

Acceptance speech by Gail Austin
2010 Iris Marion Young Award recipient

Thank you John for that kind introduction. I am truly humbled by it. I don't see John as often as I would like. So I was very surprised to learn that John had nominated me for the Iris Marion Young award. On that rare occasion that do I run into John, we generally engage in spirited discussion about the political issues of the day. I must say that John keeps me on my toes. I usually walk away from our discussions feeling like I had lost the debate. So when the award committee asked me to select someone to introduce me, I thought the best revenge was to have John make the introduction. Like I warned him, no good deed goes unpunished. I also want to thank my family and friends for attending today's ceremonies. I want to especially thank my niece Naya and my nephew Philmore who I use to drag to demonstrations and protests when they were just little kids, whether they were in Pittsburgh or Washington, DC.

I am honored to have been selected for this year's Iris Marion Young award, although I am not quite sure why I was selected. Iris Marion Young was a woman and scholar of singular accomplishment. She is considered one of the most important political philosophers of the past quarter-century. Known for her fierce commitment to social justice and her grassroots political activity on causes such as women's rights, workers rights, and Africa debt relief, Young was praised for being as comfortable working on the street as she was writing, having written several books on gender, inclusion and democracy.

My accomplishments, if any, have been a collective achievement. Over the better part of 40 years, I have played a small role along with so many others, addressing issues of peace and justice. I began as a student activist in the late 60's, fighting to increase the number of black students who attended the University of Pittsburgh. We were inspired by lectures of two very important men who visited the campus at that time: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who spoke to an over flow crowd at the William Pitt Union and Stokely Carmichael (who later became known as Kwame Ture). I'll never forget Stokely's fiery speech on the steps of the Union challenging us to act. So we organized to confront the University about the selective admission practices that prevented black and other minority students from enrolling in Pitt. For example, when I graduated from Pitt in 1968, there were only 4 other Black students in my class. A groundswell of student action all over the country successfully forced universities and colleges to re-examine their policies and open their doors to black and other minority students.

The success of the student movement reminds me of the words of Frederick Douglas, the great abolitionist:

"Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and these will continue till they are resisted. . . ."

And so from that experience as a student activist, I learned that resistance and dissent can indeed bring about positive change.

In the 1980s, it was US foreign policy in South Africa that caught the attention of the campus. Not since the opposition to the Vietnam War, sparked in part by Dr. King's speech, had the campus been so unified around a foreign policy issue. Under the name of the Pitt Divestment Committee, we joined the Free South Africa Movement, and called for the disinvestment of Pitt pension funds from corporations that conducted business with the South African apartheid government. Unlike the student activist movement, the desired result required a sustained and lengthy protest. As a result of the international struggle, along with the will of the South African people, apartheid was eventually dismantled. Sylvia Hill, one of the founders of the Free South Africa Movement, reminds us that sustained protest allows us to express public opposition instead of private disdain for US foreign policy.

And so I along with some of the people I have invited today, are waging a sustained weekly protest against US foreign policy in the Middle East calling for the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan and Iraq where more than a million Iraqis have died, 5000 American soldiers, at a cost of nearly one trillion dollars. Our group, *Black Voices for Peace* holds a demonstration on the corner of Highland and Penn Avenues every Saturday to protest the Middle East wars. We started in 2003 during the run up to the war and we continue to this day, committed to a sustained protest until the US withdraws its troops from Afghanistan and Iraq, hopefully freeing up precious dollars that would be better spent on affordable housing, education, childcare and healthcare for all Americans.

I'm often asked why we choose to show dissent in this way. I answer by referring again to Sylvia Hill's argument: Public, collective dissent works.

In closing I would again like to quote Frederick Douglas who said:

"If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, yet deprecate agitation, are people who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning. It is not light that we need, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake." I am sure that Iris Marion Young would agree. Thank you again for this wonderful recognition.