THE MOVEMENT LIVES
Johnson C. Smith University students follow in the footsteps of civil rights activists.
BY B. DENISE HAWKINS

EDUCATION NATION
Obama, Romney outline different K–12, postsecondary priorities.
BY CHARLES DERVARICS

SPEAK UP
Colleges across the country do their parts to encourage voting.
BY REGINALD STUART

FAILING CIVICS
ETS Report: Youth lack knowledge of government basics.
BY WILLIAM J. FORD

SPECTRUM
Katherine Archuleta is first Latina to direct a major party’s presidential campaign.
BY MARÍA EUGENIA MIRANDA

WASHINGTON UPDATE
New Leadership Agenda Touts Value of HSIs
BY CHARLES DERVARICS

NOTEWORTHY NEWS
Report On Education, National Security Sparks Spirited Debate
BY JAMAAL ABDUL-ALIM

WHERE THEY STAND
The presidential candidates square off on education.

ON THE MOVE

EVENTS

LAST WORD

- 23 academic majors
- Total enrollment: 1,610
- Diverse Issues in Higher Education magazine ranked the College of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) 18th in the U.S. in graduating African Americans in computer and information sciences.
- JCSU professor Kristen Hemmy was awarded a Fulbright Scholar grant to conduct research in Senegal. JCSU’s 2004 alumna Kameron Franklin is the most recent recipient of a student Fulbright grant for doctoral studies.
- The 3+3 program is a collaborative effort between JCSU and Charlotte School of Law (CharlotteLaw). After attending their first three years at JCSU, and three years at CharlotteLaw, students can earn a bachelor’s degree and a Juris Doctor degree.
- As part of the Duke Endowment $35 million contribution to the University, a new 62,000 square-foot Science center will be built to help expand the existing STEM education model.
Johnson C. Smith University students follow in the footsteps of civil rights activists.

By B. Denise Hawkins

On the night of Feb. 8, 1960, J. Charles Jones, then a student of religion and psychology at Johnson C. Smith University, knew instinctively what it was he needed to do for his generation.

He first met with a handful of other classmates and friends, letting them know what he had just learned on the radio — other Black students in neighboring Greensboro, N.C. had begun staging lunch counter sit-ins at the five and dime. The next day, Jones told them, he planned to do the same. Dressed in his “Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes,” and with some “sweet water” dabbed under his arms, an anxious but determined Jones was planning to make his way alone to Woolworth’s in downtown Charlotte, N.C. He was going to order a meal and integrate the all-White lunch counter. But before he stepped off the campus and into the fray, nearly 300 Smith students turned out to join Jones in what was the beginning of a quiet riot and boycott that soon shut down Charlotte’s businesses, and in just short of a year, pried them open to Black patrons.

“All I want is to come in and place my order and be served and leave a tip if I feel like it,” the 22-year-old activist told a Charlotte newspaper reporter who asked Jones why he and the other Black students were leading the civil rights demonstration. But Jones, now 75, says the zeal and fight he took with him to Woolworth’s day after day weren’t just about the barriers thrown up by Southern lunch counters or the White people who owned them. Each time he sat down without being served at similar segregated lunch counters in Rock Hill, S.C., Tallahassee, Fla., or Albany, Ga., or got arrested and pressed into hard labor on chain gangs as a young Freedom Rider, Jones kept going by unwrapping the memories of his people. While in the belly of the racially charged South, where he narrowly escaped the Klan, Jones says he felt the will of “slaves who were plucked out of the continent.” He conjured the endearing words of a beloved grandmother reminding him, “You God’s child, you ain’t no slave,” and he remembered the debt he owed to the line of strivers, educated and moral people that he came from.

Telling West side stories

Jones, an emphatic Howard University-trained attorney, with an ever-ready rhythm and rhyme, and nimble recollections, was one of the faces and voices city visitors to the 2012 Democratic National Convention saw and heard when they turned on local media. His was among the stories Johnson C. Smith students told of life and residents in Charlotte’s historic West End community. The student-led social media and online project titled RUN DNC 2012 is also serv-
ing as a platform for the campus and community to discuss issues and experiences that matter to them, says Laurie Porter, professor of mass media communications, who initiated the project with visiting political science professor LaTonya Williams.

