

BACK TO CAMPUS



Shaping a Dream

Oregon debates future of diversity.

By Kaukab Jhumra Smith

As a high school student in Oregon, Liani Jean Heh Reeves would often find a group of girls waiting by her locker. They'd push her, taunt her and scrawl racist epithets on her locker door.

African-American students were treated the worst, says Reeves, who is Asian-American. "The administration was not equipped to handle the situation," she says. Many students of color dropped out of high school because of emotional and physical abuse from other students, she says.

Now an attorney with the National Crime Victim Law Institute, and the public affairs chair for the Korean American Citizens League, Reeves feels strongly that Oregon's education system needs to be overhauled. "Access to education for students of color is not the same as access for majority students," she says. Efforts to raise awareness and promote dialogue about these injustices, she

says, "are long overdue in this state."

Oregon is not alone in the controversy over the status of minorities in education. "Oregon is a lot like the rest of the nation," says Peggy C. Ross, director of affirmative action at the office of the governor in Oregon. "There are areas where we have made tremendous strides; there are areas where we still have a lot of work to do."

Most recently, a U.S. Supreme Court ruling on affirmative action sent ripples across the country, and set the stage for intense legal analysis, social project planning — and further debate.

Bringing this debate to Oregon is UO's Center for Diversity and Community (CODAC), which has organized a summit on Oct. 4 to discuss the implications of this Supreme Court ruling for Oregon's population. Ross, Reeves and a host of other leaders from Oregon's civic, legal and education

communities will come together at the event called "After *Grutter*: Affirmative Action and Our Compelling Interests in Diversity."

The case prompting all the excitement is *Grutter v. Bollinger*, where the Supreme

making in other areas of government policy, in a way that would withstand legal scrutiny," says John Shuford of CODAC, who helped organize the summit.

However, Shuford says, "the impact of

'Oregon is changing, and there is a need to increase and develop programs, resources, research and other means of addressing these changes.' — John Shuford

Court decided in favor of a race-conscious admissions policy at the University of Michigan law school. This was unlike the summer's other affirmative action case, *Gratz v. Bollinger*, where the Supreme Court ruled against the undergraduate admission policy at UM because it was too rigid in its system of allotting a fixed number of points to applicants' race.

But in *Grutter*, the Supreme Court approved of the way the Michigan law school kept race in mind as one more aspect of the applicant, basing admission decisions on a holistic review of the application. The court ruled that higher education institutions had a "compelling interest" in diversity. The judgment was hailed as groundbreaking.

"I think that the decision in this *Grutter v. Bollinger* case is probably one of the most important decisions of our time," says Justice Paul De Muniz, a judge on the Oregon Supreme Court and the CODAC summit's keynote speaker. "In my opinion, this is one of those classic cases where you have the intersection of constitutional law and social policy."

Half-Hispanic and the first in his family to attend college, De Muniz will address in his keynote speech the need for emerging leaders to be informed by diverse ideas, cultures and peoples. Diversity is about more than race and ethnicity, he believes: It also encompasses class and attitude differences. Exposure to different viewpoints is necessary "in order to compete in global markets, in order to have a strong military — all these things have to do with diversity in higher education," he says.

The *Grutter* decision has been seen as a "blueprint" for implementing race-conscious admissions in higher education, "and possibly for practicing race-conscious decision-

Grutter or the 'compelling interest in diversity' for a state like Oregon, and a university like UO, would remain to be seen — which is a large reason why we're having this public dialogue on Oct. 4."

The disconnect between political representation and the general population, not just in Oregon but in the entire country, further shows the need for discussion on state diversity, says Keith Aiko, a UO law professor who will also speak at the summit. With the Hispanic population in Oregon doubling in the last 10 years, Aiko asks, why is there only one Latino among the 90 members of the Oregon state Legislature?

The summit's experts hope to discuss possible ways in which the higher education focus of *Grutter* may help extend race-conscious policies to other areas like government, private employment and business. "Oregon is changing, and there is a need to increase and develop programs, resources, research and other means of addressing these changes," says Shuford.

"Race, unfortunately, still matters," said the Supreme Court in the *Grutter* ruling. Reeves' experience through high school and her career stands proof. "The legal profession is a conservative profession and Oregon is not a diverse state. New people and new ideas are not particularly welcome in either," says Reeves. "I have to constantly defend my place as a woman and a minority because I am never looked at just as an Oregonian or just an attorney."

The CODAC summit on Oct. 4 hopes to find ways to change that. Held at the Knight Law School, the event is free and open to the public. For more information, call John Shuford at 346-3212, or visit www.uoregon.edu/~codac/

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