

## Black History Month

# The black experience at Davidson

By TRENT STEVENS

Throughout most of Davidson College's history, the typical student has been a white, male Protestant. Anyone of a different background who could be found on campus was usually a cook, a custodian or a housekeeper.

It was not until the 1960's that things began to change. For as late as 1959, college President Grier Martin was quoted as saying, "It is not in the best interests of the college to admit Negro students at this time."

The pressure to integrate did not come from within the college, but from an outside source: the Board of World Missions of the Presbyterian Church. According to the May 8, 1981 issue of *The Davidsonian*, "The Board wanted to train young Congolese in church-supported colleges in the South. They recommended specific students to Davidson and guaranteed financial support until their graduation."

On February 15, 1961, the Board of Trustees approved the Board of Missions' request. However, they would only accept students who had been chosen by the Board

of Missions, were well qualified and Congolese. No black Americans or black students of nations other than what is now Zaire could be accepted.

On May 17, 1962, a large majority of the Trustees of Davidson College voted in favor of admitting students regardless of race or nationality. This announcement came at a time when only 53 percent of Davidson College students wanted integration. The change in policy was also disapproved of by many of Davidson's businesses, five of which publicly refused to serve black students with remarks such as "I'll close that door and go home," "I'll ask them to leave" and "anybody that fools with them is a damn fool."

So the first black students to be accepted were not welcomed with everyone's open arms. Religion Professor Dan Rhodes was assigned to head a committee to help the college and the community to adjust to the new students. According to Rhodes, "It is very difficult to make the blacks feel comfortable. It's one thing to accept blacks into the school and another thing entirely to make them feel comfortable."

The first African student to enter Davidson was Benoit Nzengu. He was soon followed by Georges Nzongola. They were slowly accepted at first, but the college community put pressure upon the town to give them fair treatment. Martin managed to convince the owners of several Charlotte movie theaters to admit Nzengu, but he was required to give prior notice and bring two white students, one to sit on each side of him in the theater. Their acceptance by the white community was facilitated by the fact that they were foreigners, and they were served in restaurants, barber shops and other establishments that would not serve local blacks. The students seemed to handle the new policy well, but many taboos, such as interracial dating, took a while for the students to swallow.

The first American blacks to be accepted were Leslie Brown and Wayne Crumwell, who graduated from Davidson in 1968. Brown was his high school's valedictorian, National Honor Society president, Student Council president, yearbook editor and he was a member of his school's debate team. Crumwell was also a top student, ranking in the top 5% of his high school class. He was later to note that "You can't integrate fully here or anywhere else. What good is integrating if the feeling behind it is not real?"

But discrimination in Davidson had not taken its last breath. Many feel that a local restaurant, the Coffee Cup, sent star basketball player Charlie Scott to the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, when it refused to serve him and his parents unless they sat in the segregated section. The incident may have cost the Wildcat's basketball team a national championship.

A boycott and picketing of Ralph Johnson's barbershop in 1968 was considered by many the summit of Davidson's radical sentiment in the flower child era. Local barbershops had refused to serve local blacks because they felt that their white customers would become disloyal if they did serve them. Johnson later blamed the strike for his business' subsequent failure. Ken Norton of Norton's Barbershop was once quoted as saying "You can't teach a dog new tricks and you can't expect these men to change overnight," but he

feels the change was inevitable.

In the 1970's, the process began to slow down. Black students began to realize that the hardest part of Davidson wasn't getting in; it was finding a reason to stay. Even in the 1980's, black students at Davidson must contend with a relative lack of social life and identity crises, not to mention white students' preconceived notions about blacks and their culture.

One group that is attempting to make the situation more palatable is the Black Student Coalition (BSC), which schedules activities to bring blacks together. BSC president Marino Bruce feels that there are still barriers to be broken down. For example, he feels that white students often accept him as an athlete before he is accepted as a student. "They refuse to give blacks credit on their own merit," he states. "The students are unsympathetic to the minority situation. They don't know and they don't care to know."

With minorities making up only a small fraction of the college body, there are few who share the same experiences. And with only five black faculty members, there are even fewer role models for minority students to follow.

But despite all of this, many minority students feel that there are some positive aspects of going to Davidson. Bruce says that "the best thing (about Davidson) is the attempt by some administrators, such as the president, to improve the minority situation on campus."

Senior Peter Mangone, a member of a student/faculty committee studying the diversity of Davidson's students, says, "The faculty and the administration are committed to identifying and solving any problems that exist on campus involving minority students."

On May 18, 1962, Bill Hagen, associate editor of *The Davidsonian*, had this to say about Davidson's integration: "It reflects the ancient liberalism of a forgotten past, that of the oldest Old South, the South that prior to 1840 sponsored the first abolitionist societies in the country."

While that past is certainly a dim memory, perhaps the 1990's will bring that elusive freedom that eludes many today.

## Arts Bits

### Peking Opera

• Charlotteans welcome the Peking Opera Thursday, February 9 and Saturday, February 11. A unique combination of song, drama, dance, mime, martial arts and acrobatics, Chinese opera evolved from traditional theatrical forms about 200 years ago. The highly stylized art aims for beauty rather than realism, as actors portray stories from old novels about heroes or lovers. Stories are in Chinese, but an interpreter will make translations before each segment. Call Opera Carolina at 704-372-SING for student rates. Shows begin at 8 p.m. in Owens Auditorium.

### SECCA Stuff

• Cultural road trip to Winston-Salem, anyone? *The Davidsonian* has received hot tips of several current art exhibitions in the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art (SECCA). A solo exhibit with black and white photographs of Ireland matches its charm against cardboard buildings, hand-made paper and plaster reliefs of 6 and 7-year olds. Object-related sculpture and large-scale paintings complete the show until March 26. SECCA is a regional exhibition and education center dedicated to supporting and showing artists of exceptional talent who live and work in southeastern states.

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Several colleges of Oxford University have invited The Washington International Studies Center to recommend qualified students to study for one year or for one or two terms. Lower Junior status is required, and graduate study is available. Students are directly enrolled in their colleges and receive transcripts from their Oxford college; this is NOT a program conducted by a U.S. College in Oxford. A special summer session is directed by WISC.

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