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## 2013 "Honoring a Pioneer: USM Pays Homage to Civil Rights Activist Peggy Jean Connor" (Hattiesburg American)

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# Honoring a pioneer: USM pays homage to civil rights activist Peggy Jean Connor

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Civil rights activist Peggy Jean Connor, left, talks with Kalina, 7, and J.T., 9, Kaufmann on Thursday during a ceremony honoring her accomplishments at Thad Cochran Center. / Bryant Hawkins/Hattiesburg American

Written by [Ed Kemp](#)  
American Staff Writer

Gay rights activists have repeatedly compared the cause of same-sex marriage with the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

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Foot soldier Peggy Jean Connor is having none of it.

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"I don't think folks' homes are being bugged in the gay rights movement," said the civil rights pioneer, now 80 years old.

"I just can't see it that way. We (black people) were facing death

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every day, you might say. I don't see how it can be compared."

The University of Southern Mississippi paid homage to Connor, a former state executive secretary of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), at a Thursday afternoon meeting of the Committee on Services and Resources for Women.

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The CSRW — formed in 1984 as an interdisciplinary group of Southern Miss faculty and staff focused on women's issues — named its research grant the Peggy Connor Research Award.

Karen Wightman, a doctoral student in mass communication and journalism, received one of the three newly-coined Peggy Connor awards that gives up to \$1,000 to faculty, staff and student pursuing women-related research.

Wightman's research explores how female characters either conform to or defy gender stereotypes on ABC Family TV shows. She said she likes the award's new name.

"I think it's a definitely good thing any time that kind of activism, that kind of chutzpah, is noted," she said.

CSRW co-chair Nicolle Jordan, an associate English professor, said the decision to name the award was, in part, about historical literacy.

"People are going to ask, 'Who is Peggy Jean Connor?' and I'm going to bet that more people don't know about her than do," Jordan said. "Once the question is asked, a lot of the work is done."

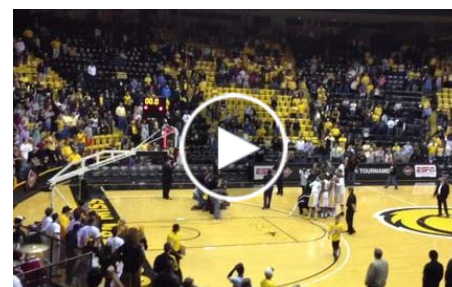
The funny thing is that Connor doesn't exude chutzpah. In fact, she would prefer anonymity.

"I like being a fly on the wall," she said. "I never wanted to be a person who what you would call popular."

But circumstances pushed her to the forefront of her time.

In the 1960s, Connor, a beautician, owned Jean's Beauty Shop at 510 Mobile St.

Just across the street at 507 Mobile was the headquarters for Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), a coalition of civil rights groups such as the NAACP and the Student Nonviolent



USM coach Donnie Tyndall

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Coordinate Committees (SNCC).

"I saw this action going on over there, and I was interested," she said.

Connor eventually became secretary-treasurer of COFO, and she helped found the MFDP, which attempted to challenge the legitimacy of Mississippi's white-only Democratic Party.

The MFDP eventually sent Connor with 67 other delegates to the 1964 Democratic convention in the face of harsh opposition.

Connor's MFDP co-founders Victoria Gray Adams and J.C. Fairley have since died, along with many other foot soldiers.

But though the movement is now full of gray heads, the problems it fought haven't gone away, according to Connor.

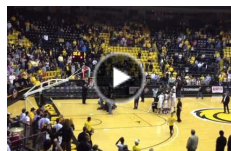
She calls attempts to implement voter identification, for instance, a return to the poll tax.

"It's better in a sense because of the laws," said Connor of the relations between blacks and whites, but added, "People's hearts haven't changed. We're not nearly where we should be, I don't think."

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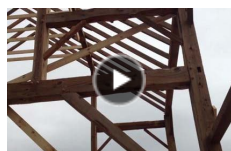
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