

University of Mississippi

eGrove

---

University of Mississippi News

---

11-22-2022

## UM Community Remembers Sociology Professor Willa Johnson

Erin Garrett

Follow this and additional works at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/umnews>

---

### Recommended Citation

Garrett, Erin, "UM Community Remembers Sociology Professor Willa Johnson" (2022). *University of Mississippi News*. 7232.

<https://egrove.olemiss.edu/umnews/7232>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Mississippi News by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact [egrove@olemiss.edu](mailto:egrove@olemiss.edu).

## UM Community Remembers Sociology Professor Willa Johnson

Memorial service set for Nov. 28 at Paris-Yates Chapel

NOVEMBER 22, 2022 BY ERIN GARRETT



Willa Johnson, professor of sociology, is remembered for her unwavering commitment to diversity and inclusion, in addition to her scholarly achievements and kindness. Johnson died Nov. 7, and a memorial service is set for Nov. 28 at Paris-Yates Chapel. Submitted photo

OXFORD, Miss. – Willa Johnson was undeniably a hero in her own right, championing diversity at the **University of Mississippi** all while gaining national acclaim for her scholarship and expertise.

The professor of **sociology**, who died Nov. 7, taught for 23 years. She was the first Black woman to rise from adjunct instructor to full professor at the university.

A memorial service is set for noon Nov. 28 at Paris-Yates Chapel.

Johnson was a Hebrew Bible scholar who also studied issues of the Holocaust and the contemporary politics of race and ethnicity. She taught courses centered on subjects such as the sociology of disability, genocide and women, and the social context of Holocaust art.

“Willa was a very special person and a true scholar and intellectual,” said Kirsten Dellinger, associate dean for diversity and inclusion in the **College of Liberal Arts** and professor of sociology. “She was an interdisciplinary pioneer – bringing together scholarship on the Holocaust and race and racism in ways that were unique and transformative.

“She cared deeply about helping students and junior colleagues succeed and thrive in their research. She wanted the best for this institution and the people in it, and she held us and herself accountable to the highest standards of fairness and equity.”

Her students praised her for being passionate, inspiring and caring. Parker Smith, community impact coordinator for Lee County Human and Veteran Services in Fort Myers, Florida, was mentored by Johnson while he completed his master’s degree in sociology in 2021 at Ole Miss.

“She was my biggest supporter during my thesis research on domestic/intimate partner violence,” Smith said. “She knew from her own research the mental strain of researching violence, and she was sympathetic and wanted me to take care of myself during that process. She humanized a side of academia that, at times, I felt was harsh, uncaring and possibly not for me.

“The University of Mississippi as an institution has not only lost an amazing scholar, but current and future sociology students have also lost an amazing and caring mentor. I will always be able to draw my successes back to her.”

### Follow us on social



### Campus Briefs

#### Donations Sought for 25th Annual Books and Bears Program

OXFORD, Miss. – The University of Mississippi is asking the community to help spread a little joy this holiday season by donating to the 25th annual Books and Bears program. Donations such as toys, books, dolls, bicycles and other children’s play items are being accepted through Dec. 14. All donations will be collected and sorted

[Read the story ...](#)

[More Posts from this Category](#)

#### Thank You To Our Donors

##### Mayo Lab to Help Combat Substance Misuse, Mental Health Issues

OXFORD, Miss. – Thomas Hayes Mayo, a 21-year-old University of Mississippi student, loved his friends and college life. Described as “a great friend that lit up every room he entered” by fellow students, he died April 14, 2022, from fentanyl poisoning. “Thomas always wore a smile and appeared full of endless joy,” said his dad,

[Read the story ...](#)

[More Posts from this Category](#)

### Ole Miss In the News

#### Clarion-Ledger: New Essay Collection Tells the Story of Meredith’s Enrollment

Essays celebrate 60th anniversary of James Meredith’s enrollment at University of Mississippi By Lauren Rhoades Oct. 1 marks the 60th anniversary of James Meredith’s 1962 enrollment at the University of Mississippi as the school’s first African-American student. “James Meredith: Breaking the Barrier,” a

Keeri Jones, who graduated in 2020 with a bachelor's degree in psychology and sociology, took Johnson's sociology of religion course.

