

Exploring diversity at Washington and Lee

Black History Month, opportunity to examine role of Washington and Lee's black students, past, present and future

By Elianna Marziani
STAFF WRITER

February is Black History Month across America. What does that mean at Washington and Lee? It means exploring some of our own black history and looking to the future of multicultural attitudes on this campus.

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

In 1795, Washington and Lee University, then Liberty Hall Academy, enrolled its first black student, John Chavis. Chavis had been recruited by local Presbyterians to help evangelize to the black community.

The next black students did not arrive at W&L until 1942, when the U.S. government's School for Special Services moved from Fort Meade to W&L. Black cadets were among the 1200 cadets to go through this program during the course of two years.

At about the same time, the civil rights issue became a major force in national politics. The debate began to come to a head, both in Virginia and in the United States in general.

In 1950, The University of Virginia admitted its first black law student, and The College of William and Mary followed in 1951 when it admitted its first two black law students. Nationally, 1954 marked the landmark Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, in which the court ruled that "separate but equal" facilities were a contradiction in themselves and that schools needed to become desegregated. Some groups were resistant to the changes this case brought, but other groups were more welcoming of change.

Some faculty members at Washington and Lee, for example, were ready for it.

"Starting in the 1960s, the faculty started clamoring for desegregation," Ted DeLaney, W&L history professor and the only black undergraduate professor on campus, said. Because of faculty pressure to debate the issue, the Board of Trustees held a special discussion about desegregation, after which it proclaimed that the school charter said nothing about discrimination.

The Board decided that since W&L had no discrimination policy, it should be entirely the prerogative of the admissions office to admit black students. As DeLaney said, there had been only "segregation by custom at W&L."

This custom ended in 1966 when Dennis Haston, the only black undergraduate applicant that year, was accepted to W&L. He attended W&L for one year before transferring to a different college. The first undergraduate student to receive degrees from W&L came in 1972 with the graduation of Walter Blake and Carl Smothers.

In 1966 black law school applicant Leslie Smith enrolled, and in 1969, he became the first black law graduate from W&L.

Since then, black students have become an integral part of W&L. While there are still relatively few black students at W&L, the ones who are here are active participants in campus social and academic life. In 1991, Willard Dumas became the first black student body president, and in 1998, Mikel Parker was elected the first black IFC president. Other black students have become an important part of all sorts of academic groups, clubs, sports, fraternities and sororities in the W&L community.

PROFESSOR DELANEY'S EXPERIENCE

As an example of the changes that have happened at W&L in the last few decades, DeLaney offered his own perspectives as an African-American man who is a native of Lexington and has also been involved with W&L since his teenage years.

DeLaney first became involved with Washington and Lee back when it was still segregated. He was what he called "a poor kid who needed a job," and in August 1963 he followed the footsteps of many members of the black community in Lexington by taking a job with the Buildings and Grounds staff. A year later he became a biology lab technician, a job that he held for 19 years.

During the last four years he served as a lab technician, he took advantage of a fringe benefit granted to employees by taking one course each term for credit. In 1983, DeLaney quit his job and became a full-time student, getting his degree from W&L in 1985. He then taught at a prep school in North Carolina, received a graduate degree from The College of William and Mary, worked in a teaching fellowship for a couple of years, wrote his dissertation and found himself back at Washington and Lee in 1995, this time as a history professor.

DeLaney's role as staff member, student and professor gives him a unique viewpoint of the life of black students at W&L, past and present. He sees black students as positive contributors to campus life, and one of his major concerns is the small number of black students on campus. The current ratio is one black student for every 31 white students. This is an example of what DeLaney sees as a trend across America, that "colleges are becoming more segregated." Part of the reason for this, he believes, is that colleges, including W&L, are not working hard enough to recruit black students. "Americans need to work harder to give the values of the importance of higher education to blacks in elementary and secondary school so that these students will continue their education," DeLaney said.

He believes it would be easier to recruit black students if they were given black role models in the faculty. A greater

number of black faculty members, therefore, is an important change that needs to be made at W&L in the future if the University is to continue to grow and improve itself.

