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Roger Williams University

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Beverly Daniel Tatum to Speak at RWU as Part of "Talking About Race, Gender and Power" Series

Author of "Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" comes to Bristol campus Nov. 8

EDWARD FITZPATRICK

Bristol, R.I. – Progress is rarely linear.

That’s the conclusion former Spelman College President Beverly Daniel Tatum reaches in assessing the advances and setbacks in racial equality and justice that have occurred since she first published her landmark book, “Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?” And Other Conversations about Race.

Tatum – who will be speaking at Roger Williams University on Wednesday, Nov. 8 – just published a 20th anniversary edition of her seminal work, which has been revised and updated.

In an interview with RWU, she was asked about the current state of affairs, which includes the mass incarceration of African-Americans, high-profile instances of police violence against people of color, the persistence of segregation in schools and neighborhoods, and the searing image of neo-Nazis and Ku Klux Klansmen marching carrying tiki torches in Charlottesville, Va.

“When you look at the arc of history, it’s often two steps forward, one step back,” Tatum said. “And we are definitely in a backwards step at the moment.”
But Tatum concludes her updated book with an epilogue titled “Signs of Hope, Sites of Progress.” And she cites research indicating that dialogue about race can lead to progress.

Still, she said, “I think it’s important to recognize that whether we do or do not (progress) is up to us. It’s not happening to us. It’s happening because of us.”

And the young generation, including college students, will play a crucial role. “Colleges can take advantage of diversity on campuses to help this generation of students learn how to connect across lines of difference and to understand the importance of continuing to work for social progress,” Tatum said.

Tatum’s speech will be part of RWU’s yearlong series, “Talking About Race, Gender and Power” and the President’s Distinguished Speakers Series. Her book is the RWU Common Reading Book for the 2017-18 academic year, so all first-year students and many others in the campus community are exploring her book in classroom discussions, campus lectures and more.

“I’m excited to come to Roger Williams University and to have a conversation with people who have been reading the book,” Tatum said. “My purpose for writing the book – and what I hope readers take away – is a deeper understanding of how racism operates in our society, how it impacts all of us. Whether you are a person of color or a white person, we are all impacted by racism. It’s important for each of us to think about our spheres of influence. Everyone influences somebody. Ask, ‘How am I using it to make things better?’ ”

Tatum said she hopes people will find valuable historical information in the book. But also, she hopes the book and this year’s theme at RWU (“Talking About Race, Gender and Power”) will underscore “the power of dialogue to create momentum for change.”

In the book, Tatum notes that a 2014 national survey found 94 percent of millennials reported having seen examples of bias. Yet only 20 percent of millennials indicated they were comfortable having a conversation with someone about bias.

Those findings led Tatum to conclude that neither baby boomers nor millennials are “living in a post-racial, colorblind society.” Instead, she wrote, “we may be living in a color-silent society, where we have learned to avoid talking about racial difference.”

The young generation grew up with the symbolism of America’s first black president, but it also grew up hearing that president trying to respond to outrage over the justice system’s response to the shootings of African-Americans such as Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown. Such contradictions can lead to confusion, Tatum said. “That is another reason for talking – to clear up confusion and get clear about what our values are and how we can move forward together.”

Tatum will speak at 7 p.m. Wednesday, Nov. 8, at the RWU Campus Recreation Center, Fieldhouse, One Old Ferry Road, Bristol. The event is free and open to the public with no tickets or reservations required. Any questions may be directed to (401) 254-3166.