

Nancy O'Connor photo

First
president
recalls
**Early
struggles**
of the Legion
of Black Collegians

By TERRY JORDAN

Fresh out of the Army and with two years of study at New Orleans' Dillard University behind him, Ettie Collier was not quite prepared for the culture shock he experienced when he enrolled at Mizzou in 1965.

"I was born and reared in Mound Bayou, Miss., a small, all-black town where African Americans never had a problem getting along," says Collier, BS Ed '68, M Ed '69, the first president of MU's Legion of Black Collegians in 1968 and now a St. Louis attorney. "My grandfather, for instance, made a good living as a mason. When I came to



Above, Ettie Collier and Pam Smith attended an Alpha Phi Alpha dinner-dance at Mizzou shortly before their marriage in 1967. Today Collier is a labor attorney in St. Louis.

Columbia, though, I could really see racial separation at work.”

There were fewer than 500 black students at MU. Marching Mizzou played *Dixie*, and members of one fraternity waved a Confederate flag after touchdowns at Memorial Stadium. Members of another fraternity donned blackface for a *Savitar* Frolics skit in Jesse Auditorium. A large rock outside Tate Hall, the law school, praised the efforts of Boone Countians who fought for the South in the Civil War.

Young black students at Mizzou, Collier says, were “coming in the front door and leaving out the back. Most of them were not graduating. Black graduate students across campus were not able to obtain fellowships or teaching assistantships.” There were no black professors. “A lot of black students felt uncomfortable on campus. There were no

special tutoring or counseling services for them, and they didn’t know where to turn.”

Collier, who lived in Donnelly Hall, helped form the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity with other black men. He met Pam Smith, BS Ed ’70, a student from Kirkwood, Mo., and they began a courtship that resulted in marriage two years later. He advanced in his studies in the College of Education. “Personally, things were going well for me,” he recalls. But there was trouble on other fronts.

At a football game in 1968, some black students brought a “black power” flag to wave as a countermove to *Dixie* and the Confederate flag. “But we never got the chance to wave it,” recalls Mike Middleton, BS ’68, JD ’71, now a law professor at Mizzou. “The team scored and we got ready; but then a campus policeman standing near our section reached for his gun. That was enough to deter us.”

Some campus historians have pointed

to that incident as the event that launched the LBC. Collier and Middleton disagreed. “We would have started the group anyway,” Collier says. “There were a lot of issues out there that needed to be addressed.” Jim Oglesby, M Ed ’70, PhD ’72, and George Littleton, AB ’62, MS ’69, PhD ’75, also were instrumental in the early days of the group, while Jimmy Rollins, a former Mizzou law student, was working to bring about equal-housing changes in the Columbia community. Oglesby, a former professor and administrator at Mizzou, is now a project director for the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Washington, D.C., while Littleton is a professor of physiology at Howard University in Washington, D.C. Rollins is a businessman in St. Louis.

“Remember that there were a lot of anti-war groups around in those days — mainly composed of white youths — and many times they’d start talking about civil rights,” Middleton says. “It bothered me that they were talking about our issues, but they didn’t know our situation like we did. We needed our own group.”

Meetings of the LBC that first year drew up to 50 students — about 20 graduate students and 30 undergraduates. The group’s statement of purpose noted that the LBC sought “to promote social, educational and cultural enrichment of black students at the University of Missouri; to end discrimination within the campus community; and to create an effective means in which black students can be represented in student activities.” Any student — white or black — could join for \$2 dues a semester.

Middleton recalls that Collier was elected president “because he was older and knew how to work with people.” Collier created the name, believing that blacks on campus needed their own “legion” — a military term. “And yet, we weren’t militant,” he says. “The LBC leaders were upperclassmen or graduate students, and we were more mature. A lot of freshmen and sophomores wanted us to be more radical, but we thought it best to work through the system.”

Collier met with then-Chancellor John Schwada in fall 1968, presenting him with a list of 11 demands fashioned by the LBC leadership. They were:

- Increase the number of black faculty members

Current initiatives

An expanded roster of financial aid packages will increase MU’s ability to attract African-American students.

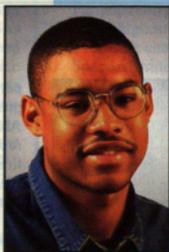
“But, because our focus is on student success, we recognize financial aid is only the first step,” says Dr. Charles Schroeder, vice chancellor for student affairs. “We have enhanced special services to freshmen such as overhauling the advising process and instituted learning communities in residence halls that will allow students with common academic interests to immerse themselves in those pursuits. It is all geared to ensure those students we recruit will graduate.”

The University’s goal to increase African-American freshman enrollment to 8 percent in five years will be more representative of the state’s demographics. “We want a University that looks like the state, that looks like America,” Chancellor Charles Kiesler says. “Students will need to function in a diverse society after graduation, and we need to prepare them.”

