

Dr. Fannie Richardson Cooley

Professor Emeritus of Tuskegee University
Tuskegee University (1969-1983)

President, Alabama Personnel and Guidance Association (1976-1977)

President, Alabama Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (1985-1986)

President, Association for Specialists in Group Work (1989-1990)

Editorial Board, Association for Specialists in Group Work (1975-1978)

Acknowledgements and Introduction:

I would like to thank Dr. Shirley Barnes for the interview she conducted with Dr. Cooley and Kelly Burnham for videotaping the session. I also want to thank Ms. Linda Buchanan, the niece of Dr. Cooley, who graciously accommodated us on two visits and numerous phone conversations.

Dr. Shirley Barnes and I went to the retirement home of Dr. Fannie Cooley in Montgomery, Alabama. Dr. Cooley was courteous, kind-spirited, willing to help, and dressed perfectly - as always. In November 2013, in a follow-up interview, I returned to her home to ask additional questions to add a personal perspective to the initial interview.

The following information reflects excerpts from both interviews. Note this version was reviewed and approved by Dr. Cooley and her niece, prior to publication.

Interview Excerpts:

JB: I'm here today with a special person, Dr. Fannie Cooley, who was a counselor educator for approximately 30 years at Tuskegee University. We are visiting icons in the counseling field to preserve our history. We are starting with Dr. Cooley because she has meant so much to our counseling association for decades. Dr. Shirley Barnes is here with me from Alabama State University to interview Dr. Cooley.

For background purposes, I want to start with interesting information about Dr. Cooley. She was born on July 4, 1924 and celebrated her 90th birthday in 2014. She was born in Tunnel Springs, Alabama in Monroe County. She was the only child her parents had. Her father was

killed in an accident on the day she was born. Later on, when Dr. Cooley's mother remarried, a son was born.

Dr. Cooley's mother and maternal grandfather raised her. She expressed strong family ties and community ties, noting the strong guidance of her mother and grandfather in her life. She described her mother as the disciplinarian, and her grandfather as the one she could run to when she was in trouble with her mother. None of us can imagine Dr. Cooley in any type of mischief -- but she admitted if/when she was, her grandfather protected her.

Dr. Cooley spent time describing her early school years. She stated that "she enjoyed learning." Her family emphasized continuing education, which led to Dr. Cooley's striving to be a life-long learner. Her Grandfather's family, the McCorvey's all believed in the need for a solid academic education. She talked about going to grade school (1st - 9th Grades) at Rosenwald Elementary School and attending high school at Bethlehem Industrial Academy, (BIA), which was a boarding school.

During her early years in rural Alabama, she grew up in a home surrounded by soft shell (paper shell) pecan trees, fig trees, and other fruit trees. At the school, all children contributed in some way to make the school run (e.g., boys brought in firewood). While attending BIA she was responsible for making biscuits every morning for the students and faculty. There was no cafeteria so the students had to help with meal preparations. She and her mother canned fruits and vegetables during the summer and shared a portion of this bounty with the school to help ensure the students had food. This contribution helped to augment the cost of tuition.

Dr. Cooley noted that she helped the principal at BIA. While other students were reluctant to ask the principal things, she did not mind. She stated, "I helped him run the school, I was always helping him out."

SB: *My name is Shirley Barnes and I am here with Dr. Fannie Cooley. She is one of the greatest contributors to the field of counseling, not only in the state of Alabama, but throughout the country. I was a student of Dr. Cooley's in the 1970's. There are many people in this country that consider Dr. Cooley as their mentor - she is the reason that many of her mentees are in higher education.*

Dr. Cooley, we would like to know about your education. Where did you begin your education?

