



Many believe that only black students take courses in the Black Studies Department at Portland State University, but department chair Shirley Jackson says the curriculum is really for everybody.

# 50 Years of Black Studies

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

Aug. 22, 1969.

“It was deemed experimental because it was so new — there was no guarantee that this would actually be something that would continue to exist,” Jackson said.

Charlotte Rutherford, a former civil rights attorney with the NAACP Legal and Educational Fund who donated a vast collection of her family’s black memorabilia to the PSU Library, earned her certificate in the program in 1976. She said she took classes from the program — and continues to support it — through her desire to learn “about our history as black people both in Oregon and the in the history of the U.S.”

“The public school system then and probably now does little to teach race history and the true story of how black people (and other people of color) have contributed to and been treated in this country,” she said. “I always knew there had to be more information than I had been given in school but I had no idea so much information had been suppressed.”

Initially, the program focused on the African American experience, based on what was happening around the country at the time. The few years before its founding saw marches on Washington, D.C. and in the American South, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the assassinations of both Malcolm X

and Martin Luther King, Jr., the founding of the Black Panthers in 1966, numerous race-fueled riots in American cities, and the emergence of the Black Power movement.

The program also had the mission of providing assistance and support to Portland’s black community.

“At that time the majority of Portland black residents resided in an area known as Albina,” recalled Phil McLaurin, the center’s first director. “Black Studies offered courses to Albina-area residents at a PSU-funded facility known as Albina Presence, and was actively involved in all issues impacting the community residents.”

The mission broadened in the ensuing years to include courses on the black experience in Europe, the Caribbean and Latin America. It added travel opportunities, and next December will offer study in Santiago de Cuba and has plans to develop a study trip to New York City — probably the most diverse black population in the United States.

The curriculum is multidisciplinary, covering history, sociology, cultural anthropology, literature, film and other fields. Although many believe that only black students take courses in Black Studies, Jackson said it’s really for everybody.

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“Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, ‘What are you doing for others?’”

– Martin Luther King, Jr.



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