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Students struggle to inform, increase diversity

By Christine Thurston
Staff Writer

A gun-toting gang member. A NBA all-star player. A welfare mother struggling to survive with five children. A bum passed out in a secluded alley in New York City. An outspoken Ricki Lake audience member.

Stereotypes like these are what African-American students at UMaine face every day. And the day when the term "African-American" swings a majority of white thoughts to a high-paid doctor, a dedicated teacher, a well-spoken lawyer and a friendly collegiate the next dorm room over, is still far away.

With only around 70 African-Americans on this campus of 11,000, and over 80 percent of those being athletes, UMaine is not a fair representation of the African-American populace, non-athlete African-American students say.

"What are we saying to students from rural Maine?" said Paula Codrington, a junior social work major from Queens, New York. "They think, 'Oh, they really are all athletes.' The fact that they go away with skewed views is my biggest concern."

Despite the stereotypes, not all black student leaders on campus are athletes.

Christopher Bragdon, former vice president of student government, values his heritage and his campus position. It allows him to see both sides of the fence.

He was raised in a snug, middle-class, white neighborhood by a white family

after his Irish mother and African-American father gave him up for adoption. He says he was pretty much the token black in his home town outside Portland. And he still is pretty much the token black on campus.

"It is a challenge and an asset to see both sides," Bragdon says. "It's all about making inroads."

Because the number of African-Americans in Maine hovers around one percent of the population, most Mainers don't know the feeling of meeting a black face at the mailbox every morning or seeing one across the table at lunch time, unlike other communities around the country. The same can go for African-American students.

"Sometimes I feel conspicuous," Codrington said. "I notice when I'm the only one in class."

Carrie Buxton, a junior social work major from Enfield, Maine, says she also felt isolated when she first started her college career.

"Out of the 60 of so African-Americans, there are only 10 women," Buxton says. "I can go for days and days without seeing someone who remotely resembles me."

Although it isn't likely that outright racist insults will be hurled at passing students, general insensitivity is still prevalent, say some African-American students.

"Although I haven't come across any blatant racism, there are still a lot of ignorant questions," Codrington said.

"Like asking me to speak for the entire race about styles and music tastes. People have asked me, 'So, why do you suppose you like rap?'"

Bragdon says that expecting a black student to speak on behalf of all African-Americans is just as ludicrous as expecting a white student to speak for all white people.

Codrington says that people also act amazed when they find out she is from New York City.

"I look different and they have false

expectations," she said.

Melissa Williams is a fourth-year history major from Brooklyn, N.Y. She decided to come to school in Maine after visiting some relatives over several summers.

"Sometimes people are scared to approach me. They only know about African-Americans from what they see on television," Williams said. "Some peo-

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Here comes the sun



Jasmine Ireland and Jeff Douglas enjoy the sunshine while parked on-campus on Monday afternoon. (Page Photo.)

ple even ask what gang I'm in."

Bragdon agrees that most racial problems that he has come across stem from widespread ignorance.

"People can be well-intentioned, but they just say the wrong things," Bragdon said. "People see my skin color and they misjudge me, they misjudge everyone. Then they hear me talk and it blows their stereotypes."

Many African-American students agree that although blatant racism isn't that prevalent in their daily lives, there are still some exceptions to the rule.

"Some students feel very discriminated against, while others are completely oblivious to any problems," Bragdon said.

Codrington recalls her first job in the area, when her boss came up to her and asked, "You know what we call you up here?" Through his hysterical laughter he continued, "Long-legged 'coons."

"Everyone in the room fell silent, they were offended for me," Codrington said. "I didn't know what it meant."

Codrington said her boss was fired soon after and the incident was the closest she's come to pure racism in this community.

During Williams' sophomore year she was hanging around with some other students when a drunk student started harassing the people she was with, trying to pick a fight.

"I kept telling him to just go home," Williams says. "Then he told me to 'go home, you nigger.' Just like every state,

Maine has its good and its bad."

About three years ago, Bragdon was accused of being an "Uncle Tom", a "house Negro" that was a sell-out to his race.

"I would disassociate completely if that was the case," Bragdon said. "Just because I don't walk the walk or talk the talk, makes me not fit the mold of either group."

Bragdon says that some students view the entire campus as being racist, but throwing that term around can be dangerous.

"People can be too quick about putting a label out there," he said.

According to Bragdon, problems can arise from both sides of the race issue.

"The black community needs to get their shit together as well and not be self-defeating," Bragdon said. "It's about becoming a CEO, not an angry, aggressive, black militant."

Bragdon says that the entire politically-correct movement has been a hindrance because it can make people too sensitive and worried about stepping on each other's toes.

"God forbid you inadvertently offend me and I get up and walk away," Bragdon said. "That doesn't help anything. We need to understand where each other is coming from."

Most black students say they would encourage other African-Americans to attend school in Orono but with a strong warning about the lack of diversity.

"It's exhausting, but it can be rewarding when someone walks away enlightened," Bragdon said. "African-American students need to realize it will be a struggle, but to stand their ground."

Buxton says that it wouldn't be any better to go to an all-black school because that still takes away from being exposed to different cultures.

Williams took the opportunity to comment on Maine's lack of activity, as opposed to any cautions on the state of racism.

"I'd tell them that life is over at 9,"

Williams says.

"I'm not sure why I came to school here, but I don't regret it," Codrington said. "College is a learning experience in every aspect, but student here are learning little of diversity."

Codrington says that the lack of multiculturalism may turn some people off from even coming, while others come unprepared and feel like sore-thumbs.

"We come to places of higher learning to with preset notions and ideas," Codrington said. "And this is where you get them wiped out or reinforced."

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