



Photo by Maria Corvallis

Still Judged By Their Color

The discrimination persists on campus and off.

BY MICHELLE BRENCE

When University student Tammy-Jo Rhodes returned a Christmas gift to a Eugene store without a receipt, the clerk implied she had stolen it. When student Vanessa Newton wanted to rent a campus-area apartment, she was initially told her monthly income must be three times the rent. And student Tommie Reynolds says that when he goes into stores that carry expensive merchandise, clerks ignore him because they don't think he has enough money to buy anything.

Rhodes, Newton and Reynolds have something in common. They're black.

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Of the more than 17,000 students at the University, fewer than 200 are black — less than 1.2 percent.

The landscape is as white in Eugene and even whiter in nearby Springfield. According to 1980 census statistics, blacks make up about 1.1 percent of Eugene's population. They account for about 4 percent of Springfield's residents. About 1.4 percent of the state's population is black, compared to 11.7 percent nationally.

Being black in an almost all-white

community isn't easy. The stereotypes blacks encounter on campus and in the community are negative and widespread: All black students are athletes. Blacks are stupid. Black people are lazy. Blacks steal. Black people are poor.

And the repercussions of the stereotypes range from being called a nigger to being denied an apartment or a job.

What's worse, some black people don't think racism is ebbing away, but that conservative forces swept in by the Reagan administration are turning the tide back.

According to Ed Coleman, a black University English professor, the century-old adage "if it's white it's all right, if it's brown you stick around, and if it's black you get back" is still applicable today.

The first black student to enroll at the University was a woman — Mabel Byrd back in the fall of 1917. According to Keith Richard, University archivist, the woman in charge of Byrd's assigned dorm was shocked to see a black person bring her bags up the steps.

In fact, the dorm supervisor told Byrd a terrible mistake had been made — blacks weren't allowed to live on campus. Byrd spent the night in the dorm lounge, and the next day the University found accommodations for

her off campus with a professor's family.

Byrd, her parents and even The Oregonian complained vehemently to no avail. Byrd left the University at the end of the quarter and ended up finishing her degree at the University of Washington.

1927 saw the entrance of the first black football players, Robert Robinson and Charles Williams. They, too, lived off campus their first three years until the football team petitioned the University to let them move in the dorms.

But the discrimination off campus was uglier. Some teams from the South wouldn't allow whites to play against blacks until the 1960s. So when the team traveled to the University of Miami and lost, many blamed the fact that Robinson and Williams, two of the team's better players, had been left behind.

Off the field, Robinson, who was also an exceptional student, changed his major from pre-medicine to physical education when no medical school would admit him.

In the 1930s, the University of Washington petitioned the Pacific Coast Conference, the forerunner of the Pacific 10 Conference, to make another University athlete, Joe Lillard, ineligible to compete because he had played semi-professional baseball. Lillard also happened to be an outstanding football player.

But even though several white athletes at other conference schools had played semi-pro baseball, the PCC declared only Lillard ineligible. Lillard quit school at the end of the year and went on to become one of the first two blacks to play professional football.

Then in 1936, the University basketball coach, Howard Hobson, brought Charles Patterson to the University. Patterson was the first black to play basketball in the northern division of the PCC, which included Oregon, Washington, Idaho and Montana.

"The Brown Bomber," as Patterson came to be known, faced hostility on every court except Oregon's. He was jeered by crowds and warned by referees that if he touched anyone during the game they would call a foul.

But Patterson kept on with the encouragement of Hobson, who told him someone had to break the barrier and that he was the person to do it.

In the 1960s, the number of black students overtook the number of black student-athletes. But athletes remained the targets of much of the discrimination.

In the middle of that decade, the assistant basketball coach, Frank Arnold, tried to make the black basketball players shave all facial hair and abide by an Athletic Department rule requiring athletes to have crew cuts. But the students protested, and the rule was changed.

Michelle Brence is editor of the Oregon Daily Emerald.