

Ota Benga: Thank you for Teaching Me Tolerance
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ABSTRACT

The story of the life of Ota Benga in Lynchburg, Virginia was assigned to me as an independent study during my junior year at Lynchburg College. Research was conducted from 1994 – 1996 through personal correspondence with living witnesses and intensive investigation of vintage newspaper articles. These combined efforts revealed the timeline of events that led to Ota Benga's arrival in Lynchburg. Upon completion of the project, Lynchburg College and the Jones Memorial Library in Lynchburg were given copies of my thesis. Additionally, my investigation unraveled the mystery of Ota Benga's burial place, which resulted in the restoration of the White Rock Hill Cemetery.

Abstrait

L'histoire de la vie d'Ota Benga à Lynchburg, la Virginie m'a été assignée comme étude indépendante pendant mon année junior à l'université de Lynchburg. La recherche a été conduite de 1994 - 1996 par la correspondance personnelle avec les témoins vivants et la recherche intensive sur des articles de journal de cru. Ces efforts combinés ont indiqué la chronologie des événements que cela a menés à l'arrivée d'Ota Benga à Lynchburg. Sur l'accomplissement du projet, l'université de Lynchburg et la bibliothèque commémorative de Jones à Lynchburg ont été données des copies de ma thèse. En plus, ma recherche s'est démêlée le mystère de l'endroit d'enterrement d'Ota Benga, qui a eu comme conséquence la restauration du cimetière blanc de colline de roche.

Ota Benga was a man just like you and me. .He was brought to America in 1904 by S.P. Verner. He was put on display in the Bronx Zoo-as an exhibit. This is the story of Ota Benga's life in Lynchburg, Virginia in the years following his degradation. And, this is the story of what he taught me.

For my friend
Mr. Chauncey E. Spencer, Sr.
I, for one, know "Who is Chauncey Spencer?"

“Don't open that can of worms,” was the initial response I received in regard to the story of Ota Benga and the White Rock Hill Cemetery. It was this negative comment that set the tone for my thorough investigation into Ota Benga's life in Lynchburg, Virginia.

I attended Lynchburg College from 1993, graduating in 1996. I was assigned an

independent study project in the fall of 1993. My professor, Dr. Ed Polloway, suggested I read a three page article entitled, "The Man and Monkey Show" (NY Newsday, August 31, 1992) to see if I would be interested in further investigation. Dr. Polloway's simple instructions, "Find out if this is true," gave me little direction, but sparked my curiosity. The Newsday article described a pygmy brought to the United States by a missionary by the name of Dr. Samuel Phillips Verner. The most unbelievable part of the article described the "show." The 'man and monkey show' was the description given to the period of time that a human being, Ota Benga, spent as an exhibit in the Bronx Zoo. An exhibit, not a visitor. Ota Benga was placed on display in the prominent Bronx Zoo in New York. People gawked at him as an oddity. They laughed and then were frightened when bones were purposefully thrown about the man's cage. He was made to share a habitat with an orangutan, an awkward attempt at socialization for a man and an animal. The Bronx too maintains a record of unsurpassed attendance at the pygmy exhibit. While I wanted the article to be a hoax, it was printed recently and by a reputable source. When the Newsday mentioned that Ota Benga had eventually settled in Lynchburg, Virginia I began to note the connection to the College. The article about the life of Ota Benga was just so unbelievable, and no one in Lynchburg was talking about "the man and monkey show." The article only told half of the story, however I had to find out the other half by myself. No one in Lynchburg was addressing Ota Benga because he was simply forgotten about. Or, perhaps the townspeople were torn between the feelings of pride and guilt. Were they proud for bringing Ota Benga to a place he would call home, but feeling guilty for the way they had forgotten about him? They had forgotten about the man who provided guidance to young children, who brought smiles to bus riders, and who had displayed wisdom beyond his years to the most prominent Lynchburg families of the 1910's and 1920's. My assignment in the fall of 1993 was three-fold: First, find out if the story was true and second, if it was true, find out where Ota Benga was buried. Finally, obtain first hand accounts of Ota Benga's life in Lynchburg. I was only 19, and I was intimidated. Initially, I could not understand what Ota Benga's life had to do with human

rights and my course of study, special education and psychology. I honestly did not understand the impact Ota Benga had had, and continues to have, on so many people. There were many people who could recall the *era* of Ota Benga, but one can only guess the reasons why his grave and the remains of hundreds of other human beings were left to the elements, unattended. My initial reaction of disbelief was soon coupled with a growing resentment. I simply could not comprehend that a person's basic human rights had been violated so severely- in life and in death. Hence, the title of my original report, "Ota Benga: Survival in Life and in Death."

