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GWU History Professor Talks Historic Civil Rights Act

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Office of University Communications

June 27, 2014

Summer Marks 50th Anniversary of Landmark Legislation

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. – In schools and restaurants, voting booths and employment lines, life changed drastically for Americans 50 years ago this summer. National leaders approved the Civil Rights Act on July 2, 1964. The legislation brought some sweeping changes to the country’s racial divisions, but it didn’t eliminate all boundaries, according to Gardner-Webb University Assistant Professor of History Dr. Joseph Moore.

“It certainly was a great accomplishment that was long-delayed,” Moore reflected in a recent interview with WGWG.org. “We’re still living generation to generation with the wealth and the cultures and the morals that were handed to us by a previous generation. Those things change slowly and, as many people in the movement in the 1960s pointed out, they were changing too slowly and they wanted them to change more quickly. We still see that they haven’t changed completely.”

The Civil Rights Act of 1964—signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson—made it illegal to discriminate against a person based on color, origin, race, religion or sex. It wasn’t the first such rights act in the nation’s history, Moore said, but none of the previous legislation was effective. The act addressed rights for public facilities, public schools, employment, voting and other sectors of society. “All of those comprehensively are the most effective civil rights bill in American history,” Moore offered. “When you combine that with putting in the hands of the attorney general of the United States the ability to bring into the court system any violation of that act, you have a pretty powerful piece of legislation. That combination of elements radically shifted the American landscape.”

However, the 1964 rights law didn’t completely change American race relations, and many places still segregate today, according to Moore. “In the midst of the rights movement, someone famously called Sunday morning at 11 a.m. the most segregated hour in America. It still is,” Moore shared. “Some churches do actively integrate racially, but the vast majority of American churches are as segregated as they’ve ever been. You can say this about American religious life. You can say this, more or less, about American residential life.”

Schools changed with the law’s demand for classroom integration, albeit slowly in some areas. According to Moore, nearby Shelby (N.C.) High School enrolled four African-American students in 1963, a number that more than doubled a year later. By 1965, a plan

was in place to fully desegregate Shelby's schools. "One out of every 100 black children in America in 1963 went to an integrated school," Moore offered. "Within 10 years, school integration reached about 90 percent."

Despite strides in race relations, Moore understands that America still struggles with inequality and racial issues. "There are class divisions in every society. There are wealth disparities in every society," he said. "In America, those take on a very peculiar narrative, because it's the narrative of race. It's a story that hasn't finished yet."

Located in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb University offers a comprehensive academic experience that introduces students to the diverse world of ideas and to the people who think them, preparing them for professional success and for productive citizenship.