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Robin Adams Cheeley: Yes Elon, you can fix this

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Mary Carroll after being crowned homecoming queen at Elon College in 1979. In the school's then 91-year history.

This column is updated to correct a reference to Dr. Williams' academic department.

“I have the audacity to believe ... that what self-centered men have torn down, men other-centered can build up.”

— *Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.*

Sometimes, in our haste to do a good thing, we don't do the right thing. As I see it, that's what happened recently during Elon University's homecoming.

Before going forward, let's step back to 1979 for a minute.

During what was then Elon College's homecoming, Mary Carroll-Robertson was named homecoming queen. But instead of claps and cheers, many members of certain predominantly white fraternities and sororities booed her as she walked across the football field to get her crown and bouquet.

You see, in the school's then 91-year history, Mary was the first African American homecoming queen. Slight number one.

To make matters worse, when the school's yearbook was distributed that spring, the perfunctory homecoming queen picture was missing. Slight number two. The photographer missed the printing deadline, a university's spokesperson said then.

Two African American students — my brother-in-law James Strickland and fellow football player Alonzo Craig — risked expulsion and dismissal, by burning their yearbooks on the steps of the student union. They were then joined by other African American students, and it turned into a full-fledged book burning that was even mentioned in *Jet* magazine.

Mary hadn't counted on being queen. Instead, she and many of the almost 300 African American students on campus, myself included, were really trying to assert our presence on the small, liberal arts campus. Each university organization could submit a nominee for queen and the entire student body voted on the selections. There was some feeling that if the African American students voted in a bloc that Mary might be named to the court. Not that she would win.

But she did. The power of voting. But that's another column.

After years of not coming back to Elon, Mary and her husband arrived on campus homecoming weekend and decided to visit the school's African American Wall of Fame, where she is pictured alongside Glenda Phillips, the school's first African American student, and Eugene Perry, the first African American graduate.

While there, she was espied. And quicker than Jimmy John's can deliver, the school is pulling together an "impromptu" way to make up for 1979. Since the new president arrived, Elon has been on an I'm Sorry tour. Last spring, the school presented Phillips an honorary doctoral degree because she got sick before she could graduate. Bet that took planning.

That Friday afternoon, text messages were sent back and forth to Mary from various campus administrators, and faster than Amazon Prime can deliver, Mary found herself being introduced during the football game, given a bouquet and crowning the next homecoming king and queen.

No time to invite her children and grandchildren or other family members who live nearby in Oxford. No time for classmates to arrange to be there and celebrate with her. In fact, there was almost no time for Mary to walk out looking runway ready, as is her custom. Slight three. You're out.

"This wasn't the be-all end-all," said Rudolph Williams, the school's chief diversity officer. "We were just optimizing an opportunity.

"Had we known she was coming to town, we would have had a much bigger event," added the education professor, including her sitting in the president's box and other fanfare.

Back at her home in Delaware, Mary said now that she's had an opportunity to stop and breathe and take in all that happened she's perplexed.

“This didn’t fix what happened earlier,” she said. “I understand the intent, but in a perfect world, and we don’t have a perfect world, it could have been done so differently.”

Graceful, always.

As for me, this was a mess and the third time Elon has fumbled this historic event.

Thirty-nine years later and they couldn’t wait one minute more to make sure that a delayed celebration was done, as the church women say, decent and in order.

Oddly enough, then African American students at Elon and other predominately white campuses, had the audacity to hope and believe that we could make a difference and forge our place.

We were all naïve enough to believe that, even in small numbers, we could make change.

Almost 40 years later, I still have the audacity to hope.

And in this era when racism and sexism and homophobia and xenophobia and arrogance and lying is running rampant, where are we if we don’t have the audacity to hope?

So yes, Elon, I believe you can fix this.

We’ll be waiting. Hopefully, not another 39 years.

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