FC: *I graduated from Tuskegee Institute High School in 1943. I received a Bachelor of Science degree in Home Economics from Tuskegee Institute in 1947 and a Master of Science degree in Human Nutrition from Tuskegee Institute in 1951. I received the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Counseling and Behavioral Studies from the University of Wisconsin in Madison in 1969.*

SB: *Did you then move on to your Master's degree or did you move straight into a doctoral program?*

FC: No, I had work experiences at several universities before returning to Tuskegee University. I worked at Alcorn College in Mississippi (1948-1951) where I supervised home management and taught in the home economics division of Alabama A&M in Huntsville (1951-1962). I was a General Foods Foundation Graduate Fellow at Purdue University in Indiana from 1962-1964. From there I went to the University of Wisconsin-Madison to work on my Ph.D. From 1965-1969, I was a House Fellow and Head Fellow at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, while working on my degree. With my peers, we tutored over 500 students who lived in the dorms. I earned my Ph.D. in 1969.

SB: *What was it like being a counselor educator during your career?*

FC: Exciting is the word that I would like to use for being a counselor educator. Just being a part of the lives of those young scholars was exciting to me and being able to see how they contributed was great. I would often say (to the students) that they would make an even greater contribution than I could ever think of because it would be a different point in time for them. They had information in school that was not available to me during my time in the classroom.

SB: *How was it as a woman during your career, especially a woman of color? You had a double minority status. How was that during your career and coming up at that particular time?*

FC: Well it was there, but I did not focus on it. I focused on the opportunities that I had because there was always someone who saw what I could do, and made it possible.

SB: *That is a fabulous answer. I think that now days even with all the differences that we see with people of color, people still concentrate so much about our differences rather than concentrating on our similarities. You stated it beautifully when you said you concentrated on the opportunities and the individuals who saw that potential in you.*

FC: That's right.

SB: *That's great. Now how was it as a woman of color in a small university? I know you received attention from the Alabama Counseling Association and from the American Counseling Association. You were not just involved on the state level, you were involved in the counseling nationally and internationally.... So, how was it that you were able to climb to that area especially during the 1960's and 1970's when a woman of color perhaps was not considered for those top level positions?*

FC: Well, what I can say is that, I did not do it alone. There was always someone there that understood the system and understood where I stood. There were always people who were willing to extend a helping hand. So it wasn't a step alone. It was moving with opportunities that is, and allowing myself to work with others who were different from myself...and, without focusing on my differences.

SB: *Exactly, thank you for that answer. Your comments add so much more to how we can move forward. We can learn so much just from your responses here today.*

SB: *Now let's move to a level and this would be where I come into play because I was one of your students and I know you brought into focus many different ideas about the college counseling, agency counseling, and school counseling. Tell us about your relationships with students when they were in your classes and what emphasis perhaps that you placed on where they should be and where they were going.*

FC: I would try to think of the students themselves and the interests that they showed and the information that I had that I could make available to them. Then, I would try to step aside and let them move forward. I would not stand in their way.

SB: *Exactly. Well you provided so many opportunities for us as students. One of the things I learned from you was along the lines of helping students to understand the importance of professional development. When I was in the program at Tuskegee University, I did not have a lot of money. Tuskegee University was expensive because it was a private university. One of the things that you always focused on was making sure that we were able to attend the Alabama Counseling Association. We would present every year as a student group. That helped me along with hundreds of other students who had gone through your program.*

We were excited about the conference time of the year. We did not know a lot about the professional part of that, but you understood it, and you made sure that we understood it. Because you knew the theme of those programs and you would let us know ahead of time that that was where we needed to focus our interests and our research if we were planning on presenting at that conference each year. That continued from one generation to the next in terms of how you made a great impact on the students and let them know the importance of professional development. You would even put your funds there along with any other funds that were available through the program to make sure that we were housed there in the hotels and making sure that we represented through our membership.

FC: That's right.

SB: *If you could bring back anything in the profession from say three decades past, what would it be that you would bring back that perhaps is fading away from the profession now?*

FC: Well, I guess I have to admit that I'm not as abreast of what is really going on, I'm not as active as I would like to be and I would not want to criticize something that is already in progress. But I would want to continue to focus on exposure for our students. To let them see for themselves what it is like. ... Some of the things that we thought were so very important might need to be modified. I would like the younger generation to have the freedom to strengthen what needs to be done.

