

Chapter 9: 1970s

“The Hawaiian Club and Black Theme Dorm”

The decade of the 1970s was the most complex era in Whitworth’s history regarding race relations. On the one hand, an increasing number of African American students enrolled during the decade.¹ The Black Student Union exerted a presence on campus. The college adopted a more progressive approach to pressing social issues. On the other hand, by the end of the decade, Black student enrollment began to lag and retention was poor. By 1973, only six African American students from the 1969 entering class of twenty-three graduated. Project Opportunity had quietly been ended. The Black Studies curriculum never got off the ground. Although Whitworth employed its first African American administrator, the college continued to struggle with hiring and retaining faculty and staff of color.

The decade began on a generally optimistic note for those who wanted Whitworth to pursue a more progressive and diversified racial identity. The Board of Trustees hired Ed Lindaman as the 14th president in 1970. He would serve for nearly ten years. Lindaman had spent his earlier career in the aerospace industry in Southern California and was an active Presbyterian layman. But his distinctive calling was as a futurist. He wrote and thought

seriously about the future of the world in general and American society in particular. He maintained Whitworth's commitment to its Christian identity by continuing to require that all faculty and staff be professing Christians. At the same time, he desired to make the college a place where social issues, environmental concerns, and progressive religious beliefs would be nurtured and affirmed. Lindaman, who was frequently referred to by students as "Captain Eddy," liked to say that "we are fellow travelers on the planet Earth." He quickly assembled a new team of talented administrative leaders that included David Winter, Dave Erb, Duncan Ferguson, Ron White, and Lillian Whitehouse Lyle. They began a season of substantive change at Whitworth. The '70s were marked by a new approach to student life, directed by Erb, where student decision-making was prioritized over strict emphasis on rules, and by Duncan Ferguson and Ron White as chaplains.

The curriculum, redesigned at the end of Koehler's presidency, featured a set of required courses for all students that became known as the "Core program." By the 1970s, the Core curriculum found its footing by featuring a critical examination of the Western philosophical tradition as well as the Judeo-Christian tradition. Chapel was no longer required, but it was replaced by "Forum," which met twice weekly and for which students could receive academic credit for their attendance. Controversial speakers were frequently brought to campus who provoked discussions afterwards, much as William Stringfellow had in 1966. Overseas study became increasingly popular and the Jan Term (a single course taken in the month of January) allowed faculty and students to develop educational experiences that were not possible during the regular semester.

Whitworth marketed itself as the "Alternative Christian College." Rather than protect Christian students from engaging the world, Whitworth faculty challenged students to develop a

fearless attitude toward changing the world by applying Christian beliefs and principles. This took place in the context of crises precipitated by Vietnam War, Civil Rights movement, concern over the future of the planet, as well as emerging feminist issues. Roe v. Wade made abortion legal in 1973, Title IX legislation transformed women's athletics, and momentum built nationally toward passing the Equal Rights Amendment.

For Whitworth's African American students, the growing importance and acceptance of their identity translated into an increasing sense that "Blackness" should not only be recognized but celebrated. Black students discussed the Black Power movement with colleagues and friends, and occasionally these discussions worked their way into the classroom. The Black Student Union remained a robust group and numerous Black speakers of significance came to Whitworth to instill awareness regarding the plight of African Americans in America including Spokane.

Growing self-consciousness of one's racial, ethnic and cultural identity also began to shape the experience of the students attending from Hawaii. In 1966, Hawaiian Curt Kekuna was recruited by football and baseball coach Paul Merkel to come to campus. Whitworth officials assigned another Hawaiian student to be his roommate (there were only four Hawaiian students altogether on campus at that time). In retrospect, Kekuna remembers feeling somewhat odd that Whitworth did not ask him his preference regarding roommates. Nevertheless, Kekuna, a charismatic individual, became well known across campus. Eventually he roomed with one of the African American students, Leonard Dawson, and became friends with many of other Black students as well.

When asked about his classroom experience, Kekuna recalled, that he often felt tension between faculty expectations that students participate verbally in class and his own cultural

norms that emphasized respect for authority and resulting hesitation to speak up. Nevertheless, he also recalls how significant and even life-changing were several Whitworth professors who took an interest in him. These faculty members included Fenton Duvall in history, Gus Haas in political science and Leonard Oakland in English.