You must first understand that my research was conducted prior to the age of the Internet and cell phones. No one I knew at Lynchburg College in 1992-1996 had a cell phone. The Internet was not accessible from our computers. I do not believe that Internet access was available anywhere on campus. I independently conducted my research by contacting and writing to people who I assumed knew about Ota Benga or who had connections to his past. I started my research by reading the book by Phillips Verner Bradford and Harvey Blume entitled, Ota Benga: the Pygmy in the Zoo (Bradford, 1992). I used the references listed in this book to aid my research. I used the inter-library computer system at the Lynchburg College library to help me locate, copy, and borrow New York Times articles, beginning in 1906. These articles and copies were sent to me over a period of ten weeks. When I think about that now, it almost seems foreign in the current age of instant information access and e-mail. I also wrote to Mr. Phillips Bradford, hoping that he still lived at the address listed in his book. Mr. Bradford wrote back after three months, apologizing for being on an extended vacation and not responding sooner. Mr. Bradford's letter provided many missing details about Ota Benga's journey to Virginia. I also contacted the Bronx Zoo by telephone. I spoke with the curator, who at first did not recall the story of Ota Benga. After some prodding, he told me that he could research the archives of the Bronx Zoo to determine if Ota Benga had indeed resided there. Within a few days, I received a copy of an article printed in the Zoological Bulletin. At a time when my

friends were receiving mail from friends and family, I was thrilled to see a small envelope from the Bronx Zoo in my mailbox! I kept Dr. Polloway informed of my research, but I honestly do not think he realized the extent to which I had “opened a can of worms” that would span an entire school year and encompass every minute of my free time. I had assembled a folder, a binder, a box, and finally several stacks of clippings, copies, and correspondence. I was astonished to find so many articles that had been written 70 years ago about Ota Benga in the archives of large and well-used libraries. However, there were very few *current* articles. The ones I did find were in reference to the Bradford and Blume book, Ota Benga: The Pygmy in the Zoo. (Bradford, 1992). It was through this book that I came to know Mr. Chauncey Spencer as a close childhood friend of Ota Benga.

I was thrilled to find Mr. Chauncey Spencer alive and well and still living in Lynchburg. It was with tremendous trepidation that I contacted him. I did not know if he would be available to speak to me or if he would be able to receive visitors. Mr. Spencer was a very robust and jovial man at age 89 in 1994. Mrs. Ann Spencer answered the phone when I initially called to inquire about Mr. Spencer. Chauncey's wife and his mother, the famous poet Anne Spencer, were both named Anne. Chauncey called them his "two Anns." Mr. and Mrs. Chauncey Spencer lived at 1306 Pierce Street, directly across from the Anne Spencer House. Chauncey and Ann preserved the late Anne Spencer's home making it a historic site and museum. Mrs. Spencer welcomed me and we made arrangements for the visit on March 24, 1994.

It was on this day that I met the most famous man I had ever met. Not only was Chauncey Spencer a childhood friend of Ota Benga, he had grown up in wealthy surroundings at a time when wealth was rare among African American families in 1910 in Lynchburg. His mother was Anne Spencer! Chauncey Spencer's lifetime accomplishments are many and varied. He literally soared as a Tuskegee Airman! He was also a Police Commissioner in San

Bernardino, California and a Deputy Administrator for the city of Highland Park, Michigan. *But, more importantly to me, he was my friend.* He was genuinely interested in me and my efforts. Prior to turning on my tape recorder, Chauncey and his wife shared many personal stories with me. We spent quality time together. Chauncey and Anne were so touched by my interest in human rights and equality that Mrs. Ann Spencer removed a frame from her wall, a copy of a poem that she and her husband had written together, and presented it to me as a gift. The poem is their love story. I will always cherish their gift of friendship.

Chauncey Spencer referred to Ota Benga as “Otto Bingo.” He told me that this was the name that had been given to him by the children in Lynchburg, their mispronunciation of his real name. I have attached a written copy of my interview with Chauncey Spencer, transcribed from my original copy of the taped interview, in order to share all of the information I have pertaining to Ota Benga's life in Lynchburg. Chauncey shared his personal recollection of Ota Benga's life from his arrival in Lynchburg to his death in 1916. Chauncey recalled Ota Benga's death as a sad event in his childhood. The suicide was explained to him as a man's desperate attempt to free his spirit in order to return to his homeland, Africa.

