

# Professor Receives National Honor

By Anne Mullins  
Bulletin News Editor

President Bill Clinton honored James Farmer, distinguished professor of history and American studies, with the Presidential Medal of Freedom on Jan. 15, the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Farmer was delighted by the award.

"I had been hoping for it for some time," Farmer said.

The Presidential Medal of Freedom is the highest civilian honor the President can award. Recipients of the medal have made important contributions to national interests, world peace or other cultural endeavors.

Farmer started the Congress On Racial Equality as its director in 1942. Using the nonviolent techniques of Gandhi, Farmer staged sit-ins at segregated restaurants in Chicago. However, Farmer's most important civil rights protest happened in 1961 when he originated the Freedom Rides, challenging interstate bus segregation.

"[The Freedom Rides were] no doubt the most dramatic and most successful action of the civil rights movement," Farmer said.

Farmer attended the ceremony, given in the East Room of the White House, with some members of his family including his daughters, Tami and Abbey, and his granddaughter, Abigale, who celebrated her 10th birthday at the White House that day.

According to Philip Hall, vice president of academic affairs and dean of the faculty who attended the ceremony, Farmer sang "Happy Birthday" to his granddaughter in his deep, baritone voice.

Hall described the East Room as adorned with chandeliers. Surrounding the chairs for all the guests, the media had set up platforms and step ladders so they could watch the proceedings.

"There were bazillions of cameras and lots of light," Hall said.

Hall further said that Hilary Clinton opened the ceremony with a speech about the significance of the medal and concluded that the recipients were "a group of ordinary Americans who had done extraordinary things."

Hall said that President Clinton next said something about each recipient, fifteen in total, before he placed the medal around his

neck.

"James Farmer was absolutely radiant during this whole thing," Hall said.

Farmer's fellow recipients included many famous people. The President also awarded the medal to Arnold Aronson, a fellow civil rights leader who cofounded the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, and Eliot Richardson, who as the secretary of health, education, and welfare served as Farmer's boss.

Farmer felt privileged to have received the medal from the President.

"This is the highest civilian honor possible in this country, and needless to say, I was honored and flattered," Farmer said. "This was the cap of my career."

Following the ceremony, Farmer held a reception at the Hay-Adams Hotel, across the street from the White House. According to Farmer an estimated 200 people attended, including both celebrities and friends. Farmer said that when he rode into the reception, the crowd of guests sent up a roar and surrounded him.



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Bruce O'Brien, associate professor of history and American studies, was one of the few members of the faculty to attend the reception. He said that Farmer was touched by the award and the show of affection at the reception.

"He's a very dignified guy, and this was a very dignified event. And I think he appreciated that," O'Brien said.

O'Brien also said that an amazing number of people approached Farmer including various senators and Marion Barry, mayor of Washington, D.C.

Even royalty congratulated Farmer on his accomplishment. King Foli-Bebe A. Ayi, symbolic king from the kingdom of Guin, Togo, West Africa, issued a proclamation which now hangs on Farmer's wall at home and recognizes "Dr. James L. Farmer as a symbol of freedom throughout the world and do hereby proclaim that you are a man to be honored among all men."

Forrest Parker, vice president of the multicultural center, also attended the reception in Washington, D.C. Parker called the affair delightful and elegant.

"It just felt good! I felt like I was part of history," Parker said. "I felt truly honored to be in the same room with a person of history."

Parker did, however, feel that the honor for Farmer was long overdue.

"The only regret I have is why did it take so long," Parker said.

Bill Hanson, adjunct professor of sociology, agreed with Parker.

"I think he's deserved it for a long time," said Hanson, who also attended the reception with his son, Jesse, a freshman at Mary Washington.

Jesse remembered Farmer's words when he left the reception.

"I just want to thank each and everyone of you for coming out. This has been the best day of my life," Jesse said.

The campaign to have Farmer nominated for the medal began four years ago when Val Coleman, a friend of Farmer's who worked for CORE in the past, wrote a letter

to a friend of the President, Vernon Jordan.

"It was a long letter running down my life from 1942," Farmer said.

According to Farmer, Jordan said he would talk to the President. Someone else got the medal that year.

By the fourth year, the campaign really got rolling. Farmer said that two women, Ruth Turner Perot, who was active in CORE, and Gail Beil, of Marshall, Texas, began writing letters to the President. Also the Free Lance-Star, the local Fredericksburg newspaper, ran an editorial urging people to write to the President as well.

Farmer joked that he almost received the award posthumously, referring to his bout with congestive heart failure in December last year. According to Farmer, he stopped breathing and had to be put on a respirator.

"It was a close call," Farmer said.

Students are trying to honor Farmer before he retires from teaching. Dennis Rudnick, junior, held a meeting last Tuesday night to organize students to petition to rename the multicultural center after Farmer. Rudnick

said that the petitions have been successful so far.

"Dr. Farmer's name has been left off the list of great leaders of our American history for far too long. As evidenced by his recently receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom, perhaps he is now getting his just do. What better way for we, the community of Mary Washington College, to honor Dr. Farmer than by renaming the multicultural center in his name, a symbol of what he stood for and so bravely fought for," Rudnick said.

As of last night, Farmer had returned to the hospital with difficulty breathing, according to Hanson. Hanson remained optimistic though that Farmer would return to his classes next week.

"Jim once said to me it was going to take an elephant gun to kill him, and there are no elephant guns in Virginia," Hanson said.