacher. So that is kinda my background. At age four I was stricken with polio. I often tell people, this is an experience about when you don't get enough information. When I first came down with it, the doctor who lived in the country in Mississippi, thought I had tonsillitis. He told me to go back home and when my fever went back down he would take my tonsils out. My mother put a pallet out on the porch and so I was out on the porch and there was a guy who was selling insurance who came by and he looked and he knew instantly. That time they called it the infantile paralysis.

He knew it was paralysis and he told my mom that that boy had paralysis because he could see my leg twisting. My mom got my dad and they rushed me to the Cripple Children Clinic in Jacksonville Mississippi. Which probably at that time was about two to two and half hours away. When I got to the doctor the polio was traveling up the right side of my body, paralyzing. They managed to cut it off at my hip. It was going to paralyze the whole right side but they cut it off at my hip. The good news is it got cut off at my hip. The bad news is had they gotten me there when it first started they probably could have stopped it in my foot or somewhere. So I attended all black schools. At the end of my eight grade year my father wasn't too happy with the school I was attending. I live in Philadelphia, Mississippi. Historically noted, this is where the three civil rights leaders were killed during the 1960's. So he wanted me to go to a school called Piney Woods, a country life school. It was a school that had been started by Dr. Jones. He started the school in 1909 to educate kids of former slaves. But at that time Piney Woods was probably the best school for blacks because it was private and had its own facilities. So I went to Piney Woods. And from there I went to Rust College a small black school.

My intent was to always become a medical doctor, my parents and a lot of my relatives were teachers. During this time as an African American, your best future would be as a teacher or a preacher. They used to say which one of the "ers" are you going to be. I was going to break the mold because I was going to go into medicine. My senior year, I followed a premed curriculum and my senior year I applied to Mahera Medical School, which is a medical school in Nashville Tennessee. That time I think it was the only one for African Americans in the country. There were some students who went previously before me from Rust to Mahera. Rust College is one of the oldest black schools in the country and was started right after slavery by the Methodist Church. There is what is called the thirteen Methodist Schools, and Mahera was one of those thirteen schools. In a sense Mahera was kind of like a sister school. It was not uncommon for students who went to those schools to go to Mahera. So I was all set to go to Mahera.

The year that I applied was the year that the American Medical Association told Mahera that they had to stop taking so many students from unaccredited colleges. Even though my scores were high enough I was put on an alternate list. Now he is where good information can be helpful. I got a letter from two dominate white schools telling me that my MCAT and my grades were high enough and that they would consider me if I would go on probation. The probation didn't bother me because I was thinking if I can't do the work then its not going to matter whether I am on probation or not. So that part didn't bother me, but what part bothered me was that the day I got the letter from them was the day that the applications were due. I showed them to a couple of friends of mine and to my premed advisor and everyone said, "How come we couldn't have gotten these a couple of days ago?" So I ended up not applying. Now what would have happen if someone would have called these guys and tell them that we just got the letter today and could you just give us a couple more days to turn in the application? So getting good information is important. My dad had always insisted even if I wanted to go to med school that I getting a teaching degree because that is all he knew. So I had gotten a teaching degree and immediately took a teaching job back in my home town. Since I went into teaching I discovered that teaching was something that I enjoyed and it would be probably something that I would be pretty good at. I worked with a lot of kids in poverty. It makes you feel good as a teacher when you see kids do things that they couldn't do before they started and really begin to enjoy it. I think I accepted the fact that I was going to be a teacher and I wanted to be the best teacher I could be.

Russia had just created Sputnik and the United States thought it was behind in science and they had what was called the National Science Foundation programs. And this is where science teachers would go back to Universities on NSF grants and be paid to go back to school to learn how to teach science better. I went to the Tuskegee Institute and they had what was called the academic year. And while I was there over the summer one of the academics was in a car accident and couldn't come. So the director of the program asked if I would be willing to take the academic year and so I did. And that is how I ended up getting my masters with that. I then went back to my high school to teach and my father was friends with several Presidents of the black schools at Jackson State and others. He was at Valley State and he told his friend that he knew someone who taught. So I ended up at Valley State. This was the time that immigration or desegregation was beginning to become obvious that it was going to happen. And like many other schools Valley State was trying to become accredited and one of the weaknesses of the black schools was that they didn't have enough Ph.d's. At that time I was twenty-six and it become pretty obvious to me that if you were going to stay in education you were going to have to get a Ph.d or otherwise you were going to get all the grunt jobs. That time I was teaching chemistry, so I would end up with the four o'clock lab classes and at that time we had Saturday morning classes. So I was going to end up with all the late classes and Saturday morning classes. So I went back to graduate school and as I was graduating from the University of Virginia for my doctorate, I had had a relative who had gone to Ball State during the sixties. So I knew a little bit about Ball State and while I was at the career center and looking at positions being advertised, Ball State was looking for someone to develop a Multicultural Program.

