

Good afternoon.

Today, I get to share voices from Bowdoin's past. I ask that you think about what the story I am about to share means for you and your role at Bowdoin—here in the present, as well as for the future.

Virgil Logan grew up in Dayton, Ohio, the son of divorced parents—his father a construction worker; his mother a cook and housekeeper. He was big—nearly six-foot five and 200 pounds at age seventeen. Bowdoin's football and basketball coaches had their eyes on Virgil, but as his Bowdoin roommate, Bob Ives, remembers, while Virgil was a commanding and dynamic presence, he was “the most uncoordinated person you'd ever meet. He was only coordinated in one area of his being: his [voice].”

Virgil could speak on any topic and ended up winning just about every speaking contest there was. He was a leader. Everyone on campus knew who Virgil Logan was, and they respected him.

But college wasn't always easy for Virgil. He struggled with math and science, something he attributed to “an extremely low interest level,” among other factors. Virgil was a student who did very well when he was engaged and interested in the subject matter. Maybe not so much when he wasn't.

High on Virgil's list of passions were human rights and human dignity, and that's where he channeled his energy and his dedication. This was a half-century ago, during the late 1960s. The Vietnam War had the country and many college campuses in turmoil. In 1968, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were both assassinated. In August of that year, riots convulsed the city of Chicago during the Democratic National Convention.

A month later, Bowdoin's acting president, Athern Daggett, focused part of his remarks at Convocation on the ongoing civil rights movement:

“The world in which we live,” he said, “is today dominated by the sickness in our own society which arises from the fact that a large element in our society has been denied its rightful place throughout history.”

“In all of this, the College must take its part.”

King's death had been particularly difficult for Virgil. He idolized the slain civil rights leader and believed deeply in King's nonviolent approach. He and his roommate, Bob Ives, hatched up a plan to hitchhike from Brunswick, Maine, to Atlanta, Georgia to attend King's funeral.

“The day before we were planning to leave,” Bob remembered, “we received a call from the secretary of interim President Daggett, saying he wanted to see us both immediately.

We were a bit stunned and apprehensive that we had done something wrong. He greeted us and shared that he had learned through the Bowdoin grapevine that we were going to attend King's funeral and that we were planning on hitchhiking.

'Hitchhiking!' he said twice.

We shyly nodded to the affirmative. 'Well,' he said, 'would you consider having Bowdoin purchase your plane tickets to Atlanta, and would you be willing to represent Bowdoin College at [the] funeral?'"

Bob and Virgil accepted the offer and returned from the experience, as Bob put it, "with a commitment and determination to work for peace, justice, and human rights."

As a leader of the Bowdoin Undergraduate Civil Rights Organization, Virgil was already actively raising money for scholarship assistance for black students, and he and other students were using their vacations to travel to inner-city and black neighborhood schools to recruit applicants. They were determined to enroll more black students, to bring black faculty to Bowdoin, and to change the curriculum to reflect a more diverse history.

"We have begun to see ourselves as distinct forces within the College community," Virgil told a gathering in the chapel.

The spring of 1968 and the following fall, Virgil was instrumental in forming the Afro-American Society at Bowdoin, known today as the Black Student Union. The idea was to make black students more aware and prouder of their heritage and to convey to others a better understanding of, and appreciation for, that heritage by emphasizing black contributions to culture.

In the spring of 1969, Virgil's senior year at Bowdoin, he and members of the Afro American Society developed a proposal for the establishment of an Afro-American Center to "serve as a focal location for the cultural, intellectual, and social activities of black students."

It had the full backing of then-president Roger Howell, who wrote:

"It is increasingly apparent how much of an education we need, how great the gaps are in our knowledge and understanding, how much of the rich and living heritage of our country white Americans are ignorant of. The Afro-American Society, which already has done so much for Bowdoin College, has much to teach us. I hope very sincerely that the establishment of a center at Bowdoin will aid in this very necessary process of education."

The center would open the following year in what is now the Russwurm Center on College Street.

Later this semester—in November—the College will celebrate a half-century of multiculturalism and scholarship through the Africana Studies Program, the African American Society, and the John Brown Russwurm African American Center.

Sadly, the former student who started it all won't be here for the celebration. Virgil Logan passed away in 1989 at the age of 42, a victim of the AIDS epidemic.

In his junior year, Virgil was awarded the Franklin D. Roosevelt Cup as the undergraduate “whose vision, humanity, and courage most contribute to making Bowdoin a better College.” At his commencement in 1969, he was recognized as the senior who has shown “the highest qualities of conduct and character.” Virgil would be awarded one of Bowdoin's first two Watson Fellowships and would later earn his master's degree at Harvard, devoting his career to education in urban environments.

Virgil was also a poet, with a volume of poems titled “How Does a Whisper Catch Fire?”

Just a few weeks before his death, the Bowdoin Governing Boards considered the question when they voted to establish a scholarship fund in Virgil's honor.

How does a whisper catch fire? The answer, they wrote, must in part be “through lives devoted to the brotherhood and sisterhood of humankind.”

I hope members of the Class of 2023 will take these words to heart. Make the most of your years here. Be yourselves. And make Bowdoin a better college.

Be well and thank you for listening.