

Being black: isolation and self-doubt

By PHIL MURRAY
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Editor's Note: This is the second of a series on black students at W&L.

At a predominantly white, public high school in Columbus, Ga., Robert Stephen was class president and active in the student council.

A licensed minister since he was 18, he preaches at churches in Lexington, Staunton and Pennsylvania. When he graduates from Washington and Lee University in a few weeks he will enter the U.S. Army as an officer.

He is intelligent, articulate and unassuming; his leadership qualities are unquestionable.

He had fully expected to pursue his interests in student government but soon discovered that blacks at W&L were treated like ants at a picnic.

"I didn't think I would be wanted," Stephen said, "If I ran, I felt like it would be a black student running, not just a student. You feel set apart; you wonder if you will be accepted."

Consequently, Stephen has
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Blacks feel separated from mainstream

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never become involved in student activities.

"W&L makes you really conscious that you are black; you feel others saying, 'He is black first.' But I'm a W&L man, no different from any other."

All W&L students feel pressures; academic, social and otherwise.

But add to those pressures feelings of being rejected, isolated and unwanted; it can sap your confidence until you begin to doubt yourself.

"You're looking at people who were accepted at Cornell, Princeton. We are not inferior people, but we are treated as such," said Ron Magee, a junior from Dallas, Texas. "Minority students come here and start doubting their own abilities for the first 12-18 weeks. You have to be extremely confident. You can't excel in a hostile environment."

Most black students agree that they feel separated from the majority on campus, a separation caused at times by racist tendencies on the part of the white community, both direct and indirect, and at times by a misunderstanding and an inability to deal effectively with blacks.

RACIAL TENSIONS

Although many of W&L's blacks attended mostly white high schools, they were surprised by the attitudes they encountered here.

It is a very subtle form of prejudice, one that is hard to put your finger on, but very easy to sense. "Racism exists at all levels, but it's low-key," said Terry McWhorter, a sophomore from Cleveland, Ohio. "But it can still be as powerful and vivid. It's definitely there."

"Just read any bathroom wall," added Wesley Payne a sophomore from Baltimore, Md.

Stephen said he felt racial tensions immediately when no one would speak to him during freshman orientation at Natural Bridge.

And the problem is pervasive. "In a classroom when you speak, the guys look at you like, 'He can speak?'" said Ira Puryear, a junior from Newark, N.J.

Even professors, perhaps unwittingly, add to the pressures. "Blacks tend to be compared to each other in class. You hear the professor asking, 'Why can't you do as well as other blacks?'" Puryear said.

"We don't feel we are received well enough (by the faculty). We don't have the student-professor relationship that W&L prides itself on," Magee said.

In social life, no black is a fraternity member and generally does not feel welcome at parties. "You get the feeling that

you're not wanted even as a visitor," said Bryan Johnson, a sophomore from Jersey City, N.J.

Furthermore there are no blacks on any of the major campus organizations: the Executive Committee, the Student Activities Board, Contact or the Ring-tum Phi.

Once again, blacks students perceive that they are not wanted and so do not even try to join.

Being a part of such a small and conspicuous minority, the black student needs a big slice of confidence to break the color barrier. But he wants some encouragement.

"You feel like an outcast. You

hollered, 'Niggers go home,' as a black student and his mother were loading their car to go home.

Then there are what the blacks call "Good Ole Dixie" parties where fraternities hold mock lynchings and wear black face.

But always it is a behind-the-back sort of racism. "It's very subtle," said Magee. "But at times the subtleness is easily seen."

"How does the joke go?" asked Puryear. "When is a nigger a nigger? When he leaves the room."

MISUNDERSTANDING

Another part of the problem is a lack of understanding bet-

The black community at W&L is not large enough, strong enough or unified enough to force recognition. The tendency, therefore has been to tolerate rather than accept their presence on campus.

"Whites don't have to understand us," Johnson said. "But we have to adjust to them."

As a result black students have to prove continually that they belong at W&L.

"In order to be respected, you have to be an overachiever; you have to accomplish so much more than the average student," Magee said. "It makes guys here more tense toward their relationships with the majority, and it drives some guys

between the races is communication and interaction. At the very least, blacks and whites can begin to understand one another.

"It's the most you can ask for," Puryear said. "You can't make people change their attitudes, but communication can help."

To accomplish that, blacks and whites need to work together in campus organizations they say. "We need to have a common ground, a place to meet, events, etc.," Stephen said.

"I haven't seen any function where blacks and whites have come together," McWhorter said. "It would be an advantage to the entire student body to do something like that."

The white students have their Fancy Dress Ball while the blacks hold their own black tie affair in the annual Student Association for Black Unity (SABU) Ball.

This year, SABU sent letters to every fraternity, every law student's carrel and every freshman in an attempt to make it a school-wide function. About 600 people came; seven of them were white.

"There is not enough interchange between blacks and whites," said John White, director of minority affairs at W&L. "The potential exists for a meaningful coalition; but I think it's a lot easier not to do that. We are comfortable in the small groups we get into and that works both ways...It's going to take some pretty brave students to bridge that gap."

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feel like you're not wanted. The depressing part is trying to succeed. The hardships, the troubles...You don't need that problem. At the same time, white students are not urging us to get involved at all," said McWhorter. "Nobody's stopping the blacks from getting involved; but it's going to have to be an individual effort."

McWhorter said he gave thought to the SAB and the EC but lacked the confidence to try. Feelings of isolation and alienation are reinforced when the racism takes a more direct form.

Most of the blacks at W&L have been yelled at from passing cars and dorm windows. Magee recalled one incident in which someone in the dorm

between the white and black communities.

For one reason or another, many whites carry a false image of blacks to W&L. "A lot of white students who are not used to blacks bring stereotypes with them," Stephen said. "They don't realize that blacks have the same interests and aspirations. Once they realize it, they will understand better."

Stephen recalled being shocked in a sociology class one day when a white student remarked that the problem with blacks is that they don't have fathers around the house.

Because white students do not understand their black counterparts, it is often easier to ignore them than to deal with them in any meaningful way.

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out."

In Magee's freshman class in 1980, a record 15 blacks entered W&L, a group of black students ranging from National Merit Scholars to class valedictorians. Now eight of them are left.

"The attrition rate is due to not being able to handle the intricate pressures of W&L," he said.

COMMUNICATION

The black students agree that the first step to better relations

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