

40th Anniversary of the Desegregation of the College of Charleston
President P. George Benson
January 11, 2008

Thank you, Professor Dulaney. And thank you all for being here to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the desegregation of the College of Charleston.

The Avery Institute played an important role in challenging the College to integrate. Professor Dulaney, and the faculty, staff, and students from the Avery Institute and today's Avery Research Center have done so much to help make the College of Charleston the diverse institution it is today.

Forty years ago, African Americans weren't allowed to attend class on this campus. But a little more than 24 hours ago, thousands of people crowded into the Cistern Yard to hear Senator Barack Obama, in his bid to become President of the United States. We've come a long way!

I have learned a lot about the College's history on desegregation, and I'm looking forward to hearing from others who have stories to share. Ours is not a pretty story, but it is a success story. It is a story of overcoming division, a story of justice prevailing, and a story of healing.

College of Charleston's History

I would like to say the College of Charleston was a powerful leader in integrating higher education in South Carolina, but, as Professor Dulaney pointed out, it was not. That recognition goes to Clemson and USC. Efforts by the president and some of the trustees of the College of Charleston to remain segregated throughout the 1940's, 50's and the early 60's have been well documented.

Efforts by determined individuals to desegregate the College are also well known. John Wrighten, a graduate of the Avery Institute, began a campaign to integrate South Carolina colleges and universities in the early 40's.

Lucille Whipper, from Avery's class of '44, was among several dozen students who also wrote application letters to the College. And why shouldn't they? The College was a public institution. It had received funding from the city and the county since 1836, and the city owned the College's property. The Honorable Lucille Whipper is with us today. Welcome, Lucille, and thank you for encouraging the desegregation of the College.

In the face of mounting inquiries by students and the NAACP, the College worked to strengthen its stance on separatism. In 1949, the Legislature passed an act to amend the College's charter, transferring deeds for its properties to the Trustees. Once again, the College was a private institution and relatively free from the pressure to desegregate that was mounting on all public institutions.

By the late 1940s and early 1950s, white alumni were calling for the College to integrate. John Lofton, from the class of 1940, had become an editor at the Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette*. He started a petition in favor of an integrated campus and sent it to the Board of Trustees. Other graduates across the nation wrote letters as well. But the leadership of the College was determined to stay the course. In the end, they nearly went bankrupt trying to retain what they called the College's "traditional character."

In July 1965, the Department of Health, Education and Welfare notified the College that its students would not be permitted to borrow college expense money under the National Student Defense Loan Act of 1959. The notice stated that the denial of such funds was based on the College's refusal to comply with provisions of Title Six of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

On July 12, 1966, the Board of Trustees of the College signed HEW Form 441, "Assurance of Compliance With the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare Regulation Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964." Three months later, Walter Coppedge became the president of the College and the first to usher in the era of desegregation. The following year, African American students began to enroll at the College of Charleston.

Among those early student-pioneers were:

- Eddie Ganaway, who became our first African American graduate (he's here with us today)
- Linda Dingle Gadsden
- Carrie Nesbitt Gibbs (who is also here today)
- Vince Clark
- Angela Brown
- Gene Washington
- Basketball players Remus Harper and Otto German
- And Arlinda Locklear, who was our first American Indian student

In 1968, President Ted Stern took over the task of reshaping the College of Charleston as an integrated institution.

In 1970, the state legislature brought the College back into the state public system of higher education.

Eddie Ganaway graduated in 1971. We presented him with an honorary degree at our Winter Commencement last month, and Ted Stern participated in the ceremony. Mr. Ganaway was also our guest speaker. Two pioneers who made history at the College 40 years ago were reunited: Eddie Ganaway as the first African American student to receive a degree after many others had tried to gain access to the College . . . Ted Stern as the first president to grant a diploma that for decades had been reserved for whites only.

By the way, Lucile Whipper became our first African American administrator in 1972 and helped to change the campus culture. She will share some of her experiences with you in a few minutes.

We can't rewrite the College's history of segregation. But we can celebrate those who helped to integrate the College. Thanks to their courage and determination, today "We are a much better and stronger institution."

College of Charleston: Present and Future

Today our student body is composed of students from many cultures. Diversity is one of our core values. It is central to what colleges and universities are all about: a powerful sense of community and an equally powerful respect for diverse peoples and diverse perspectives.

However, we are not where we want to be in terms of the percentage of underrepresented students at the College. We need to improve our face-to-face recruiting and not rely so heavily on mail to encourage prospective students to apply and enroll. We also need to find better ways to retain students from year to year, particularly from the freshman to sophomore year.

It will take the energy and commitment of all of us - the administration, faculty, staff, students, alumni and friends - to encourage students to come here, stay here, and graduate from the College. I commit my office to this important task, and I'm asking each of you to help us. We need your ideas, your energy, and your open and active advocacy of diversity.

People will make the difference, just as they did 40 years ago. Thank you for helping us celebrate the 40th anniversary of desegregation and the progress that has been made and will be made to enrich the lives of our students through diversity.