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BLACK HISTORY MONTH

FROM NIGERIA TO THE BRONX TO UMAINE

By Aislinn Sarnacki ♦ Staff Reporter

Ogheneovo Dibia laughed and clapped from the sixth row of the Collins Center for the Arts as he watched fellow students perform.

The packed auditorium cheered along as Forrest Dantzler took center stage and danced a solo hip-hop routine in tribute to Black History Month. As part of the International Dance Festival on Feb. 14, he wore a New York Yankees hat from his home, the Bronx. His white sneakers moved quickly to the beat, and he smiled at the audience, an ethnically diverse group of all ages.

His "Dream" dance was the last number of the festival. When the music and lights died, a picture of Martin Luther King, Jr. glowed on the backdrop. It gave way to a picture of Barack Obama. Underneath read "A Dream Realized."

Dibia, a third-year student from Nigeria, helped organize the event.

"To people back home, it's amazing to them to see how far America has come," Dibia said.

Dibia left Kaduna, Nigeria for the first time in 2006 at the age of 18 to study computer science at an American university. His parents agreed to send him to the U.S. when he explained he would get a better education in technology here. He crossed the Maine border by bus.

"It was really strange. It was just like bushes — really thick vegetation, fewer houses ... I thought, 'What did I get myself into? I'm in the middle of nowhere,'" Dibia said with a wide grin.

Despite his initial worry, UMaine proved welcoming. Although sometimes he is the only black student in a packed lecture, he doesn't feel out of place. He thinks students are more concerned with character than appearance.

"Many people back home still had this notion that America is segregated ... Now it's obvious to the world that America has seen a lot of progress since the dark ages of segregation," Dibia said.

President Barack Obama's win proved this to him.

Dibia watched the inauguration alone in his room. Afterward, his mother called from Nigeria to ask if he had seen it.

"It's inspiring to me personally that the glass ceiling is broken — that I can achieve whatever I can put my mind to as long as I'm honest, hardworking and have a bit of luck," Dibia said.

In Nigeria, his parents were concerned about American music videos displaying gangs, drugs and violence. They worried black stereotypes portrayed by the media would affect Dibia as a student in the U.S.

"There's the idea that if you send your kid to America, they'll come back as a thug ... That's why lots of people send their kids to the U.K. They'll come back more civil in a way," Dibia said with a long bout of laughter.

His reports home of good grades and extracurricular involvement put his parents at ease. Wearing a black cowboy hat and down jacket bought by his parents, he hurries around campus with a busy schedule.

When asked about the black stereotype portrayed in the media, he grew serious and said, "I think there's a little bit of truth to it, yeah — not entirely."

"It's not just about the struggles of African Americans in America, but the struggles of all black people around the world."

— Dibia Ogheneovo, third-year student

He thinks some young black people see music artists as role models and copy their behaviors, but he's hopeful role models like Obama can have a positive influence.

Dibia said he has gained an understanding of the importance of Black History Month.

"It's not just about the struggles of African Americans in America, but the struggles of all black people around the world," Dibia said.

Dantzler, the hip-hop dancer, is the president of the African Student Association and a third-year secondary-education student. He has celebrated Black History Month on campus and at home in New York.

When asked what the month means to him, he said, "My life. If it wasn't for those who accomplished what they did in the past, I wouldn't be here right now."

To celebrate every year, Dantzler chooses one person involved in black history and learns more about them. He has done this since childhood. His grandfather used to assign a historical figure to him and his siblings each week of February. At the end of each week, he graded their research reports. To complete the monthly celebration, his family gathered to watch historical movies about black history.

On campus, Dantzler attends Black History Month events such as the Black Student Union Games Night and the hip-hop lecture. He encourages everyone to attend diversity events, no matter what color their skin.

He is optimistic about UMaine's overall attitude toward diversity but recognizes some problems. For example, he thinks the UMaine Multicultural Center in Hannibal Hamlin Hall should be moved to a more central location for easier student access.

Naturally, he says Obama's election is a step in the right direction, but he sees racism persist in aspects of life

such as interracial dating and job application.

He calls it "color-blind racism" — a belief that everything is equal and racism is a thing of the past. People act like skin color doesn't matter, even in situations when it does. Some say this less blatant form of racism is the most common in America today.

"Color will still be the first thing anybody will see," Dantzler said.

So while Black History Month is about applauding the nation's progress, it is also about acknowledging the problems that still need to be addressed.

Black residents made up 13.5 percent of the total U.S. population in 2007. Blacks were the largest minority group in 24 states, including Maine, according to the U.S. Census.

African-American historian Carter G. Woodson created Negro History Week on Feb. 12, 1926. It wasn't until 1976 that it became a month-long celebration, recognized by the government as a part of the nation's bicentennial.

"A lot of it has to do with the resistance people have had against black culture," said Director of the Multicultural Programs Judith Josiah-Martin. She is an Afro-Caribbean U.S. citizen who moved to America at age 15.

"The whole purpose really is to just educate the nation on the contribution of African-Americans to the history of America," Josiah-Martin said.

For Black History Month, Josiah-Martin is helping student organizations and academic departments plan a mixture of events, from panel discussions to bowling.

The International Dance Festival was a chance for students to express different cultures, and for Dantzler, it was a way to celebrate black history away from home.

"The thing that people need to understand is that if you're interested in learning a culture, or just like it, you shouldn't be afraid. You should take advantage of that," Dantzler said before the festival.

At the end of the festival, he accepted a bouquet as the event's artistic director. The audience laughed as he petted his flowers and pretended to tear up.

"Forrest [Dantzler] was great, but I expected him to be great," Dibia said, rising with the audience to applaud the performers.

"I'm definitely dancing next year."