In addition to Jones, students also interviewed Harry Webb, another Johnson C. Smith alumnus, about popular West End haunts from the 1950s. And in another video, university cheerleader Jockuela Ballard posted a video about growing up in foster care. Ballard was adopted at age 20 by her cheerleading coach and recently decided to go public with her story.

“The area is rich in character, but the stories of the people who live there don’t always make the news. Now they’re going public,” says Porter. The project, which launched in March, is also intended to be a resource for “improving the democratic process and civic engagement with the sharing of the stories,” Porter adds.

Williams added a voter registration drive to the project in a “Rock the Polls” week in early April. The event helped students learn about the political process and ways to get involved. “The site is interactive and fully integrated with social media, which makes it easy for people to learn about the political process and get involved,” says Williams.

In many ways, the student storytellers, using iPhones, iPods and other simple tools at their disposal, are doing what Jones and his classmates did a half century before with just their feet, some placards and their committed presence.

RUN DNC “wasn’t a teacher thing. It was a student thing,” says Anika Cobb, the project’s student coordinator, of the freedom that she and other students had to find and capture stories of interest to them and the community. “I’m going to tell a story about the White Freedom Riders who supported the Black students when they wanted to walk into uptown Charlotte but couldn’t. That’s what was important to me.”

But the tales and issues that they captured and displayed were also meant to “engage, engage, engage,” Cobb says of the goal for students. And it didn’t matter about party affiliation, she notes. “We only told students to get out and vote and tell stories about what you believe in, but not who to vote for,” says the graduating senior.

Cobb is used to the frenetic pace that comes with being a campus leader. But when she attended the Black Caucus event on the last day of the DNC, she seized the moment, pressed her way forward and somehow caught the eye of her idol over bobbing heads and crushing shoulders in the room. But when a long toned arm came her way, Cobb managed to reach her right hand out over the bodies that stood between them, to shake the hand of first lady Michelle Obama. The brief but special encounter left the energetic 21-year-old giddy and breathless.

Where the action is

Attending some of the week’s convention caucuses and social events was among the project’s perks for Cobb and other RUN DNC 2012 students whose online work was first noticed by the Georgia delegation. The state delegates invited the students to shadow and interview them during the convention and served as mentors during the political event.

The Coca-Cola Bottling Company also became a fan of the students’ work and a benefactor of the RUN DNC project, Porter says. The company bought airtime before and after the DNC to run its videos and promotional pieces, and awarded students hand-held devices to document the DNC and continue storytelling on the West side.

RUN DNC 2012 was one of many projects the university launched this academic year to promote student leadership and political activism, says Malcolm Graham, special assistant to the president and a North Carolina state senator. It held a politically themed lecture series and hosted a luncheon for global leaders attending the International Leaders Forum of the National Democratic Institute just days before the DNC. Johnson C. Smith President Ronald Carter used the occasion to talk about HBCUs and the global presence of his own institution.

“Our ultimate goal is to challenge all students to become politically aware, socially active and intellectually inspired so that we can make America the best it can be. Your voice and your vote will go a long way of assuring that this goal is met,” says Graham in a letter to the university’s 1,600 students.

The university, Graham says, wanted to be a part of the political story unfolding in Charlotte. And its location, less than a mile from downtown, made the Historically Black University the place to be seen when the nation’s delegates and the world came to town. The campus was also the place that the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department and its fellow law enforcement officers from across the nation took up residence while working the convention, Graham says. The security and law enforcement detail shut down the campus, delaying the start of the fall semester until September 17.

As life on campus returns to normal and Smith students march back to class, many will be like Cobb, eager to register more voters, stay engaged in the political process and enter the voting booth for the first time on November 6. But this academic year, as Jones trains his watchful eye on the pride of students moving back and forth between the halls of his alma mater, he won’t be looking for those who can do the things he did as a student activist or have the same impact. For one thing, he says, “today’s issues are confusing,” and the times are too complex.

Instead, Jones is hoping for students with “vigor, even among a few of them,” and for those willing “to continue the tradition of commitment” to making a difference in the world that he and the ancestors embraced. While most sages are eager to pass the torch they’ve been carrying to the next generation, Jones prefers to light it for them.

“I tell the students, I am giving you a little oil. You will have to keep replenishing, but don’t ever let it go out,” says Jones. “And with that connection, I am comfortable that this small group of students is going to continue it.”