SB: *If you were to offer advice to any of the new counselor educators about staying focused and continuing to make this counseling field great, what would it be?*

FC: Exposure. I think it is so important to expose, make sure that the people are exposed to different experiences.

SB: *Exactly. Now you use a key word exposure, and I've always been told when I was growing up that once you become exposed you never go back to where you have been because that exposure lends so much to your growth. You also learn from bad experiences.*

FC: And, you don't repeat.

SB: *That's exactly right. I have learned so much from you and from the growth in the organization. I was very fortunate to become one of the presidents of Alabama Counseling Association. It has been an honor to share the same stage that you have shared in the past and to follow your footsteps. I want to thank you so much for the interview.*

Is there anything that you would want to say?

FC: Well, all I can say is you have my best wishes in your continued growth, and I appreciate the opportunity to be with you here today.

SB: *Thank you so much.*

FC: That's essentially what I have to say.

SB: *Okay, well thank you so very much. Thank you again Dr. Cooley for all your wisdom and for your experience that you shared with us, and for your exposure that you helped us to gain from your making sure that your students got the best knowledge not only in the classroom, but outside the classroom, as well.*

FC: Thank you, bless you.

Excerpts About Dr. Cooley:

Quotes from Dr. Cooley in Baker (2005):

“My parents instilled in me what I call self-respect.” (p. 117)

In describing her family oriented home, “the family would gather in the living room to listen to the grafanola - a record player that had to be wound up....” (p. 118).

My “...childhood was full of love and structure which she believes had a direct impact on her life experiences” (p. 117).

I went to a “co-educational boarding school. We had to work, my job was to make the biscuits for breakfast” (p. 118).

“The Grit was a weekly publication that her grandfather would read aloud. Once her grandfather became unable to read because of his vision, she took that responsibility to read the paper to him” (p. 118).

Description of Dr. Cooley in Baker (2008):

“Dr. Fannie Richardson Cooley explained that there are always obstacles that must be faced in professional and personal lives. She chooses to take an optimistic approach and search for opportunities. Through our conversations a love of learning, sharing, and helping others was evident. She firmly believes that all things influence who we are and what we become. Dr. Cooley says we do not have to agree with the opinions of others, but we must realize that everyone has something to contribute to the conversation. When you disagree with the opinions of others, you create your individual position.” (Baker, 2008, p. 60)

Theme at the ALPGA Conference when Dr. Cooley was president, "A Helping Hand-That's What It's All About."

Honors and Awards

General Fund Foundation Fellow (Purdue University, 1962)

United Negro College Fund Professor of the Year (1978)

Association for Specialists in Group Work Fellow for Distinguished Service (1988)

Gilbert and Kathleen Wrenn Humanitarian and Caring Person Award (1990)

Golden Anniversary Certificate of Honor from Tuskegee University (1995)

Outstanding Personality of the South; 1973, 1974, 1988

Chi Sigma Iota - Lifetime Member

Jean L. Cecil Distinguished Counselor Education Award

ALCA Distinguished Professional Service Award (now named in her honor)

Founder, Interdisciplinary Forum, Tuskegee University

Selected Publications

Cooley, F. R. (1970). *Women doctoral students: Differential perceptions of their role behavior in the academic environment*. Dissertation Abstracts International, 30,12-A, 5228-5229.

Cooley, F. R. (1977). School counseling looks ahead: Focus on the inner point. *The International Paper Company Foundation*. Tuskegee Institute Press.

Cooley, F. R. (1986). ALACD: A legacy of service. *Alabama Association of Counseling and Development*, 12, 5-24.

References

Baker, P.B. (2005). *Resilient lives: A critical narrative inquiry into the triumphs as struggles of five African-American women with doctoral degrees*. Georgia Southern University, Electronic Theses and Dissertations.

Baker, P.B. (2008). *Resilient lives: African American scholars*. Edited by Fang He, M., & Phillion, J. Personal, Passionate, Participatory Inquiry Into Social Justice in Education: A volume in research for social justice. Information Age, 53-69.

Hawk, R.S. (1991). Fannie R. Cooley: A humanitarian group worker. *Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 16, 3-7.