

MIZZOU

The magazine of
the Mizzou Alumni Association

[Home](#) » [Fall 2011](#) » [Features](#) » Reunion recalls history, yet embraces progress



Reunion recalls history, yet embraces progress

Black Family Reunion helps reconnect alumni

Story by Stephanie Detillier

Since 2003, Black Family Reunion has provided opportunities for black alumni to reconnect during Homecoming weekend. The Legion of Black Collegians organized Black Homecoming starting in the mid-1970s. Today's reunion continues as a way for alumni and students to preserve their cultural traditions as part of — rather than separate from — the overall Homecoming celebration.

“The primary focus of the Black Family Reunion is to re-engage black alumni with the University of Missouri,” says Nathan Stephens, director of the Gaines/Oldham Black Culture Center. “My hope is to cultivate relationships that will lead to support of the Black Culture Center and networking opportunities for our students.”

Adobe Flash version 8, or higher, and Java Script are required to view the slide show for this feature story.

That's a marked shift from the purpose of the initial Black Homecoming, which reflected the nation's tense racial issues in the '60s and '70s. MU Deputy Chancellor Michael Middleton, BA '68, JD '71, also supervisor of the Chancellor's Diversity Initiative, says when he was a Mizzou student in the late '60s, blacks didn't feel welcome at the campus event. He recalls the Kappa Alpha Order fraternity unfurling a Confederate flag and Marching Mizzou playing “Dixie” during football games. When he and other black students decided to display a black flag in protest, a campus police officer approached them with his hand on his pistol.

“Because we weren't embraced by the majority group, we built up a gathering of like-minded

people with similar backgrounds,” Middleton says. “Those experiences created a tradition of us wanting to reconnect and reminisce. For the large number of African-Americans who remember those early days and for those African-Americans in recent days who more closely associated with the Legion of Black Collegians, the Black Family Reunion is less of a separatist thing than an affinity thing.”

Mark Miller, BS RPA '78, MS '82, a former Mizzou Alumni Association president, agrees. He says some African-American students in the 1970s felt included in the campus Homecoming, especially those who were involved in Marching Mizzou or athletics. But others began gathering informally in homes of faculty, staff, alumni and friends, then later at the original Black Culture Center.

“I think of Black Family Reunion as being the same as the traditions you see at a lot of Greek houses and other affiliate organizations, such as ROTC,” Miller says. “This is where you found camaraderie as a student, and that still resonates with you as an alumnus. You have a tendency to gravitate back there when you return to campus.”

In the early 2000s, leaders of the MU Black Alumni Organization (BAO) helped organize Black Family Reunion as a social event for alumni. The celebration has grown more student-focused in recent years and includes a step show, alumni mixer, tailgate, comedy show and gospel brunch.

“I get emotional when I come back and see how many African-Americans have a love for the university and feel an affinity for the Black Culture Center,” says LaTia King, BJ '90, a former BAO president. “It’s been joyous to see such an increase in the number of students participating.”

Lauren “Lo” Grant, BA '11, who was honored as queen of the 2010 Legion of Black Collegians Homecoming court, reflects how the event has evolved as the racial climate has improved. In addition to her own royal duties, one of Grant’s most memorable Homecoming 2010 moments was when her Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority sister Alex Holley was crowned as the overall queen.

Remembering the Multicultural Extravaganza

As a Riverview Gardens High School student in St. Louis, Jo Lena Johnson received recognition from administrators and classmates for being an active community service volunteer, the bossiest senior and the most spirited. Those accolades summed up Johnson’s personality as she arrived at Mizzou in 1988.

She was eager for her first Mizzou Homecoming, until she noticed that few — if any — black students were involved in Homecoming festivities. Although she was only a freshman, Johnson snagged a spot on the Legion of Black Collegians executive board and created the Mr. and Mrs. LBC pageant and the Multicultural Extravaganza talent show to boost participation of minority students in Homecoming. The Black Culture Center co-sponsored the extravaganza, which included free food to drum up attendance. Fourteen talent acts took the stage in the Memorial Union ballroom.

“We had everything ranging from someone playing Chopin on the piano to people doing comedy to traditional African dances,” says Johnson, BA '92. “It was so wonderful because you could see the talents of so many students, yet it wasn’t competitive, so we weren’t saying one person was better than another.”

By 1991, the Multicultural Extravaganza officially became a part of the overall Homecoming festivities, and Johnson served on the

“Although we AKAs understand that we have Black Homecoming for historical reasons, that doesn’t mean we segregate ourselves and don’t participate in the main Homecoming events,” she says. “I would not mind showing the rest of Mizzou why we do Black Homecoming, and I wouldn’t mind us being more heavily involved in Homecoming week skits and the parade.”

Black Family Reunion also serves as a way for older alumni to see the positive changes regarding diversity. Stephens says alumni who remember the Black Culture Center’s old house on Turner Avenue are proud to visit the center’s 12-year-old, 12,000-square-foot facility on Virginia Avenue.

“Black Family Reunion doesn’t make up for or apologize to those who had those experiences,” Stephens says, “but it does provide positive memories of Mizzou. A student from the ’60s can’t come back to the Black Culture Center and not realize how much the campus has progressed.”

MORE:




- Read related MIZZOU stories about the [2010 Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority sisters](#) named Homecoming queens and about the [1985 queen, Vivian King](#), who was part of the first black couple crowned at Mizzou Homecoming royalty.
- For details on the 2011 Black Family Reunion, visit the [Black Culture Center website](#) or call 573-882-2664.

Homecoming Steering Committee, which co-sponsored the event at the Missouri Theatre. In 1992, Kim Coles of *In Living Color* and *Living Single* fame hosted the event, which continued through the early 2000s.

“School spirit to me is about pride, community, coming together, recognizing who people are and celebrating that,” says Johnson, now an author, speaker and communication expert based in St. Louis. “The Multicultural Extravaganza gave students something to look forward to. These are the traditions that people remember — it’s not the calculus class or Spanish 3 class that almost kept you from graduating. I think that, for me, Mizzou was a microcosm of the real world. It can be what you make of it, and I’ve always wanted to celebrate what is good and ask people to embrace what they don’t know.”

Share your comments with Mizzou magazine at Mizzou@missouri.edu.

Note: If published, feedback may be edited for length, style and clarity.

 [Follow us on Twitter](#)  [Join us on Facebook](#)  [Subscribe to our feed](#)

Published by MIZZOU magazine, 109 Reynolds Alumni Center, Columbia, MO 65211 | Phone: 573-882-5916
| E-mail: Mizzou@missouri.edu

Opinions expressed in this site do not necessarily reflect the official position of MU or the Mizzou Alumni Association.

Copyright © 2021 — Curators of the [University of Missouri](#). All rights reserved. [DMCA](#) and other [copyright information](#).

An [equal opportunity/affirmative action](#) institution.

Last updated: Feb. 15, 2013