

ON-CAMPUS POLLING PLACE AT PRAIRIE VIEW A&M UNIVERSITY

Campus story by Emma Strother, based on an interview with Andrew Goodman Ambassador Evan Gross and the Honorable Frank Jackson, former Mayor of Prairie View

CASE STUDY

Prairie View A&M University is the second oldest public institution in Texas, located 40 miles northwest of Houston. An average of 8,250 students attend the HBCU annually, with more than 50% of undergraduates living on campus. The university has been internationally recognized for excellence in Agricultural Research, Architecture, Biology, Business, Education, Engineering, Juvenile Justice, and Nursing.¹ Closer to home, it plays an important role in the history and daily life of Waller County and the City of Prairie View, population 5,576.²

Prairie View A&M has a rich history of voting rights advocacy, inextricably linked to racial justice, that long predates its connection to The Andrew Goodman Foundation. In 1876, the university was established in the Texas Legislature by state Rep. William Holland and state Sen. Matthew Gaines, both of whose mothers were enslaved.³ It opened on the former Alta Vista plantation, where hundreds of Black people were enslaved, and where students still attend classes today. When Prairie View A&M was founded, the surrounding community was majority African American. Yet white people, including the Ku Klux Klan and the White Man's Party systematically used violence, terror, poll taxes, and other intimidation tactics including segregationist legislation to disenfranchise Black residents of Prairie View.⁴

After the ratification of the 26th Amendment lowered the U.S. voting age to 18 and outlawed age discrimination in access to the ballot, white Waller County officials forced Black students to fill out intrusive questionnaires attempting to delegitimize their residency before registering to vote where they lived. The ensuing lawsuit made its way to the Supreme Court in

¹ FACTS ABOUT PVAMU." Recruitment, 19 Aug. 2020, <https://www.pvamu.edu/recruitment/facts-about-pvamu/>.

² Alley, Samir. "City of Prairie View, TX." Prairie View Visitors, <https://www.prairieviewtexas.gov/visitors/index.php>.

³ Ura, Alexa. "Texas' Oldest Black University Was Built on a Former Plantation. Its Students Still Fight a Legacy of Voter Suppression." The Texas Tribune, The Texas Tribune, 25 Feb. 2021, <https://www.texastribune.org/2021/02/25/waller-county-texas-voter-suppression/>.

⁴ Ibid.

1979, where the questionnaire was confirmed unconstitutional.⁵ In the 1980s and again in the early 2000s, federal intervention stopped the Prairie View A&M campus from being gerrymandered to break the small student body into multiple precincts. In 1992, more than a dozen students were baselessly accused of voter fraud by the county district attorney, who dropped the charges due to student protest and national attention. In 2004, multiple students at Prairie View were arrested and indicted simply for voting where they were registered to vote.⁶

In 2013, Prairie View A&M finally secured an election day polling site on campus after decades of student and community-led advocacy. In a city that lacks public transportation, where most students do not own cars, the on-campus polling site was crucial to voter accessibility. Yet in 2018, racially discriminatory policies limited early voting at the site, which served predominantly Black voters. Student leaders organized volunteer carpools to a polling location 2.5 miles from campus one way, and the university chartered private transportation at its own expense to help fill the gap. Students filed a lawsuit against the county with the help of the NAACP Legal Defense & Education Fund, and entered an arduous and prolonged fight for the same early voting hours as other precincts. At this time, Yael Bromberg, Special Counsel & Strategic Advisor at The Andrew Goodman Foundation, visited Prairie View and met with Mayor Jackson. Yael and Annabel Park filmed an interview with six students, on their voting rights advocacy, the upcoming elections, and their views on democracy. The students' fight is ongoing today.⁷

Evan Gross became the first Andrew Goodman Ambassador at Prairie View A&M in January 2021.⁸ She is keenly aware of her campus' history, brings passion and organizing savvy to the current fight for voting rights, and cares deeply about passing on practical tools and knowledge to the next generation of student advocates. "Our history is unique in a lot of ways, and it's one of the first things you learn freshman year," she reflected. "For example, we don't walk on the grass out of respect because enslaved people are buried in unmarked graves on the school grounds." Evan's political and civic activism began after the 2016 presidential election, and she joined the fight for fair early voting hours in 2018. Much of her advocacy has been working with key stakeholders at the university and in the surrounding community to advance youth voter access.

Prairie View A&M was hit hard by the pandemic. Students lost close family and friends to Covid-19. The grief continues, alongside economic uncertainty. As election officials across the country seek to justify closing precincts by citing lower levels of in-person voting due to the pandemic, students at Prairie View continue the fight. Evan's tactic is to plan ahead and then meet students where they are. She often tells her peers, "help out now, because we don't know what's going to happen later." She spends a lot of time talking to students about registration, voting, and civic engagement more broadly. She shared, "the history of voting rights activism here is a reminder of our potential."

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ "Evan Gross." Andrew Goodman Foundation, <https://andrewgoodman.org/people-list/evan-gross/>.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

To find other case studies, visit [Securing On-Campus Polling Places: Case Studies from the Andrew Goodman Network](#). To learn how to bring a polling place to campus, visit [Securing On-Campus Polling Places: A Toolkit](#).