

Farmer Retiring

By Mark H. Rodeffer
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James Farmer, 78, a civil rights crusader against segregation for decades and distinguished professor of history and American studies, will retire Jan. 1, 1999. He is retiring because of deteriorating health.

"My health is not likely to improve. I will most likely be in and out of the hospital. It's just not fair to the college, the students,



courtesy photo

James Farmer

and it's not fair to myself," Farmer said.

Farmer is on medical leave this semester. Farmer's application for disability retirement is currently being considered

for the best agreement from the state and college," Farmer said.

Phil Hall, vice president for academic affairs and dean of the faculty, said he expects Farmer's application for disability retirement to be approved.

"Disability retirement is more generous than normal retirement. But he has to apply for it. It takes 90 days to get everything squared away with the state," Hall said.

Because of his medical expenses, the faculty felt Farmer needed a retirement plan more generous than the one he would be provided under the normal pension plan for state employees.

Art Tracy, associate professor of history and American studies, introduced to the faculty a resolution calling on the Board of Visitors to "use whatever financial means would be most effective to preserve the dignity of James Farmer in his retirement." The faculty passed the resolution, but the BOV took no official action.

Tracy said that Farmer needs a guarantee of financial security from the college because of his medical expenses.

"Given his physical disability he needs constant medical care. It was an issue of dignity," Tracy said.

"I am hoping [to receive disability retirement] but I have not yet heard; my ears are flapping in the wind. I'm just hoping

Porter Blakemore, chair of the department of history and American studies, agreed with Tracy.

"There was concern that Jim couldn't retire because he couldn't afford it. We were telling the Board to make sure he could retirement comfortably, given all that he's given to the school," Blakemore said.

According to Hall, rather than voting the faculty's resolution up or down, the BOV sent the measure to the administration to see if "anything could be done."

President William Anderson has since made a yet to be finalized agreement with Farmer whereby Farmer will receive an additional salary of \$15,000 a year in return for being available for lectures and oral histories in which Farmer will talk about his role in the civil rights movement.

"[Farmer] would do some taped interviews as a part of an oral history project about his experiences in the civil rights movement. The interviews would be used for our classes here and be made available to public television stations," Anderson said.

Hall stressed that under the agreement Farmer will only be expected to be available if his health permits. Hall said Farmer will have "total flexibility."

Farmer will receive the annual salary even if his health interferes with any of the planned projects.

"What exactly he'll do depends so much on his health. I know he wants so much to do it [the lectures and oral histories] frequently," Hall said.

Farmer's \$15,000 a year salary will begin Jan. 1, 1998, but Anderson said he does not know how long Farmer will receive the salary.

Farmer said he expects the salary to last the rest of his life.

"I guess it will last forever; it's not expected that I'll live too long; I'm very sick. I should assume that it would last for the rest of my life," he said.

"It's a gamble for the college; the college is gambling that it won't last too long. It's like an insurance company: the insurance company is betting that you

aren't going to live long, and you're betting when you buy the insurance that you will. So who is right? Usually the insurance company," Farmer said.

According to Sherry Morgan, assistant director of human resources, under disability retirement a professor who has not been a state employee for 30 years would receive 50 percent of his salary before retirement.

However, if that professor were also receiving social security disability, he would only receive one third of the salary he made before retirement.

Hall said he did not know Farmer's exact annual salary, but that it is "somewhere around \$60,000."

Farmer suffers from diabetes, has lost both legs and is blind. In April he underwent brain surgery to remove a blood clot.

"Last April he had a blood clot removed from his brain, and his speech and memory are impaired and coming back slowly," Hall said.

Farmer, who was one of the "Big Four" civil rights leaders, came to Mary Washington in the Spring of 1985 and has taught a class in civil rights every semester until now.

"It's hard to describe how rich [Farmer's] contribution has been. He himself is civil rights history, studying civil rights history with James Farmer is like studying the American Revolution with George Washington. Really, it's not studying civil rights, it's living it. So few college students have this opportunity. It's really been very wonderful," Hall said.

Farmer said he's enjoyed his time teaching here. He said he's sad to leave but will come back for occasional lectures and other activities.

"The students who are in my classes were very, very bright and well educated for college students. I was always impressed. These are students who could hold their own among students any college in the country," he said.

"I'm sad to be leaving, and that is one reason I plan to keep some connection with the college," he said.