After my interview with Chauncey Spencer. I was determined to conclude my project with the location and preservation of Ota Benga's final resting place. Chauncey gave me basic directions to his gravesite, and after several attempts I located the Hutcherson Early Learning Center that he had described. However, I was not able to locate any graves or boundary markers of a graveyard. After a thorough search, I found a few broken headstones in tall grass near the Center parking lot. My first thought was, “this cannot be right.” It was. I vividly remember being dumbstruck with the idea that human beings had been forgotten about, dismissed, and thereby erased from memory. Many of the graves had been vandalized. Some had sunk and the remains distributed by nature. It was an impossibility to identify any names, let alone find an

unmarked grave that looked like it could belong to Ota Benga. I guess what I expected to find was a small graveyard, meticulously cared for, with identified graves and a few unmarked graves. I never expected to find an entire generation of Lynchburg citizens in a jungle of trash and twisted underbrush. To me, this situation was degrading and unacceptable. My mission was clear.

I made an appointment to meet with the president of the local chapter of the NAACP, Junius Haskins. Mr. Haskins was also a member of the Lynchburg city council. We discussed the entire story of Ota Benga, particularly my discovery of the condition of the White Rock Hill Cemetery. We spoke for three hours. Mr. Haskins told me that he was aware of the condition of the graveyard, but told me with forceful sincerity, "Do not open that can of worms." He actually referred to the White Rock Hill Cemetery as a "Pandora's Box." I remembered the story of Pandora's Box, but I felt compelled to ignore the warning. I decided to take the lead and raise the lid, regardless of the consequences. Mr. Haskins proudly told me that a group of "at-risk" students had cleaned up the graveyard in the early 1980's. However, since that time, all of the vegetation had been allowed to grow unchecked. Mr. Haskins admitted to me that he had never been to the White Rock Hill Cemetery. I took his advice and immediately contacted Reverend Jean Page, the minister of the Jackson Street United Methodist Church, which held the deed to the property. I contacted Reverend Page who told me that the church did not have a graveyard. However, after I told her that I had spoken to Mr. Haskins, she told me that the church did not have a *deed* to the graveyard, but it could be theirs, although it could not be legally proven. After a review of the property ownership with the city of Lynchburg, Rev. Page offered me the opportunity to speak at the next church service. I was encouraged. I spoke to the primarily African-American congregation the very next Sunday. The congregation sat quietly as I spoke about not only Ota Benga, but the many graves that surely included some of their very own ancestors. I urged the congregation to bond and assume ownership of the graveyard. I could not

understand why the congregation seemed emotionless. I never heard from the church or any member of the congregation. I can only hope that the members of the church have been involved in the restoration efforts. Lynchburg's heritage is a community responsibility.

After graduating from Lynchburg College in May of 1996. I returned to Delaware. Although I had completed the requirements of the independent study, I was not satisfied. I felt that the project was incomplete. Information had been gathered and presented but the many injustices remained.

I have shared the story of Ota Benga with many of my students and colleagues since 1996. Not one has ever heard the story. I pursued my teaching career in South Carolina, but Ota Benga never left my heart. I continued to feel personally responsible for the condition of the graveyard. I had been unable to generate sympathy, let alone the empathy which would be required to make things right. I felt defeated.

On January 24, 2001, I received a short, but very important, letter from Dr. Edward Polloway at Lynchburg College. He had enclosed a copy of a library search record, which listed my publication, "Ota Benga: one man's survival in life and in death." He wrote on the bottom, "Katie, I thought you'd like to see this. LC is involved in a partnership that is, among other things, cleaning up the White Rock Hill Cemetery. Folks are expected to learn more about Ota Benga. Hope all is well — Ed Polloway." I had never heard from anyone in Lynchburg in regard to Ota Benga before this letter. In effect, he was telling me that my story of Ota Benga was now part of the LC student curriculum. The ten seconds that Dr. Polloway took to write the note changed my life. What I had hoped for was coming true. I could imagine students of all races and ages working long and hard hours to complete a single task. To my delight my vision was right on target.

Ms. Pat Price of Lynchburg College contacted me regarding the copying and distribution of my paper. I gladly gave her permission to use my work so that students could further understand Ota Benga's journey to Lynchburg, Virginia. Ms. Price and I spoke on many occasions regarding the progress of the White Rock Hill Cemetery, and I greatly appreciate her thoughtfulness to keep me informed of the progress being made by the students and community. While I couldn't be at the cemetery in person to see the progress, I was always with the volunteers in my heart. The community had finally come together.

Lynchburg College invited me to hear Mr. Dibinga wa Said speak on September 18-19, 2005. It was my honor to meet him at the home of Mrs. Anne Van de Graf in Lynchburg, Virginia. Dr. Dibinga and I shared three hours of one-on-one conversation about Ota Benga and the pygmies' plight. It was an honor I will always cherish. Dr. Dibinga encouraged me to continue my pursuit of equality for all men. He considered my 1994 research to be an integral part of the Lynchburg College and White Rock Hill community partnership and expressed his appreciation for my efforts. At times during our conversation, he was moved to tears and often speechless. Dr. Dibinga spoke to a full audience at Lynchburg College on the evening of September 19, 2005. He began his discussion by first asking me to stand and be recognized. I was honored and quite proud as he introduced me as the "project starter."