Kekuna, a person with a strong Christian faith, who went on to lead Young Life in Hawaii remembers the evolution of his own thinking in terms of his racial/ethnic identity. Coming of age in an era when non-white groups were increasingly encouraged to take pride in their own heritage and culture, Kekuna, along with the handful of Hawaiian students at the time, decided to approach college officials about the possibility of hosting a Lu'au on campus. School officials agreed, and students planned the first Lu'au in spring 1970. Food was flown in from Hawaii and Whitworth food service directors allowed the students to prepare it. Numerous hula dances provided the entertainment and the event was considered a great success. The Lu'au became one of the most significant and enduring cultural events each year on campus. It is still going strong more than fifty years later with university presidents, faculty, staff and students not only enjoying the food but learning hula dances from Hawaiian students.²

However, the story for Black students at Whitworth during the '70s suggests that the vast majority who came--and they still came in significant numbers during the early part of the decade—were not retained. Instead of New York City, Los Angeles proved to be a fruitful area of recruitment thanks to John Grayson, an elder in the city's Westminster Presbyterian Church. However, most dropped out or chose to transfer after one or two years. Project Opportunity quietly was not retained. By the end of the decade, overall numbers had declined; the number of African Americans did not recover until the early 2000's.

All of these students of color, as well as most white students, engaged race-related issues within the larger context of national and regional forces. At the national level, the Civil Rights movement focused attention on strategies for affirmative action and other approaches designed to mitigate *de facto* segregation in the North. Regionally, Seattle adopted one of the largest mandatory busing programs in the country in 1970; it was implemented in 1972 to much protest and controversy. This effort to confront segregation, particularly in public school systems, was accompanied by an emphasis within Black communities across the country on working for their own empowerment and lessening dependence on white liberals. Some of that impulse was directly the result of the Black Power Movement and work of the Black Panthers particularly on the West Coast. On campuses across the country, this impulse gave rise to the Black Student Union movement.

As suggested, the first half of the 1970s witnessed a number of positive developments intended to impact the lives of Black students on the Whitworth campus. In 1970, the college hired Walt Oliver, an extremely popular Black student who had graduated in 1967, as Assistant Director of Student Development and Vice President of Minority Affairs from 1970 through 1973. Oliver and his wife Shirley, who had grown up in the Watts neighborhood in Los Angeles, also lived for a short time in MacMillan Hall as resident directors.³

Despite strategic hires and initiatives, however, it is clear that many Black students continued to find Whitworth a challenging place for a number of reasons. In the early '70s, Black students expressed frustrations regarding campus life as well as society. One such expression is found in James Minor's 1970 column entitled, "Panthers break black image."

Minor probably intended his column to help educate Whitworth students, both white and Black, about the purpose of the Black Panthers. He began by raising a question: Are the

Panthers a group “that is trying to do something for black people; or a group of gun happy thugs out to bring down the establishment?” Minor clearly believed the former description but his column delineated white concerns about the Panthers. He began by pointing out that, “J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the FBI, tells us that the number one threat to America’s security is the Black Panther Party.” Minor asks why should this group create such fear?

To find the answer you must go back to the time of slavery when the number one fear of the slave master and other whites was the ‘bad [N]’, the one who wouldn’t take chains or the whip, the one who would assert himself as a man. The punishment for this assertion was always the same, death. As years went on white society continually kept down the ‘bad [N]’. Whole generations of black men have lived and died without the ‘bad [N]’ coming out, their mommas bring them up to be submissive, so as to not incur the wrath of white society. In a few cases they couldn’t be kept down and our jails are filled with black men who are a mute testimony to another way in which white society represses the black colony.

By lynching, murdering, burning and raping, white society kept black people down. By cries of, ‘be patient, just a little more time, and how much do you people want anyway,’ black people were kept down. Kept down until, like history tells us, all oppressed people eventually rise up in rebellion. That rebellion is manifesting itself in the form of the Black Panther Party for self-defense.