At that time that was a totally new term and a totally new concept. But I had had experience teaching in all Black school and with Native American kids, and I had also worked

with White kids. I could immediately, see the culture, not the ethnic, but the cultural differences. So I said I am going to apply to that. That sounds like an interesting challenge and I thought I would apply to that. And there was a friend with me in Physics and we were looking at it together and he said what are you looking at and what has gotten your attention? And I said Ball State University wants someone to develop and start a multicultural program. He laughed and said, "You don't know anything about Multicultural Education." And I said they don't either. It was totally new and I had been reading literature on Black Studies, Chicano Studies and Women's Studies but to me they were different than education, in that preparing teachers would be different. So I applied for the position and Ball State asked me to come for an interview. When I came here they had showed me the proposal that had been written to develop the multicultural program and within the proposal the position description said that the person who gets this position has to be from the other culture. At that time I knew that "other culture" meant black. So I knew that I had a pretty good chance of getting this job. I had just gotten married and my wife asked me if I had gotten the job? I said yep and she then asked about how much money I was going to be making. I told her I don't know. She then said, " You took a job and don't know how much money you're making?" As we were talking they called and made the offer. On the one hand there weren't people out front protesting but there were some people that weren't very happy with the fact that I was here.

At that time Affirmative Action was a pretty strong. So many assumed that I was apart of the Affirmative Action base and the only reason that I was here was because of Affirmative Action. In one of my classes, from nine to ten, and when I would leave the room there would always be two people from the department in the same spot wanting to know if I wanted to go get a cup of coffee. Two of my students told me that those two guys are always asking us about you. Then I put two and two together and the next day I went back to class and left the door open and as I was starting class I went over to the door and looked outside the door, as if I was looking for something, and sure enough they were standing outside in the same spot.

Now if something like that happen today I would probably cuss them out, but back then I kind of chuckled and thought that they may learn something. There were challenges with the concept of Multiculturalism being new. Those challenges had to be met and I often joke about how Mississippi had prepared me well. I have enjoyed the challenge. Many people who were working on Multicultural programs across the country were working within Student Affairs. What that means is that they couldn't get promotion or tenure I was able to get tenure and a promotion at Ball State. So there are a number of reasons why I came to Ball State. Other people went to more prestigious schools but weren't able to do the same things that I was able to do here at Ball State. Many of them ended up leaving Ball State basically because they couldn't get tenure. Most schools have a recognition for people who have been at the school for a long period of time. Here at Ball State I think it now starts after you been here for fifteen years, but they used to start those at five years. So after my fifth year here I went over to this lunch in I got a pin. Then they called for the people who had been here for forty years and I thought who in the hell would stay here for forty years. And I thought of that when they were calling them up.

SE: Could you talk about multicultural competence? What that is and how you developed the program here at Ball State University?

CP: Remember in 1972, a lot of the country, even though legally segregation ended in 1965, that was only 7 years so many things were still being practiced. My idea was that culture influences behavior, it influences experiences. Teachers need to be aware of the impact of culture because up to that point schools have been segregated. A lot of white teachers are going to end up with minority students that they never had before and vice versa. There would be some black teachers with white kids. So its just my idea that teachers have to become aware of the impact of culture and what it means to work with people of other cultures. Now that is the initial phase. My idea behind multicultural education is that it should teach you about yourself. It should teach you about people, yourself and how the two of you are going to live together, simply put. And I define multicultural education when I came here as good teaching and as good education. And that is as good teachers you need to be able to relate

kids of both genders as well as sexual orientation, ethnic and cultural differences. That is not easy, because teachers are human beings, there are pretty much one culture, and they have to interrupt quickly other culture's behaviors, language, and words. It just seems when people graduate they ought to see themselves as being included in things.

The education that I had as an African American, well were largely excluded. I attended all black schools and the ones of us that did attend all black schools, we got information that we weren't suppose to get, just from being in an all black school. By being in the culture we picked up a lot of things. Many of the faculty members told me it was going to be difficult starting a multicultural program here at Ball State. We didn't at that time get a lot of students Indy, Gary, or Fort Wayne. Many people thought that we needed just black students, but we just needed any students. I remember going back and telling my wife that my colleges said that this is going to be very difficult and I said I can't go running and getting another job now. I said I had to stay and make it look good for a year and then maybe I could go somewhere else. Then I got to thinking, maybe I shouldn't be talking to professors anyway because they are not the ones taking classes anyway. Students would in at the Student Center playing cards and so I went over there, and I was a lot younger then then I am now. So I began to talk to individual students and about multiculturalism and I was seeing if they would be interested in such a class. So I would get their names and phone numbers. I then put out an announcement. There was thirty to twenty-five students who showed up to the meeting. I started the program in the winter quarter with about thirty-five students. There were a few black students who came in and that is how the program got started. The concept of multiculturalism was growing in the state and there was people who were afraid of it. Finally, there was a requirement that students getting into education had to take a multicultural course. The first course that I had developed in multiculturalism was adopted by Ball State. After that my numbers in the multicultural programs began to go down because students assumed that if they had taken one course then they didn't need to take more. After the requirement came in I probably had at most twenty to twenty-five students. Now multiculturalism has become a household word and I am glad I have come to see that change. I used to tell people what I taught and I would almost have to duck when I told them. A lot of people thought that multicultural education was something that minorities were making white people do. I think that this attitude has lessen today.

SE: Do you think that there is still resistance today and were you met with any resistance personally?

CP: Yes, I used to develop my own argument. I used to practice and anticipating what the resistance would be. When you get questions you don't expect or when somebody says something, you don't want to lose it, you want to remain calm. So I would anticipate all those questions. I just want everyone that lives in America to be American. I really practiced remaining calm. I did a lot of reading, I would read the paper, and I would research on the internet, keeping up with the resistance that people had. Busing was a big issue people were afraid of that. I tried to use empathy and put myself in the shoes of those protesting who were against it. I would say, you know if I was ignorant of people trying to get in my school, I would probably behave the same way. I want a good education for my children too. I understand their attitudes and I would want the best for my children too.