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Defying expectations

by Darrell Bowden

Initially, I think, that it would be important for me to give you some background on myself, so that you can get a better understanding of the life of a Black Canadian student at university.

Originally from New Glasgow, I am the second youngest of eleven children. My father has received grade 6 and is employed at Lavalin as a machine operator. My mother is a housewife and entrepreneur, who completed grade 7.

Being the second youngest of eleven and witnessing the achievements of my siblings: three of which graduated high school, two who were a few credits short of graduation, four who never completed high school, no one expected that I would attend university. Having achieved the goal of getting here, no one expected me to succeed.

In my case in high school I was encouraged to do academic courses so long as they were arts related and not sciences. I opted to do the academic courses I thought I would enjoy and was encouraged, but more often than not, discouraged, with the idea that these courses were too difficult for me. In these cases teachers were pleased with mediocre performance and did not encourage me to excel. Few of my teachers believed in my determination to continue on in my academic career.

Assistance from my parents was to be limited in terms of their life and caring, for they wanted me to succeed, but they had no basis of which they could use to understand the step I had taken. Their feelings alternated from pride in their son the future psychiatrist to confusion of why I was leaving the family.

Once in university, when I visited home there was not a lot of interest, in what I was doing in terms of my educational advances. No one bothered to try to understand the need for quiet to do or need to study on weekends. And the family certainly did not understand the need for quiet to do my studying. The concept of university held by my family, based on stories and TV programs, was that it was one big party. My father's only words of advice as I departed to enter Dal were "Do

some studying, along with the partying."

As for my friends, they told me that they never knew that I was considering university after graduation and that I would miss years of fun partying at home. It's little wonder that I have lost touch with most of them. They all stayed home and took on jobs, now we have little in common.

Poor high school academic preparation caused me to seek entrance into Dal by way of the Transition Year Program (TYP), a special one year program for native and Black students who do not meet the regular entrance requirements.

TYP had both advantages and disadvantages. Being in an access program labelled me as someone who had a higher than usual chance of failure, with many people at the university considering us as not measuring up to the norm.

On the other hand, TYP offered a small supportive group of people with whom I could identify; skill development in Math (my weakest high school subject), English and Study Skills. Most importantly TYP offered for me an opportunity to study Black history and culture through a Black history course, something to which I had never before been exposed. This course provided a strong sense of identity as a Black person, and as a result greater confidence and determination to succeed.

What is it like to be the only Black student in a class?

One of the first things I noticed, in my first year as a regular student when entering a class, classmates sometimes physically draw away from you as if you have some sort of contagious virus. Also, I witnessed that I was very often the last person chosen to participate as a lab partner or as part of a group. Not identifying with the group, that being the white students, striking up conversations seldom occurs. Therefore you feel very ISOLATED.

This isolation is amplified for many in Halifax, for many Black students live with family in the far side of Dartmouth. Commuting by bus takes 1½-2 hours to get from home to campus, limiting use of campus resources and social activities.

Another complication of Black post secondary life is financial problems. Many of our families simply cannot afford to contrib-

ute any money to assist covering the costs, so many of us hold part-time jobs in addition to taking out student loans. The jobs have to occur with the loans, because if you live at home, you are not expected to need as much to live off of. This loans process is quite frightening because after completion of one of the most complex application forms, there is not a guarantee that you will be employed upon graduation, therefore the fear of not being able to pay back the money. If you think the job market is tough for white middle class students, imagine what the low income Black student faces.

Coming from areas where we are used to close contact with entire communities and close knit families makes the university's bureaucracy very intimidating. At home, generally everyone is known to the other, creating the sense that everyone knows who does what to be able to assist when a problem occurs. You know where to go when looking for help in ironing out a wrinkle in the system. Then at University, you are confronted with tasks like completing student aid applications, reading the course calendar, and following the registration procedure — it would be easy to quit after the first week!!

An additional and more intimidating burden occurs in the classroom. As soon as a racial issue arises, you feel as though you're being put on the spot, everyone is staring in your direction. Often, you hear your professor lecturing with inaccurate information pertaining to Black issues and people. Here, often you will encounter subtle, or even open racist remarks. You sit there and wonder whether or not to speak out, feeling alienated, inadequate and intimidated by the professor. It seems as though in order for us to be equal we have to always be better.

Sometimes the pressure reaches such intense levels we often want to give up but we can't quit. We can't fail. We are often the first in the family or at times in the community, to attend university. Everyone, family and friend alike is counting on us to make them proud.

That's a bit about my experience and that of other Black Canadian students at University. It's not all bad, and in many cases we adapted and learned to cope within the already established system.

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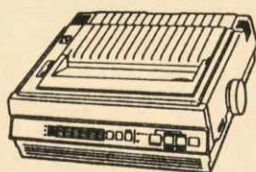
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ATTENTION HISTORY STUDENTS

If you are enrolled in a History Major, Advanced Major or Honour Programme, or if you are considering enrolling in such a programme, we'd like to talk to you.

Please drop in to an informal *Course counselling evening* where faculty will be on hand to answer any questions you may have about your programme or our offerings for next year. The up-to-date timetable will be on hand, as will be outlines of those courses being offered next year.

Refreshments will be served.

Date: Thursday, 9 March, 1989, 5:30-8:30pm

Place: Henson College, upstairs seminar room (entrance on Seymour St.)

For further information contact the history department at 424-2011.