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[Contents of Issue](#)

[Click here](#)

[Home](#)

**If You Can't Beat Them, Close Their Library:
Conley Supporters Still Keepin' On
The Substance of Truth
By Tolu Olorunda
BlackCommentator.com Columnist**

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The place: Muncie, Indiana.

The time: 2009 - ?

The case: Closing of a community library for reasons unjustified.

The concerned: Community members.

The impacted: Vulnerable children.

The protagonists: Out of touch library board members.

In unison against what is considered an unjust decision, the Friends of the Conley Library have released an official letter, which they hope explains in broader terms the implications caused by Conley's closing:

Dear Readers:

We are the Friends of Conley Library. Our letter to you is short but our story isn't. Conley Library is - was - one of the last resources our community has been able to hold onto. Unfortunately, it was officially shut down June 1st, 2009. Conley was named after a deceased community activist, Vivian Conley, and located in the Whiteley neighborhood of Muncie, Indiana.

Vivian Conley was a Woman of stature. Everywhere her name is mentioned, the personal stories that are evoked - of love, strength, support, care, and tolerance - remind us of one who sacrificed for the betterment of the community. We are compelled to recall the legacy of service that put at center the burdens of others before her personal or familial concerns.

As such, it was only fitting that the Whiteley community's only library would be named after her. When the announcement was made nearly two decades ago, no one dared question why she was being chosen for such a prestigious honor. Her lifelong struggle for peace, justice, and equality needed no introduction. When we look at Whiteley, and how steadfast it has stood through many turbulent trials and storms, we remember Vivian Conley.

In 1996, the Friends of Conley Library were informed that Conley was scheduled to be closed. To this effect, we worked with the Indiana State Legislature to find funds to purchase the building, and handed it over to the Muncie Public Library, for safekeeping.

It is for this reason that we take the current closing of Conley Library even more seriously.

The Muncie Public Library Board decided to shut it down, using the current economic woes as justification. Missing from their analysis, however, is that we were promised last year that Conley was too important, too much a community treasure, too historic, to be closed. In short, we were lied to.

With little time to act adequately, or organize effectively, our committee was still able to make enough noise before the unanimous decision rendered on May 18, 2009 ordering the closing of Conley. In spite of the time constraints we were forced to operate under, our protests generated substantive coverage within city and state media. These street protests were less about theatrics and more about a story that had to be told - of injustice and unfairness.

Following a request for anticipated savings from the closing of Conley, we received this reply: "Your request... is not enclosed. Such a record does not exist." At this, it's hard not to infer that the same Board members who voted with great confidence to take away from this community one of its last treasures might be unaware of the financial savings the closing of Conley constitutes. Yet they voted.

The Muncie Public Library Board has tried, however unsuccessfully, to explain the rationale behind Conley's closing. It was a financial decision, they said. It had nothing to do with the median income or racial class of those most affected by it. But we feel these reasons are mere excuses, meant to further mask the truth.

Residents of Whiteley are not as privileged as other Muncie citizens. A 1997 report [documented](#) Whiteley's median household income falling \$13,021 below Muncie's average, which was \$37,232. Undoubtedly, the disparity has

only worsened.

In a 2009 account detailing the anticipated expenses data, the Muncie Public Library Board concluded that it would cost a meager \$145,932 to run Conley, compared to \$383,364 (Carnegie), \$1,205,922 (Kennedy), and \$2,614,928 (Maring-Hunt) - the other Libraries in Muncie.

If \$145,932 is all it takes to keep alive the dreams of many children, for whom Conley represented a refuge, it is sad to witness the appalling indifference shown by elected Board members to our fundamental crisis.

The famous adage instructs: "Children are our future." We believe it to be irrefutably true. But we also question what future is being prepared for them, if all social structures that have hitherto kept their humanity and dignity in check are now being eliminated.

We understand that the Board members might not be aware of the significance of their decision; but we are, and so are the children.

We have decided to take matters into our hands. Our plan is to open up a new Library, modeled after Eaton Public Library, Inc., a non-profit organization founded following a similar fate. Through grants, public and private donations, charity auctions and general contributions, Eaton Public Library is maintained with an annual budget of approximately \$10,000.

This gives us hope to begin the rebuilding efforts of Conley Library. Our hope is abundant, but our finances not so.

We appeal to you, to help out in whichever ways possible. Without your assistance, this project can hardly yield the great promises we believe are imminent.

Conley Library must be reopened. The kids need it. The parents need it. The community needs it. With you, with us, and with the blessings of God, this dream would be transformed into reality. Thank you.

Sincerely yours,

Friends of the Conley Library

Below is an open letter written by Myrna Robertson, Vivian Conley's daughter and President of the Friends of Conley Library, which puts into perspective the risk factor involved in shutting down a community treasure like Conley. Walking uniformly in her mother's footsteps, Robertson is a dedicated community activist, fully invested in uprooting injustice wherever found planted. Her letter was filed June 1, 2009 - the date of Conley's closing:

Today was the closing of the Conley Library, and my spirit and heart is saddened over what the community has lost. The Friends of the Conley Library and other interested citizens tried to make the Muncie Public Library (MPL) Board understand the importance of this institution. We want you to

know that you may feel like you've won but the fight is not over.

Unfortunately, the people of this community, the political parties, the educational institutions, and the churches may not have understood what the fight is all about. It isn't a 'Black/White' fight, but an educational fight that concerns the children. It isn't because of the name, 'Vivian Conley,' but because someone has to stand up for what is right, and stand up for justice.

Has anyone really looked into the monetary part of this fight?

Let me give you some figures to look at. The budget was provided by the Muncie Public Library. There are four major libraries in Muncie: Conley, Carnegie, Kennedy, and Maring-Hunt. The Muncie Public Library's expenses data for 2009 anticipated the following costs: \$145,932 (Conley), \$383,364 (Carnegie), \$1,205,922 (Kennedy), and \$2,614,928 (Maring-Hunt). Conley's budget was based on a 40-hour week, but was only opened Tuesday-Friday from 10 A.M.-6:00 P.M.

The Muncie Public Library Board wants us to be understanding about Conley's closing, but until we - the Whitely, Morningside, Claypool, and neighboring communities - are treated fairly, there is no justice in this.

The MPL Board may try to justify their decision, but supporters feel that the rush to close Conley Library was a long time coming. We, the friends of the Conley Library, came up with options, ways to keep the library open. From volunteers, to reduced operation hours, to grant proposals, to help from local leaders, to assistance from county and city officials, we tried. But all of this was in vain.

Still, many of us are prepared to stay in this fight until the injustice is corrected. We will stay by any means necessary, until the community understands what is being done against it. If I'm wrong, I will apologize and stand corrected; but, from my heart, I believe I have the right information.

I'm asking for some help to save Conley Library.

Robertson's words are merely a replica of the community's attitude. When considering a people who have consistently had to deal with closing after closing, of centers that provided comfort and solace to the weary and young, the fiery fervor that bursts forth in her impassioned letter is better understood.

To learn more about the story of Conley Library, [click here](#). To help out in this righteous cause, please e-mail Myrna Robertson: *mjcr1008 (at) comcast.net*. She can also be contacted by phone: (765) 288-2257. Thank you.

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BlackCommentator.com Columnist, Tolu Olorunda, is an activist/writer and a Nigerian immigrant. Click [here](#) to reach Mr. Olorunda.

[Contents of Issue](#)

[Click here](#)

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