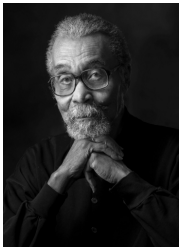


James Quincy Denton



James Quincy Denton, born on April 16, 1929, died peacefully on July 14, 2019. He was a man of many firsts including being the first black student to receive an undergraduate degree at California Institute of Technology and being the first black professor at Amherst College. In this way, he led the way for minority students to consider higher education and careers in academia.

Jim was born in the home of his great-aunt in Lincoln, Nebraska. He was the middle of 3 children born to Lorraine Cook Denton and Cecil Denton. The family moved to Santa Barbara, California soon after his birth. His mother worked as a teacher to support the family, and his father was hospitalized with congestive heart failure for much of Jim's life. Growing up, the three siblings were close but were fiercely competitive with one another. Each played 3 instruments and did extremely well in school. James played piano, organ and French horn. He became the church organist at All Saints Episcopal in Montecito while still in high school. While in college, he played French horn for the Pasadena Symphony.

Jim attended Cal Tech for his undergraduate education. Although he was awarded full academic scholarship, the school informed him just prior to matriculation that he would not be allowed to live on campus. He quickly secured a job exchanging for room and board for working nights at a local mortuary (a job that he later stated took a long time for a teenager to get used to). He graduated phi beta kappa with a degree in chemistry in 1951.

After college, Jim worked for the Jet Propulsion Laboratory until he was drafted into the army during the Korean war. He completed boot camp and was stationed at the Chemical Center in Maryland. Jim made several lifelong friends during his tenure in the military, and it was there that he met his first wife, Janice. The two were married in 1959 and began graduate studies together at the University of Oregon. On May 1, 1961, they welcomed their first child, Jennifer Elaine, while still living in Eugene, Oregon.

The family moved to Palo Alto, California where Jim completed his post-doctorate work at Stanford University and worked at Sylvania. In 1963 Duane Bailey, a graduate school friend, approached him about coming to Amherst College to join Duane in the Math Department. Neither Jim nor his family had ever been to Massachusetts. Nevertheless, he was interviewed and became the first black professor at Amherst College when he was hired (in a bold move by then president Calvin Plimpton). Given the tension in race relations at the time, the family used the Green Book and AAA to guide their drive across the country to Massachusetts. He began teaching in the fall of 1964.

His new position represented a significant change from his previous years of research. Nevertheless, he was tenure tracked within his first 3 years at the college and thus, armed with tenure and full professorship, teaching evolved into his lifelong profession. While teaching might not have been an obvious choice for a quiet and relatively introverted person, he was following an example set by his grandfather (a high school principal) and his mother. He had found his true métier as a member of the math department at Amherst College, and he spent a great deal of time during his career devising new ways to connect students to mathematics (not always an easy task) and developing close and lasting mentoring relationships with his advisees. He also mentored outside of the Amherst College community both informally and more formally as a participant in a Youth Mentoring Program at MIT established to support and encourage minority and underrepresented high school students in their pursuit of careers in math and science. Jim was also a member of the initial committee for the creation of Hampshire College. In addition to this, he was on the boards of the ABC House and of the Amherst Montessori School. Summers and sabbaticals were spent administering grant funding for the National Science Foundation, working and teaching at Stanford University in biostatistics and teaching at Harvey Mudd University.

Jim came together with his second wife, Jean Thompson, in 1978. Their son, Daniel Thompson Denton was born on January 29, 1982. A deeply spiritual person, Jim was an early practitioner of transcendental meditation. He was also a follower of Sati Sai Baba and traveled several times to Sai Baba's ashram in Puta Parti India. Jim was a long-term member of the Da Camera Singers with participation that spanned many decades. He made many friendships within this group, and his participation fostered a continuing connection to his passion for music, especially early classical music. Additional passions for Jim included hiking, rock climbing, squash, tennis, jogging, chess, cars, stereo systems, and health food. He pursued each of these with a passion and in-depth understanding that was characteristic of him. (He actually built stereo systems, car transmissions, organs and harpsichords at various times in his life rather than simply enjoying the benefits of the finished products.) He was also well known for his preference of walking over driving whenever possible. As one Amherst resident was known to remark: 'Man, you is the walkin'est man I've ever seen!' These characteristics, along with his cool, even, and analytical temperament and his endlessly entertaining camping stories, will be dearly missed by his family.

He is survived by his wife, Jean Thompson-Denton, his former wife Janice Denton, his son Daniel Thompson-Denton, his daughter Jennifer Denton, his stepson Cheong-Tseng Eng, his grandson Jaden-James Alexander Denton and his

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James Denton Obituary: James Denton's Obituary by the Daily Hampshire Gazette.

nephew Donald Deroy Primous. Services will be held at 12:30pm on September 21, 2019 at Johnson Chapel.

Donations in lieu of flowers can be made to the ACLU or the Southern Initiative Algebra Project.

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