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An Eternal Flame

Shirley Graves Kennedy was a passionate activist, a dedicated educator and a devoted wife and mother. A product of the civil rights movement, the former lecturer in the UC Santa Barbara [Department of Black Studies](#) turned her considerable energy toward bringing people together on- and off-campus to fight for social justice and make the community a better place for everyone.

Kennedy died in 2003, after decades of learning and teaching at UCSB. But her vision and leadership live on, embodied in the UCSB [Center for Black Studies Research \(CBSR\)](#), where she served as Cultural and Community Affairs Cultural Coordinator from 1996 to 2003, and in the hearts of the community whose lives she touched in a multitude of ways.

The community is receiving her gifts still today. The Kennedy family, working with CBSR, has donated the Shirley Kennedy Papers to the university. They will be housed at the [California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives \(CEMA\)](#) at the UCSB Library and be made available to those who want a glimpse of the inner workings of the progressive, multifaceted woman.

“We are so happy and delighted to have them going to the library,” Royal Kennedy Rodgers, one of Shirley Kennedy’s four children, said of the papers during a special event at CBSR in UCSB’s South Hall.

“They’re home,” Colin Kennedy, Shirley’s son, said of the papers.

“It is a very special and meaningful honor for our campus to receive this extraordinary gift of the Shirley Kennedy Papers,” UCSB Chancellor Henry T. Yang said at the gathering. “Dr. Kennedy was a beloved member of our UC Santa Barbara family for more than three decades. She was a wonderful teacher and mentor who played a vital role in the establishment and growth of our Department of Black Studies. She was also a passionate advocate for social justice and civil rights. We remember her as a person of tremendous integrity and spirit. Whatever Shirley did, she poured her whole heart and intellect into it.”

Kennedy came to UCSB as a student in 1969 and received bachelors and masters degrees from the campus in Political Science in the 1970s while working as an academic advisor in the College of Letters and Science. Already a champion for diversity, she worked hard to bring to light the discrimination suffered by people of color while uniting people of various backgrounds. Among her many endeavors was the creation of a Black cultural festival, now Black Culture Week at UCSB, and also her 1982-83 directorship of the Center for Black Studies Research. She went on to obtain a Ph.D. in Government from Claremont Graduate School and became a lecturer in the UCSB Department of Black Studies in 1987.

Kennedy was just as active off-campus. Her efforts in the Santa Barbara and Goleta community include the widespread recognition of the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday, and work with the Santa Barbara Building Bridges Coalition, an effort to bring diverse elements of the community together through collaborative projects. One such project involved an exhibit of the Henrietta Marie slave ship, the only such wreckage ever recovered, at the Karpeles Manuscript Library in downtown Santa Barbara in 2002. She is also credited with advancing the movement to incorporate the then new city of Goleta.

Her work has been recognized with a slew of awards and honors from peers and students on campus. The wider community appreciated Kennedy’s accomplishments as well, with honors such as The Santa Barbara Independent’s Local Hero Award, the Santa Barbara News-Press’ Lifetime Achievement Award, and recognition from the County of Santa Barbara as well as the State of California and the Santa Barbara branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

“It’s important to learn about our national icons,” said [Claudine Michel](#), former director of CBSR and professor emerita in the Department of Black Studies. “But it’s also important to learn about the life and contributions of our local activists.”

In her later years, the need to preserve her work became apparent to Kennedy. She had amassed a considerable collection of file boxes filled with correspondence, notes, photographs and other documentation of her projects. “We are pleased that the Kennedy family gifted this formidable collection to the UCSB Special Research Collections,” Michel said. “The Shirley Kennedy Archive will be augmented by relevant papers that others in the community plan to add to the collection.”

“We really take our stewardship role over Shirley Kennedy’s papers very seriously, and we will ensure that these materials are properly cared for according to best practices in the archival profession to preserve Shirley’s memory,” said CEMA director Sal Güereña, “so that generations to come will have access to these materials that document the important contributions that she made that are part of the struggles for social justice.”

The recent gathering was followed by the annual Shirley Kennedy Memorial lecture, given this year by Tukufu Zuberi, a professor of Race Relations, Sociology, and Africana Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, titled, “The Final Demographic Racial Transition: Africa & the African Diaspora.”

The event marked a milestone in the effort to preserve and disseminate Kennedy’s papers. CEMA, along with Sojourner Kincaid Rolle of the CBSR, is processing the documents in preparation for keeping at the library’s Special Research Collections unit.

“Shirley was my friend and we worked together on many projects in the community,” Rolle said. “It’s an honor to be working on her legacy and I’m grateful that it will be available to current and future generations as an inspiration and as a blueprint for community activism.”

Aside from their addition to a state archive of ethnic and multicultural primary sources, plans for the papers include an annual event in which the community would be invited to have a conversation around an aspect of Mrs. Kennedy’s writings. The donated papers to CEMA join a growing legacy project at the Center for Black Studies Research that includes the annual distinguished lecture, documentary videos, the Santa Barbara African American Oral History Project and an idea being formulated for a biography of Shirley Kennedy.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.