The biggest problem that DeLaney sees, however, is the lack of understanding between races. He is concerned about the "segregation within integrated colleges that exists throughout the nation."

"The self-segregation [on the part of both blacks and whites] is really sad," he said. "It will take individual attempts on the part of all the students to make sure they make the campus into more of a community."

Both black and white students have the same role on campus — to "work hard and to get a good education."

DeLaney said that creating a community in which all students can peacefully and happily pursue that end should be our primary goal.

STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

Tami Olubunmi, a black freshman, spoke about the experiences she has had at W&L. As a high school student, she met Courtney Penn from the Admissions Office at a college fair for talented minority students and learned that about W&L. Olubunmi said that the gorgeous campus, friendly people and financial aid brought her to W&L, and she loves it here.

She has pledged a sorority, has a busy schedule and is having fun. She does not see race as a major issue in her own experience. While admitting that different students may have different experiences, she said, "I'm used to hanging out with different types of people and I really don't care what they look like."

Olubunmi said that she has not experienced any racism at W&L and hates it when "people play the race card" and blame problems on their race. She expressed her belief in the possibility for black students to have just as "normal" a life, socially and academically, as white students.

Other students believe that a racial problem does exist on the W&L campus.

"I think that race is a serious problem here," senior Shannonette Wade said. "People try to sugarcoat the situation or pretend that it doesn't exist at all."

Wade believes that people tend to ignore opportunities to discuss the problem of minority students at W&L.

"When panels or discussion groups are held, the same small group of people shows up," she said. "Too many people are disinterested and try to keep it all under wraps. We need more people to make a real effort to solve the racial problem on campus."

Wade also thinks that the University could attract more black students if a greater variety of social activities for black students was provided.

"When prospectives come to visit W&L, the first thing they ask about is what we do on the weekends," Wade said. "For black students, the social aspects of the school are pretty limited because we don't have the opportunity to join

black sororities or fraternities and to participate in many other activities that are provided to our counterparts at other colleges."

With the ratio of black to white students at W&L being so small, the experience of the black undergraduate is definitely a unique one.

"My experience here has really caused me to come out of my shell and to approach people and situations in a different way," Wade noted.

"It's easy for a black student to miss out on a lot because he might feel more intimidated here. Because of this fact, I've learned that if I can make it here, I can make it anywhere."

DEAN MCCLOUD'S TAKE ON RACISM AT W&L

Anece McCloud, Associate Dean of Students and a specialist in minority student affairs and diversity, agrees with DeLaney. She believes that although there used to be a definite, strong tension between many black and white students, it has greatly decreased recently.

"When I first arrived at W&L in 1985, my impression was that the black students were much more in the periphery of campus life than they are now," McCloud said. "Now we have seen black students in positions of leadership."

She sees this as a positive trend. "Racism is a fact of life and exists in some forms even at W&L," she said, adding, "but it's on both sides."

She believes that the problems between races mainly stem not from malicious intent or malignant racism, however, but rather from "really not knowing each other and being sort of afraid to meet and talk with other students."

Students coming from different ethnic or socio-economic backgrounds merely do not know how to relate to each other, and this is the problem that must be fixed on the W&L campus. In order to get these students who are ignorant of each other's pasts to meet and get to know each other, several student organizations were formed in recent years.

Programming for the Respect for Individuals and Diversity in Education (PRIDE) is, as McCloud put it, "a project that would improve campus life through diversity."

The Minority Student Association (MSA, formerly the Student Association for Black Unity) was set up to "bring about an understanding and an appreciation for persons of different backgrounds."

This group brings minorities and other students together in special activities, believing that "through understanding and the willingness to communicate with each other, we're more likely to communicate with each other."

McCloud said, "Once students get to know that person [of a different background], they understand and appreciate him."

She feels that all the students at W&L have unique characteristics and special backgrounds, and that all students will come out of college with a better experience if they will make an effort to get to know one another, see past the differences and grow together. That's good advice.



Photo courtesy of Tami Olubunmi

Freshman Tami Olubunmi has had no trouble being happy as a black student at W&L.