

ADDRESS GIVEN ON THE OCCASION OF THE
30TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE FOUNDING OF
THE BLACK STUDENT ASSOCIATION

OCTOBER 11, 19⁹⁸~~68~~

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1968-1986

When Yvonne Jones approached me last week about speaking on this occasion, she asked if I remembered the establishment of the Black Student Association* 30 years ago. My response was easy: How could I forget the solemn procession of BSA officers who presented a series of demands to the University on Wednesday, November 13, 1968. I thought their points reasonable, and I sympathized with their position. Wenona Whitfield '70, first president of the BSA, had led a group of 55 black students in formulating the statement that called, among other things, for the hiring of 10 % black faculty by the fall of 1969. I was in my fourth month as President, struggling to gain control of an unbalanced budget and a proliferation of unfocused academic programs. As many of you know, Wenona went on to become a professor of law at Southern Illinois University and was recently nominated as a Federal Judge by President Clinton. Her later accomplishments were clearly fore-ordained by the abilities demonstrated as a student leader at Wesleyan. Her most able and active assistant at the time was Dart Hardiman '71, who dropped out of school the following year, worked for awhile at General Telephone, and later was lost to our radar screen.

Among others in that group, I also remember Linda Kershaw '71, who taught at the college level in Philadelphia and later returned to work in her native South Carolina; Theresa Paulette Britton (Gilbert), who left here in 1971 with a Ford Foundation Fellowship, later worked in Malawi in Central Africa, and now lives in Rockford, Illinois (there will be a lively time wherever she is--after participating in a march in Cairo, Illinois, she told me she was not sure Cairo was worth saving); Ed Toliver '70 sang the part of Zuniga in the opera "Carmen," which Wesleyan presented in 1969--he obtained a doctorate in music and has taught at the university level; Jean Heard '72 came here from Albany, Georgia as one of the 121 Presidential Scholars feted at the White House ceremony by President Lyndon Johnson; Sandy Epsicokhan '72, a math major now in data processing at State Farm Insurance; and Frankie Faison '71, a drama major who played Caliban in "The Tempest," a character Shakespeare described as "a savage and deformed slave" (I asked the faculty member directing the play how he got Frankie in that role, and he replied, "he wanted it")--he has gone on to an impressive career in the movies, television, and on the Broadway stage.

From the 55 African-Americans here in 1968, our numbers grew to 95 in the 1981-83 period, and later declined for a variety of reasons. I agreed with the direction of the BSA demands then and pledged our best efforts toward obtaining black faculty. We added one to our faculty in 1970, and subsequently obtained others, some of whom served in leadership positions. Never enough to satisfy, but a positive showing in a market where only 1 or 2% of blacks had doctorates. David Wilkens '74 became our first black trustee in 1983 (he is now an attorney with a Dow Chemical subsidiary in Indianapolis). Tom McKinney '76, a St. Louis pediatrician, currently serves on the Board, and there are and have been other African-Americans as members. Like other American institutions, Wesleyan is a work in progress. Not wishing to claim too much after recounting some of the BSA frustrations, I concluded my memoir of 18 years at Wesleyan with the statement, "Mostly, all parties persevered in an effort to work together."

Last Sunday, the New York Times contrasted the 1968 Kerner Commission report, saying the country was becoming "two societies, one black, one white--separate and unequal," with the just-released John Hope Franklin report on race relations. The first was somber, the second, more hopeful and promising. The first wisely supported "integration as the priority education strategy," and the second noted that "Emerging evidence shows that diversity in the education context, including racial diversity, is essential to provide all students with a complete educational experience."

Where are we 30 years later at Illinois Wesleyan? Partly as a result of the founding of the BSA there are now more than a thousand black alumni, a formidable group to influence the future of the institution and the students it serves. Marshaling your efforts to identify and follow-up on your compatriots could help significantly in areas such as student recruitment, the mentoring of black students currently enrolled, and their support as they move out to take their responsibilities in our increasingly global society. Many of you are already doing this, and I hope that you will recruit others as a tribute to the founding group of 1968.

I am deeply appreciative of the black students I had the opportunity to know and work with during my 1968-86 tenure at the University. They exhibited many excellent qualities that I am grateful for and that I hope you are aware of, too. A. Lincoln, the nation's greatest president, who came from Illinois and practiced law in this community, referred while enroute

to Washington to try to save the Union, speaking before the New Jersey State Senate, to those of us in the United States as "his almost chosen people." You are now becoming fuller members of "his almost chosen people"—not a perfect society, but a vastly superior one. No institution offers a better route to these opportunities than one like Illinois Wesleyan University. That is my message to the Black Student Union in 1998.

* The Black Student Union was founded, originally, as the Black Student Association.