

William L. Strickland

Long-Distance Runner in the Struggle for Black Liberation

By Peter Blackmer

(with thanks to Ed Cage, Vira Cage, Amilcar Shabazz, Gillian Royes, and Shawn Alexander)

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William “Bill” Strickland, an incisive scholar, beloved teacher, and decades-long fighter in the struggle for Black liberation, died April 10 at home in Amherst, MA at the age of 87. He was a former professor in the W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where he taught for 40 years before retiring in 2013.

For more than 60 years, Prof. Strickland dedicated his life to advancing civil rights, human rights, and political power for communities throughout the African Diaspora. He had extensive activity and communication with activists in the United States, the Caribbean—particularly Cuba—and the African continent.

A prolific speaker and writer, he shared his incisive critiques of American racism, capitalism, and imperialism in the pages of *The Black Scholar*, *The Black World*, *Freedomways*, *Essence*, and *Souls*, among many other popular and academic outlets. He also served as a consultant for the landmark docuseries on the Civil Rights Movement, *Eyes on the Prize* (1990), and the PBS documentary *Malcolm X: Make It Plain* (1994), and he took special pride in his companion text to the series he co-edited with Cheryll Y. Greene.

Born William Lamar Strickland on January 4, 1937 in Roxbury, MA, he was raised by his mother, Mittie Louise Strickland (née Norman), a union worker who had moved north from Georgia during the Great Migration. He graduated in the class of 1954 from the prestigious Boys Latin (now Boston Latin) before enrolling in Harvard University, where he majored in Psychology. Strickland paused his studies to join the US Marine Corps from 1956-59, serving stints in London and Vietnam, before returning to Harvard to complete his undergraduate degree.

Like many of his generation, Strickland’s entrée to the Civil Rights Movement came through his involvement with the NAACP Youth Council as a high school student in the early 1950s. Growing up in Roxbury, he became acquainted with Malcolm Little (later Malcolm X) through his older cousin Leslie Edman, a friend of Malcolm’s who also served time with him in Charlestown State Prison.

While his service in the Marines taught him about “dimensions of white America that I never would have learned otherwise,” it was his introduction to the works of Richard Wright and James Baldwin at Harvard that helped awaken his political consciousness. As an undergraduate, he enrolled in graduate classes alongside scholar C. Eric Lincoln and Urban League executive director Whitney Young and joined the Boston chapter of the Northern Student Movement (NSM) – a northern counterpart to the Student

Nonviolent Coordinating Committee – alongside legendary Boston activist Mel King. It was also at Harvard where he reconnected with Malcolm X in 1961 and formed a close friendship that lasted until Malcolm's assassination in 1965.

Strickland was named executive director of the NSM in September 1963 and helped steer the national interracial organization into the mainstream of the emergent Black Power Movement. "It is becoming increasingly evident," he declared that fall, "that 'civil rights' is no longer either an adequate term or an accurate description of the quest for full freedom which is now challenging our society."

Working out of the NSM national office in New York, Strickland worked with Malcolm X on rent strikes, school boycotts, campaigns against police brutality, and broader struggles for Black liberation alongside activists like James Baldwin, Herbert Callender, Jesse Gray, John Lewis, Bayard Rustin, and many others. When Malcolm X formed the Organization of Afro-American Unity in 1964, Strickland was a founding member as a student representative.

500 at Rent Strike Rally Hear Lewis, Baldwin, Strickland Call for Rent Revolt

"This is a revolution," James Baldwin told the more than six hundred people who attended the New York rent strike rally on Jan. 12th.

"It is going to be harder and harder and harder," he warned, "because the revolution has got to revise the entire system in order for us, as Negroes, to live and in order for the country to survive."

Jesse Gray, director of the Community Council on Housing keyed the rally with an attack on the slumlords and the city admin-



Strickland, Baldwin, Lewis

istration. He also called for the immediate dismissal of Hortense Gabel, NY rent administrator for her alleged support of the slumlords.

Gray, whose organization has been spearheading the rent strike movement, paid special tribute to the Northern Student Movement who has put 12 full time organizers into the Harlem community.

