

# STUDENTS ADDRESS THE ONGOING PROBLEM OF AMERICAN APARTHEID

BY KRISTIN STROMMER

Clark Honors College students waded deep in the research phase of professor David Frank's class "The Rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement and the Rise of Trumpet Romantic Populism," when the nation erupted in protests in response to the murder of George Floyd.

The class, partnering with the Museum of Natural and Cultural History, examined the successes of the civil rights movement and what they mean for anti-racist efforts in the current political climate. Beginning their course with a viewing of *The March*, a film by UD alumnus James Blue that documents the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, the class was structured to spark a community conversation about racial justice, social movements and political change. The students conducted original research and worked with the museum to develop a program for

presenting their findings to a public audience. Livestreamed on June 4 on the museum's Facebook page, the 90-minute presentation included discussions of four group research projects with real-time audience participation. "For nine weeks we discussed the long civil rights movement and the rise of the Trump MAGA movement," says Frank, a rhetorician who studies

argumentation in justice-seeking movements. "Then George Floyd was murdered, making painfully clear the systemic racism at work in this country and the urgency of addressing and dismantling it."

Highlighting key outcomes like the federal civil rights legislation of the 1960s as well as the war on poverty declared by President Johnson in 1964, the students pointed to the civil rights movement as a model for continued social change. They also emphasized specific actions that can pave the way toward racial reconciliation in the U.S., including widespread cultural competency training, engaging in difficult dialogue about white privilege and racism, disrupting unconscious forms of discrimination and demanding criminal justice and economic reform through voting and direct activism.

"The civil rights movement teaches us about cooperation based on mutual, often economic, interests," says Dylan Land, one of the student researchers. "Activists today should learn from that movement to build bi-racial coalitions against the powers of this country that perpetuate racial and economic inequality."

Dr. Lesley-Anne Pittard, the university's assistant vice

president for campus and community engagement, opened and framed the June 4 discussion, calling upon white allies to connect with groups on campus that have long been engaged in racial justice efforts, such as the Division of Equity and Inclusion (DEI) and Black Strategies Group. "These aren't new issues, and

we've been in the trenches. Have you? This isn't only black and brown folk work; this is where our collective and truly difficult work is. This cannot be achieved by DEI alone, or by asking our black and brown peers and friends what to do." For many of the students, this was a first experience of presenting research to a

public audience. "The Clark Honors College strives to help students translate original research into images and language geared toward the general public," Frank says. "The museum, with its outstanding reputation for public scientific and cultural programs, was a natural partner in helping us accomplish this."

Land says that the presentation offered an opportunity for a much-needed community conversation. "Without having this kind of open, respectful space for dialogue, it's hard to breach subjects that challenge peoples' core understandings and inspire meaningful change in the world. Our class presentation

was a good example of the dialogue that we should be encouraging throughout our country and the world." Originally planned as an in-person presentation at the museum, the event shifted to a virtual format after COVID-19 necessitated temporary campus closures. "One silver lining of the pandemic is that

it's poising us to present more and more of the museum's programs online," says program developer Lauren Willis. "It's proving to be a great way to support new connections between campus and the wider community."

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Illustration by Elise Reisman