

John Lewis Remembrance

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The Tulane School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine community was saddened today to learn of the passing of Congressman John Lewis. A towering civil rights leader known as the “conscience of the Congress,” Rep. Lewis was honored by Tulane University at the 2019 commencement ceremony as an honorary doctor of humane letters.

Dean Thomas LaVeist had a more personal memory of Rep. Lewis. In 2008 he attended a conference on health disparities held by the Congressional Black Caucus. It was held in St. Croix and hosted by Rep. Donna Christiansen who represented the U.S. Virgin Islands at the time. When the closing keynote speaker was delayed, Dean LaVeist, who was then faculty at another University, was asked to step in.

“I didn’t even have the right clothes for giving a speech,” LaVeist recalls. “I gave that speech extemporaneously, dressed in a t-shirt, shorts, and flip flops.”

After the speech, Congressman Lewis approached him. “Pause for a moment and think about that,” says LaVeist. “Congressman Lewis approached *me*.”

The representative congratulated LaVeist and the two spoke for more than thirty minutes, during which time they discovered they had been members of the same two fraternities – Phi Beta Sigma and Sigma Pi Phi. “It was a great conversation,” LaVeist recalls.

Fast forward eleven years. LaVeist, now dean of the School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, had donned his robe in preparation for the graduation exercises. John Lewis was there, ready to receive his honorary degree, so LaVeist approached him.

“I introduced myself and said I’m sure you don’t remember me,” he recalls, but Lewis cut him off. “He said, ‘I met you in St. Croix.’” The dean was flabbergasted that this elder statesman, a social justice icon who’d met countless individuals in the interim between their meetings, remembered him.

“He was the most humble person,” said LaVeist. “With all that he had accomplished in life it was almost as if he was oblivious. You would never say he had a sense of self importance. He saw himself as just another human being – it was just the way he approached life.”

“I was very blessed to have met him and had two such meaningful yet everyday experiences with him. The world has lost someone truly special.”