Here’s a brief list of some current MU initiatives to recruit and retain black students:

- The Brooks Scholarships, which offer minority in-state students to up \$7,000 a year.
- Residential Leadership Grants, which help students with room and board costs.
- A new Transition Program, which will identify 25 at-risk students and offer them scholarship, advising and counseling support.
- The African-American Achievement Awards, offered in varying amounts to help defray fees.
- An Overnight Visitation Program, in which minority students can stay in a residence hall for one weekend and see the campus up close.
- The United Ambassadors, a group of black upperclass students who visit high schools to meet and recruit potential minority students.
- A new practice in which admissions staff members call admitted black students and their parents to see if they have any questions or concerns before enrolling.

- Implement a black studies program
- Open a black culture center
- Sponsor an annual "Black Week"
- Actively recruit black students
- Set aside scholarships for black students
- Create an office for the LBC
- Implement tutoring sessions for incoming black freshmen
- Periodically promote black service employees and staff
- Dedicate a campus building to a slain black leader
- Increase the number of black cheerleaders and pompon girls, proportionate to black athletes on the football and basketball teams.



Jason Hill

Cooperation is the key

Positive strides have been made in the past two years toward improving the climate for MU's black students. While LBC president Jason Hill applauds his group's leadership for its work, he's just as quick to praise Missouri Students Association officers.

"This proves to me that all students have to work together to bring about the most effective change," says Hill, a journalism major from Chicago. He's speaking of a new, 50-cent student fee that will give the LBC more than \$18,000 this year for programming, publications and other projects. Before, the organization's funding came from the student organizations allocations committee, and seldom exceeded \$3,000 a year.

The ball started rolling in 1991, when MSA president David Ridley and vice president Kelly Bull created the MSA black programming committee and funded it to the tune of \$20,000. The next year, Rebecca Lambe and James Browning were elected MSA president and vice president, respectively, and began working closely with LBC leaders Tim Smith, BS BA '93, and Kim Rogers, BJ '93. "Alliances were formed, and the cooperation made all the difference," Hill adds. The referendum passed the MSA Senate in spring 1992, and the student body voted it in that fall.

Similar cooperation occurred last year with Hill at the LBC reins, and Barry Stinson and Scott Stallman forming the MSA leadership. "We saw eye-to-eye on a number of things, and their support helped," Hill says. Bolstered by the additional funding, the LBC embarked on several new projects: student recruiting visits to urban high schools; financial support for MU's Martin Luther King Jr. celebration; funding for guest speakers; cooperative programs with Lincoln University and Central Missouri State University; a newsletter; and a directory that lists black groups and special services available to blacks on campus.

One of the biggest hurdles for black students today is a sense of "institutional racism" that shows up in things like standardized tests, Hill says. "White males generally do better than white females on those tests, and white females generally do better than black females, and black females generally do better than black males. I think we need to take a hard look at that."

Other barriers continue to be access to and the cost of higher education. "If a black student scores a 26 on the ACT, great. But if he makes a 21, he can't get in—or at least he won't qualify for a scholarship, which is essential in some cases.

"That sense of elitism may be fine for private schools, but MU is a state university. Let's give our students from Missouri a chance to show what they can do."

Twenty-five years later, the first seven demands have been satisfied, and University officials note progress of varying degrees on the next two. Only the last two demands have gone unfulfilled, although the chancellor's office gave a generous donation to the city's new Martin Luther King Jr. amphitheater two years ago. "And regarding the Golden Girls and MU cheerleaders, we probably never will see the same proportion as black athletes," Middleton acknowledges today.

Collier recalls that Schwada was receptive to the group, and visible progress started almost immediately. Within a year, a pilot tutorial program had been established; the flag-waving and playing of *Dixie* at football games stopped; a black newspaper was started; and the LBC leadership was asked to sit in on interviews for a black professor. "They (the institution) saw the general racial situation as a problem, too, and wanted to do something about it," Collier adds.

After receiving his master's degree, Collier applied to law school at St. Louis University, and was accepted. He was the first black to serve on the law journal there, and also was a member of the admissions committee. In fall 1973, he and three other new SLU graduates started their own law firm. Today, he is a partner with Elbert Dorsey and Gaylard T. Williams in that firm, and specializes in labor, probate, and wills and trusts law.

Collier attended the LBC's silver anniversary celebration during

Homecoming weekend in October, and was both encouraged and discouraged by the events. "I was happy to see that the organization is still going, and that some progress has been made. But I was disappointed that more students didn't attend the events." He notes that the University's black population is 3.9 percent—a figure that has not dropped or risen more than a percentage point in 15 years—and applauds Chancellor Charles Kiesler's goal to increase black

freshman enrollment to 8 percent in five years.

Collier believes that most of the University's racial problems can be traced to the days when Mizzou was the state's land-grant university for white students, while Lincoln University was for blacks. "A lot of people can't seem to forget those days—or don't want to forget them," he says. "That's tough to overcome. If the situation is going to improve, everyone needs to work together." ☐