

Legal causes concern dean Derrick Bell

By Jonathan Siegle
Photos by Dave Kao

Controversy has followed Derrick Bell, dean of the law school, since his arrival in Oregon.

There was the FBI flap last year and the crisis over the Environmental Law Center. Lately he's received more attention over the reporting of his comments to the black alumni.

He's not happy with all the attention.

"I think I've had more exposure in the press than the president (Olum)," he says. But that is the result of speaking out on unpopular issues.

"A substantial part of being controversial is to have views that most people have and be willing to express them in contexts that it's not in your best interest to do so. And at some risk."

He does not seek controversy, but it may be unavoidable. Causes raise eyebrows — some of approval, some of disapproval — Bell says. "To speak out on controversial issues, to take unpopular stands," he says, "is to raise some questions."

Yet Bell is no radical. Many of his concerns are what one would expect from a lawyer — civil liberties issues, privacy issues. It is this, however, that makes Bell controversial. "To express and support a policy people think is fair creates consternation, even when you're clearly working in people's interests."

And he surely isn't backing off, although he does wish some of the attention would go away.

Bell knows there are many in Oregon who would prefer he leave, just as there are many who are glad he's here. Hiring him was "a smart move, and it did take some courage. I told them in advance that I wasn't one of those professionals who just happens to be black."

He took the job and did not "disappear into the woodwork of regularity." There are those, Bell says, who believe "it's a great thing the law school appointed you as dean. Be appreciative, and don't make waves."

Don't make waves. "Everybody would rather get along with people. Most of us take an awful lot in order to get along, which is especially true of blacks."

Don't make waves. "Americans are a people comfortable with the status quo."

Don't make waves. "Fade into the background. Be more neutral."

Bell is proud of his tenure as dean of the School of Law. He admits, however, to not being "an administrative genius. I kind of drop the ball the whole time."

"I have a sense that enterprises I am involved with are going to do well. Effort on my part will be rewarded. We were able to add LEXUS. We've got computers now, a number of improvements. Visitors want to stay."

"I'd like to have a decent budget, but the absence of a decent budget and the pressures from outside create an environment where people want to stay together," Bell says.

"Seven members of our faculty — and we've only got 22 — published books this year. Harvard can't say that, certainly in percentage, if not in

number.

"Course they'll say their books are better than ours, but I don't know about that either. And there are as many books in process for publication next year. It's astounding," he says. Unlike Harvard, our people get very little support for writing. But good teaching makes good writing and vice versa. It's a circular effort."

"I can't take credit for that."

The law school is improving its national image, Bell says. "I think that reputation is a subjective thing. Reputation is based on the age of the school, its size and the amount of money it has to spend. Reputation is separable from the quality of education, and you have to deal with it that way. A quality reputation attracts better students."

"Impressive folk are applying to teach at Oregon," he says. "Add the budgetary problems, and it's quite amazing."

Bell says at other law schools the dean stays an average of three years. He would like to equal the six-year tenure of his two predecessors, then move on but not as a dean. "One of these is enough. But I'd like to fill out the same term and build on their good work."

Bell, his wife Jewell, and his three sons came to Eugene from Harvard, where he was on the faculty. Living in Oregon, he has faced some problems, "but to a different degree. Boston is one of the most racist cities, even now. It's just an awful place. Oregon was a relief to living in Boston."

"If I hadn't lived in cities like New York, Chicago, I would not appreciate what Eugene has. But Oregonians aren't used to seeing too many black people.

"It's normal when a black face enters a restaurant for people's heads to go up. There's an air of tension. You get used to the stares all the time, but you just wish you didn't have to when you go out to have a good time," Bell says.

"I can't say I haven't been affected by the racial composition of the state. But you've got to take the bitter with the better."

Bell admits it's easier for him as dean of the law school than other blacks. "Whites are very class conscious. There's a lot of class base to racial discrimination. In our travels people have been kind and helpful."

He also admits he ignores the lesser hassles. "People have no sense of what they're saying, so you let it pass."

When Bell was hired, colleagues back east suggested perhaps he was retiring. He disputes that. "It's not an anomaly for a civil rights attorney to come out and be dean of a virtually all-white law school in a virtually all-white state. Since I've been here I've been more outspoken than ever before."

Coming to Oregon may prove to be the best thing for him and the state. He challenged the legal profession when he suggested Portland attorneys would prefer representing murderers and thieves to the Black United Front. He's challenged the institution of law school when he suggested great similarities exist between law students and slaves. He's brought attention to important issues and recognition to the School of Law.

"I hope," Bell says, "the final evaluation is that it will be good for me and good for the school."

Derrick Bell, dean of the University's law school, is widely known for his pursuit of civil rights causes, yet he has found time to improve the law school during his tenure.