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Coverage of a January 1964 rent strike rally featuring Bill Strickland, James Baldwin, and John Lewis. *NSM News*, February 10, 1964. Credit: Pat Murphy Collection

At the invitation of Mississippi-based civil rights organizer Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, Strickland also went south to support the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) with its challenge to the Democratic National Convention in 1964. That December, Strickland helped organize a Harlem rally in support of the MFDP challenge and fostered a historic introduction between Malcolm and Mrs. Hamer. It was a contribution that Strickland remained proud of throughout his years.



Doug Harris, "Malcolm X at Williams Institutional Church with Professor Bill Strickland and Fannie Lou Hamer," 1964. Credit: Doug Harris/*The New York Times*

After the NSM dissolved in 1966, Strickland taught as a visiting lecturer in Black History at Columbia University, filling in for renowned historian Eric Foner. While teaching at Columbia, he also served as a member of the advisory board for the groundbreaking television documentary series "Black Heritage," spearheaded by Dr. John Henrik Clarke.

Following the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Strickland headed to Atlanta where he co-founded the first independent Black think tank, the Institute of the Black World, with Dr. Vincent Harding in 1969. With the participation of renowned scholars, artists, and activists including Lerone Bennett, Sr., Howard Dodson, Katherine Dunham, Robert "Bobby" Hill, Joyce Ladner, Walter Rodney and many others, IBW positioned itself as "a gathering of Black intellectuals who are convinced that the gifts of their minds are meant to be fully used in the service of the black community." IBW notably played a formative role in the struggle to build the academic discipline of Black Studies amidst the student protests sweeping the nation in the late 1960s and early 1970s.



Bill Strickland (left) and Walter Rodney leading the 1974 IBW Summer Research Symposium. Credit: Institute of the Black World

In 1973, Strickland joined the W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where he taught political science for 40 years and served as the director of the W.E.B. Du Bois Papers. Among his most popular courses were Black Politics, History of the Civil Rights Movement, The Writings of Frantz Fanon, and The Political Thought of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. Strickland combined his razor-sharp intellect, personal reflections on the Movement, and caustic humor to create transformative learning experiences for his students, within and beyond the classroom.

Strickland also remained engaged in political work throughout his years at UMass. In the 1980s, he renewed a relationship with Civil Rights Movement veteran, Jesse Jackson, and served as the New England Coordinator for Jackson's presidential campaigns in 1984 and 1988.

After retiring in 2013, Strickland split his time between Amherst and Ibiza, Spain, where he had a close community of dear friends. He continued to speak at conferences,

symposia and events, dedicated to passing on stories, lessons, and legacies from the Black Freedom Movement to younger generations. He spent much of his time over the last several years in Amherst with his devoted friend and steadfast caregiver Edward Cage by his side.

Prof. Strickland leaves to cherish his memory his first cousins Earnestine “Perri” Norman, Dorothy Craig, Gwendolyn Smith, Arthur Norman, and Keith Norman; second cousins Amy Simpson and Gregory Berry; ex-wife Leslie Lowery; and countless friends, colleagues, comrades, and students around the world who carry forth his legacy in the ongoing struggle of Black liberation.

In lieu of flowers, his close friends Edward Cage and Amilcar Shabazz encourage those who wish to honor Bill Strickland’s legacy to donate to Amherst Media in his memory. A symposium and celebration of life is being planned for fall 2024 and a lecture series fund is being established in his name. More details will be forthcoming.

About the Author:

I was one of the last students in the W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies Prof. Strickland mentored before his retirement in 2013 and he continued to serve as the advisor of my dissertation on the Black Freedom Movement in Harlem from 1954-64, a history he featured prominently in. He was a steadfast teacher, mentor, and guide in my development as a thinker, writer, scholar, and activist for over a decade. My forthcoming book, *The Whole Nation Will Move: Grassroots Organizing in Harlem and the Advent of the Long, Hot Summers* is a product of his mentorship and will be dedicated to his legacy.