

## Desegregation at the University of Virginia (Reprint of article in *Cavalier*)

### Black graduate tells story

*Racism, hatred factored for students in the 1950s*

By Stephen Power

Cavalier Daily Associate Editor

At 53, Harold Marsh still bears a long, t-shaped scar along his left hand that he says forever reminds him of the racial oppression he faced as one of the first black undergraduates at the University.

It was a typical chemistry lab where the accident occurred on that fall day in 1956. He had been trying to remove a piece of glass from a rubber stopper when a glass beaker he held suddenly exploded, tearing through the flesh and bone and lodging itself firmly in his hand. He then asked the instructor for permission to have it bandaged but was politely rejected. After his hand continued to bleed, he finally was allowed to go to Student Health, then located on the Corner. There his wound was cleaned and bandaged, and he was ordered back to class after being told that "it would be OK."

But as he sat in class slowly bleeding to death, Marsh gradually realized it was not OK. At the frantic behest of his white classmates, the instructor reluctantly summoned an ambulance, which took Marsh to the hospital's emergency room.

By that time, he already had lost 12 ounces of blood and was paralyzed on one side of his body. After surgery, he recovered and was approached by a concerned doctor.

"He told me I should not even consider going to the

University any longer. But I decided I would because I wanted to prove I could do the work, and at that time I was not doing well," Marsh said. Like other young black men growing up in Richmond, Va. in the early 1950s, Marsh said he "could never have dreamed" of actually going to the University, since it was only in 1955 that the Admissions Office had admitted the first black undergraduates. Up until that time, black men interested in getting their degrees were forced to choose among the state's historically black colleges, like Hampton University or Virginia Union, or to go to a college in another state.

Because Marsh wanted to pursue a degree in engineering, however, and because there were few other schools in the state or elsewhere with a curriculum as strong as the University's, the Admissions Office decided to accept Marsh as a first-year student in the fall of 1956. Marsh's test scores in high school were so good he even was able to earn a partial scholarship.

As a consequence of studying at a poorly funded public school however, Marsh was forced to enroll in a 25-hour schedule during his first year. His classes would last from as early as 8 a.m. until 5 p.m., often without a lunch break. Despite the taunts and humiliations, he succeeded, not only by graduating with a degree in engineering in 1960, but by eventually making the Dean's List and even earning membership in an engineering honor society. He later earned a law degree from the University, and today is managing partner of a Richmond law firm.<sup>1</sup>

Marsh's experiences at the University closely parallel those of the other early black graduates who pioneered their way through a school whose overwhelmingly white students, at that time, loyally rose to the playing of "Dixie" at each home football game. And while these graduates say they are proud of the strides the University has made in attracting a talented population of black students, they also admit worry over a national climate which, they say, seems to grow less and less

tolerant of affirmative action, and similar opportunity programs.

"Were it not for affirmative action and other plans like [those at the University and elsewhere), I would not be where I am now, nor would someone like Clarence Thomas be where he is now," said James Trice, who graduated from the Engineering School in 1962 and currently is a director of marketing for the St. Louis-based, Monsanto Chemical Company. "If it weren't for these programs, people wouldn't do what's right by blacks. You need some kind of overall responsibility, otherwise it would be business as usual.

"Affirmative action still hasn't worked as well as it should. We've talked about it for years, and it still hasn't lived up to what it's supposed to be," he said. "In industry, we get so far and that's it. Over one's career you're halted in your progress simply because you are black or a woman."

Like Trice and Marsh, Bobby Bland knows firsthand "the business" of trying to concentrate on learning in a slightly less than sympathetic community. Bland, who graduated from the Engineering School in 1959, is the first black undergraduate to earn a degree from the University. For him, the hardest struggles at the University were academic. There were no study groups to help him, no files of tests he could consult like his white peers did and few social outlets in then-segregated Charlottesville.

These and other historic obstacles, he said, have been ignored by the critics of affirmative action. "Many people in this country don't understand what affirmative action is or why we have it in the first place. They've never dealt with the tough questions," he said. "Unless you went through the struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, it's hard to have an appreciation for why these programs are necessary."

The nomination of Thomas, these alumni say, subjected

Montgomery County Schools  
Melissa N. Matusevich  
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affirmative action to attacks that are unwarranted. According to Marsh, President George Bush deserves blame for fostering these criticisms. "Affirmative action has done a whole lot for blacks regardless of whether they believe it or not. Blacks are now in many high-level positions due to the efforts of a few blacks who did it the American way," he said. "Affirmative action is still necessary, and it doesn't matter what you call it. All the politically correct terms and all the politically incorrect terms are meaningless."

<sup>1</sup>Marsh went on to become mayor of Richmond, Virginia. Sadly, he was murdered in 1997. Posthumously, Marsh was named "Richmonder of the Year."