In addition to my invitation to meet Dr. Dibinga, Pat Price generously took me the "new and improved" White Rock Hill Cemetery. I felt like I was in a movie when she led me to a small hillside and said, "close your eyes." I was moved to tears when I saw the approximately 600 restored gravesites. The area was a beautiful resting place of peace. It was a symbol of dedication and patience - a representation of commitment and community. What I saw on that fall day cannot be described in words. Ms. Price showed me a place that was now Heaven on Earth. We meandered through family plots and benches that had been placed at the graveyard. Then she led

me a place that is believed to be the resting place of Ota Benga. The site is marked with a stone pot, exactly what Chauncey Spencer described to me. I believe that it must have been divine intervention which kept the pot in place to mark the spot for so many years. The fast-growing shrubs and years of growth had been beneficial after all. I am sure that I will never see another transformation to equal that of the White Rock Hill Cemetery. Initially, no one had been aware that the cemetery was so large. I was amazed that a place in such disrepair could be brought back to glory. It was my honor to walk the paths created by Lynchburg College students and community members and to see, for the first time, the resting places of the citizens of early Lynchburg, Virginia.

I greatly appreciate that Lynchburg College provided me with the opportunity to find the truth. My research and resulting story of Ota Benga was the cornerstone of my education; the turning point in my journey of equality and human rights. The friendship I developed with Chauncey Spencer is incomparable. Dr. Dibinga, Mrs. Anne Van de Graf, and Ms. Pat Price have all supported and encouraged me. Their generosity in keeping me informed and included has always been greatly appreciated.

Thank you, Mr. Phillips Verner Bradford, who wrote a lengthy personal letter to me on April 24, 1994. In the first sentence, he asked me to send his regards to Mr. Chauncey Spencer, whom he felt certain would help me in any way. Mr. Bradford continues to support my efforts via e-mail and often sends me his grandfather's personal correspondence as I continue to study Dr. Verner's life. Mr. Bradford has been very generous in sharing his family's heritage.

Thank you, also, Dr. Peggy Pittas and Lynchburg College for the invitation to speak at the 2007 Conference at Lynchburg College, "Ota Benga, and the Empowerment of the Pygmies: An International Conference." It is my honor to have been included from the beginning to the end. I

appreciate this rare opportunity to see the completion of such a meaningful project and am humbly grateful for the years of effort that Lynchburg College has devoted to Ota Benga, both honoring his life and protecting his legacy. The efforts of Lynchburg College should be widely praised and recognized as an example of tolerance, patience, acceptance, devotion, and equality.

I live in the “small town of Walhalla, South Carolina.” I described this town, having never seen it, when I wrote my original report in the spring of 1994. I live three miles from the home where Dr. Samuel Phillips Verner resided while he was not travelling in Africa. Dr. Verner’s homestead, named Bachelor’s Retreat, is a stately example of how a wealthy family lived at the turn of the century in Walhalla, South Carolina. Mr. Samuel Phillips Verner was a very prominent figure in Walhalla in the early twentieth century. His impact was substantial. His career of land ownership, missionary efforts, newspaper editing, and educational pursuits are well documented in the state of South Carolina. Many of Dr. Verner’s original manuscripts from his travels in Africa were willed to the South Carolina Library at the University of South Carolina. However, the Walhalla newspaper, the Keowee Courier, holds no record of Dr. Verner bringing pygmies to the United States. The Oconee County Heritage Center only lists Mr. Verner as a prominent land owner living at Bachelor's Retreat. Mr. Verner’s friends and colleagues in Walhalla knew him well, but not well enough to know that he “held diamonds in his hands only to walk away with quartz.” (Bradford, 1992) In effect, Dr. Verner had the power to make a difference in so many ways. He educated and led many people. He positively transformed the lives of many human beings. However, there was one who always wanted to go back to his family in Africa. There was one who took his own life after years of heartbreaking loneliness. One person can make a difference, and one person can affect many lives, both positively and negatively. It is a choice we all make every day. At the end of your life's journey, will you walk away with diamonds or quartz?

Ten years after Ota Benga's death, in 1926, Dr. Verner led a prayer meeting in Ota Benga's honor at a Presbyterian Church in Walhalla. Upon completing the sermon, "his eyes reddened, his voice broke down, and S. P. Verner cried." (Bradford, 1992)

He missed his friend. We all miss Ota Benga.

May his spirit be at peace in his homeland, Africa

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