

Dr. Floyd W. Banks: From Social Activism to Reflections in Retirement



IMZ (Itibari M. Zulu): Thank you Dr. Banks for this interview. From my reading I've learned that you spent 27 years as a professor of Physiology and former chair of the Biological Sciences Department at Chicago State University (CSU) in Chicago, Illinois. Congratulations on this dedication and achievement.

FWB (Floyd W. Banks): Thanks, it was my pleasure to serve the mainly minority students on the south side of Chicago. I started as Associate Professor from 1984 until 1990 when I became full professor. I served as Professor of Physiology from 1990 until 2004 when I was appointed Acting Chair for one year and then Chairman of the department from 2005 until my retirement May 31, 2011.

IMZ: In my read via *US News & World Report* I learned that Chicago State University ranks first in Illinois in awarding bachelor's degrees to African Americans in the physical sciences, health professions, and related sciences; and that the school ranks fourth in the state in awarding baccalaureate degrees to Latino students in education. Since you were at CSU for almost three decades, I am sure you have contributed to this success. Can you give our readers some insight into the ingredients that created that success?

FWB: Chicago States' Pre-Med program had a successful entry of 87% of its graduates into medical school. The highest acceptance rate in the state; we had the MBRS (Minorities in Biomedical Research) program which funded basic science research which involve our students in cutting edge research which they published in refereed journals. This greatly enhanced the education of our students.

IMZ: I understand that your specialization is synaptic physiology and biophysics; membrane biophysics of compensatory enlarging mammalian muscle fibers and the motor nerve release properties, however you did have time throughout your career to engage in political activism (student advocacy). Hence, did your political//social activism contribute to your teaching philosophy, and if so, in what ways?

FWB: I was always involved with social activism from the time I was attending San Francisco State College where our strike resulted in alterations of the admissions criterion so that more Black and Latinos were enrolled in the school. During my time at UCLA I was actively involved in the anti-war movement and fought to get more minorities into UCLA graduate school. While at CSU I was always at the forefront fighting for student rights and changes that would serve students.

My politics did inform my teaching philosophy because I understood that any student with the right background and the desire to learn could master any material. If the student didn't have the background it was our role as educators to direct them to get the background and never discourage their ambition to learn.

IMZ: As you may guess, our journal deals with just about all things African, past and present, thus as trans-disciplinary project we don't shy away from the sciences, although we primarily focus on the social sciences and the humanities. In this regard I've discovered that the history of African science and science education is absent in almost every science text which means that students may never learn that there is an African root to fractal geometry, the Ishango bone was found with mathematical markings found at the fishing site on Lake Nyanza (aka Lake Edward) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo between 9000 BC and 6500 BC or that historian and physicist Chiekh Anta Diop translation of a major portion Albert Einstein's theory of relativity into Wolof to demonstrate the ability of an African language to adequately articulate the modern laws and principles of science.

How do you think this can be corrected, and in your years of teaching did this absence (African science and science education) ever become a topic of interest among students or faculty, and if not, why do you think it didn't?

FWB: African science was never overlooked because if you read the Greek scientific manuscripts you'll see the Greeks credited the Egyptians for creating the sciences that they enjoyed. It's only the later European scientist that didn't teach the roots of all scientific theory. Science doesn't grow in a vacuum. Everything we learn is built on previous understanding. The Greeks learned from the Egyptians and the Egyptians learned from earlier cultures farther up the Nile, which learned from sub Saharan cultures. The meek shall inherit the earth means; the original cultures expanded until some of the populations were forced out into more inhospitable terrains where they had to develop more advanced technologies to survive. As they developed these new technologies they were able to return and conquer the spawning culture. There is always a flux and return from and to new cultures and because if this, knowledge is built and enhanced.

IMZ: CSU is located on 161 acres of picturesque land in a residential community on the south side of Chicago in stark contrast to the area's reputation as a poor and crime-infested section of the city, yet Chicago has the fourth-largest gross domestic product in the world, and is the home district of President Barack Obama. These contradictions are obvious, but during your tenure at CSU, did they become something to embrace or avoid?

FWB: I love CSU! The environment on campus was tranquil, but our students came from many varied backgrounds. We had International students from everywhere on the planet. The community was an enriching environment where everyone was encouraged to excel.

IMZ: As in the social sciences, racism and racist theory is not absent. In general, for the sciences, do you see any trends of theories we should be concerned about that may present a potential threat?

FWB: All true anthropologists agree that there is only one race, the human race which prehistorically was divided into discrete populations where the remnants still exist. Due to commerce and trading routes that span the world, no population was free of gene flow from all over the world. There will always be pseudo scientist that will come up with racist theories which will be debunked by the scientific community. Capitalism requires racism, sexism, nationalism etc. to divide the working class so they can be exploited. So as long as capitalism is our economic system we'll have to fight racist theorist.

IMZ: You have taught in China for a few years while also at CSU, and recently in retirement; what has been your experience there, and how do you think it has enriched your life?

FWB: I started teaching at the Jio Tung Medical School in Shanghai China after I retired. It has been a wonderful experience which has broadened my world perspective and in the process I can now converse with the Chinese people in their native tongue. I greatly appreciate the Chinese hospitality and genuine gratitude for my efforts.

IMZ: Before we conclude, is there anything you would like to share with our readers that we have not covered?

I would like to thank you for your invitation to reflect on my life. I have come from a very humble background and am grounded in humility. I love all peoples of the world and hope to be instrumental in the uplifting of all. Since I have had such a wonderful life experience it is encumbered on me to help humanity evolve to a higher plane where all humankind can be free.

IMZ: Thank you, Floyd, you have been a quit inspiration to me.