"It was really evident that Dr. Johnson really enjoyed what she did," Jones said. "I always admired her ability to provide both encouragement and correction, all in the same sentence. She was definitely unwilling to let her students be misinformed about something."

"Dr. Johnson was an amazing person all around, and she will truly be missed."

Jones' friend Stephanie Poiroux, who received her master's in sociology in 2021, joked that Johnson was her "professor mom."



Willa Johnson

"She believed in me when I could not believe in myself," Poiroux said. "Dr. Johnson helped me see how academia and research could improve people's lives in just the connections we form with those around us."

"She inspired in me the desire to become a professor one day, and if I could be even half the scholar she was, that would be enough."

Johnson received a Master of Divinity in biblical history from Boston University. At Vanderbilt University, she became the second Black woman in the U.S. to earn a doctorate in Hebrew Bible.

She was a postdoctoral research fellow at the International Institute for Holocaust Studies in Jerusalem and the Cummings Foundation Fellow at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

Over the course of her career, she received accolades from the university and beyond. In 2017, she was honored with the **Institute of Higher Learning's Excellence in Diversity Award**. The award was in recognition of Johnson's work to create an inclusive and supportive campus environment.

Authoring "Through an Artist's Eyes: The Dehumanization and Racialization of Jews and Political Dissidents During the Third Reich" (Routledge Press, 2021), garnered Johnson an invitation to give the keynote address for the 2022 International Holocaust Remembrance Day at the University of Colorado.

In 2021, she **received the Lift Every Voice Award** from the Black Faculty and Staff Organization at the university, in partnership with the Center for Inclusion and Cross Cultural Engagement. The designation was a result of her efforts to go above and beyond in the areas of diversity, equity and inclusion.

Specifically, the Lift Every Voice Award recognized Johnson's willingness to help fix students' problems. She would often buy books for students and encouraged her colleagues to find a way to assist students who couldn't afford textbooks or hadn't received financial aid payments.

Charles Ross, acting chair and professor of history and African American studies at the university, presented the Lift Every Voice Award to Johnson. He said she was a "true holistic scholar" who bettered the lives of her students, colleagues and our society.

"One of her greatest strengths was challenging students around the issues of diversity," Ross said. "She asked them what they could do to improve these issues and how they could make the university and the world better."

"Probably one of the worst things that you could tell Dr. Willa Johnson was that something was difficult or too hard. She always felt like there was a way you could look at a problem and find a solution. She was a person of immense confidence and welcomed challenges. That's the kind of DNA you need to have to deal with many of the complex problems and barriers surrounding diversity. So, she was perfect in that role – it was a part of her natural makeup."

MJ Shappley, a 2020 master's graduate in sociology, fondly remembers the way Johnson would challenge the status quo.

"She not only asked you to question why society was the way it was, but also how it can be changed," Shappley said. "She taught me the importance of slowing down and being intentional with my thoughts, words and actions."

"She cherished those around her, and I was extremely lucky to be in her life."

Dellinger said that Johnson was a "renaissance woman" who was an expert in many disciplines, fluent in multiple languages and even a painter.

"(Johnson) was also a kind and generous human being showering graduate students, colleagues and friends with baked goods and special meals to celebrate their accomplishments or help them in their

collection of essays edited by UM professor of journalism Kathleen Wickham, honors this historic milestone with

[Read the story ...](#)

[More Posts from this Category](#)

time of need," Dellinger said. "We have lost a giant – a brave, compassionate and passionate advocate for change."

Johnson is survived by her husband, Kirk Johnson, associate professor of sociology and African American studies; daughter, Olivia; her sister, Patricia; her brothers, Alan (and wife, Melissa) and Philip (and wife, Stephanie); and numerous nephews, nieces and extended family members.

Memorial contributions may be made in Johnson's name to the [American Joint Distribution Committee](#).

 FILED UNDER: [COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS, NEWS RELEASES](#)

---

[Return to top of page](#)

Copyright © 2022 · [The University of Mississippi](#)

---