

## 20-21 Alumna speech

**To:** President Lyle Roelofs, Berea College

**From:** Rev. Sonja B. Williams, Ph.D

*“Berea was built on the basis of Good Trouble, standing on the side of the oppressed.”*

Thank you President Roelofs for this opportunity to reflect on my Berea journey.

Berea awakened within me the desire to be the voice of freedom. Freedom, “the power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants without hindrance or restraint... the state of not being imprisoned or enslaved” by poverty or our circumstance. As a student, all I knew was, I felt grown and it was my responsibility to make good decisions.

Good decisions, much like participating in and later learning about John Lewis’ *Good trouble*. Who knew the good trouble of advocating and organizing for myself and others would be an option? It was Berea College convocations that exposed me to the work of the Hook family, Black woman ethicist- Katie Cannon, American Poet Nikki Giovanni, and feminist and cultural critic, bell hooks. And in the classroom, I sailed the riffs of improvisational jazz, economics, and a down-beat history waiting to breathe.

Jessie Jackson came to campus and took a bus load of us to Ohio for my first protest, while encouraging young folks to vote.

Repeatedly young people would shout, “Give us the ballot.”  
My message for you today. “Take the ballot”

I served as the first African American Rover Chaplain at Berea - allowing me to create a space where myself and other students could worship into the night, ask God hard questions, and we created safe spaces for us to explore God’s desires for us. This led me into the vocation of aggressive care and hospice chaplaincy for over a decade.

Sonja B. Williams, PhD - St. Louis, Missouri  
T: 502-876-7874: Eden.edu

Berea was built based on Good Trouble, standing on the side of the oppressed. If you allow it, if you are open to it, Berea will prepare you with the spiritual and academic foundations for an accessible future -caring for the whole world, one corner and *holler* at a time.

I've been called to St. Louis, Missouri, where police brutality is known too well. Where we speak the name of Mike Brown Jr. and Breonna Taylor often. My clergy colleagues and I suit up in jeans and hope to write a new chapter to change the course of this nation. As dean, I teach people to imagine and to demonstrate God's glory in the flourishing of all people. For – Acts 17:26 says, God has made of one blood all peoples of the earth"

Today, I celebrate you, the start of a new year, and a praxis of walking into the spaces that need you most, so that we all may be liberated to live whole and authentic into the future. For without you and I, we remain broken. We're like crayons that color but always runs out too soon.

Living and leaning towards freedom as broken crayons is the substance of things hoped for -Berea molds us to become whole crayonic -utensils to paint the world whole in the color of justice. Like faith, we are the evidence of things not seen.