You see the Panther Party represents to white society, the supreme example of the ‘bad [N]’. For four-hundred years, black people have lived in fear. The fear of a man who knows he cannot protect his family, the fear of the woman who watches her kids grow up in shame. The fear of knowing you have no rights, that fear of knowing that anytime, the

police wanted to knock in your door and rob or even kill you, they could do it and not one thing would be said about it. With the advent of the Panthers, the black colony had hope, something white society had to demolish. Imagine the spectacle, armed [Ns] running around, next thing you know they will want to live next door. So of course, white society once again had to rush to the rescue, in the form of police departments that harmed and continually threatened the Panthers. In an attempt, which is obvious to anyone with eyes, to completely wipe out the party. Yet it is the Panthers who are regarded as the threat. The threat to the nation's security. And they are a threat to security, all those who feel secure because black people are in their place, or the security of those who maintain and get rich off this nation's black communities from the dope pusher to the store pusher who charges higher prices for cheaper goods, to the landlord who is never there except to collect the rent.

If you don't fall into one of these categories you can feel secure. But the next time you read in the papers of another attack on the Panthers by a police department, remember with every attack, the black people of this country doesn't give a damn about them and as more come to this realization, true revolution can be the result.⁴

Minor's column did not elicit a response from any student or faculty member in the next issue of the *Whitworthian*. However, his blunt description of the context for the rise of the Black Panthers, his direct dissection of the history of slavery and fear among white individuals of any African American who was armed, surely must have generated many conversations. Minor's column also suggests that Whitworth's Black students were willing to confront white students

and faculty with the reality of an aspect of American history with which they were largely unfamiliar.

In addition to expressing themselves in the *Whitworthian*, African American students continued to make the Black Student Union an important group on campus. On December 1, the BSU presented a document to the administration entitled “The Way We Feel: Proposals for Change by the Black Student Union at Whitworth.” They presented fifteen proposals for change; the BSU acknowledged that eleven had been made in 1969 but felt that it was necessary to reiterate them. The focus of the demands centered on the necessity of hiring persons of color in admissions, in the athletics area, and in other faculty and staff roles. They argued that more work was needed to fund fully the Martin Luther King Jr. Scholarship. They wanted increased transparency regarding admissions decisions that involved Black students. They asked for more courses that specifically addressed the history of African Americans and African American culture. Black students also called for more “intercultural sensitivity training” for faculty and staff.⁵ All of this emerged in the wake of the quiet end of Project Opportunity which seemed largely due to the inability of the administration to fund many of the earlier initiatives.

On the same day the proposals were presented, Whitworth’s BSU president, Perseal King, sent a letter to the Department of Health, Education & Welfare regarding racial issues at Whitworth. The letter began, “It is after a number of serious, disturbing and frustrating occurrences [sic] that it becomes imperative to enlist your assistance in hopes of rectifying a number of impending and continuing discrepancies.” The letter described the frustration of Black students on campus. It also raised the question of whether Whitworth was using federal funds for their intended purpose which were in King’s opinion, for use by “poor people or students who demonstrated sufficient need.”⁶

Meanwhile, the BSU demanded a response from President Lindaman to their demands by December 5th. In response, Lindaman's administrative assistant, Herbert Stocker, read a brief statement from the president at the college's Forum. Lindaman said that he supported each of the recommendations and would "do everything that I can to see that they are implemented." He indicated that he would establish immediately a Black Education Planning Task Force. He said that "We cannot operate as an institution committed to Jesus Christ without a greater sensitivity to the needs of the minority student. At Whitworth the largest minority group is black. It is important for us to meet the needs of these students more effectively than we have in the past."⁷

Lindaman and his cabinet created a planning and response grid for each of the fifteen proposals. In addressing the proposals, the president involved the Student Affairs Council, the Academic Affairs Council, as well as the Black Student Union. According to archival records, there was general consensus that Whitworth needed to recruit more minority students, offer more courses with a Black Studies component, offer expanded tutorial services, hire more persons of color and raise more money for scholarships for minority students. These affirmations reflect a serious effort to engage issues raised by the Black Student Union though a lack of documentation makes it difficult to discern the actual result of the proposals.⁸

In February 1973, the administration formed the "Black Education Commission." Comprised of the president of the Black Student Union, other students and faculty and Ed Lilly, the Minority Affairs Director, the commission met for approximately twenty hours and interviewed key administrative figures including Ed Lindaman, Academic Dean Dave Winter, and Director of Admissions Dave Morley. Committee notes indicate that they tried to interview current Black students on campus but were unsuccessful aside from a group interview that

Perseal King conducted with Black students. He indicated that the group of Black students said that priorities had not changed since 1968.

The commission supported the need for a Black professor, a Black tutorial director, a Black coach, a Black Studies program, improvements in social activities and increasing the number of Black students on campus through financial aid and recruitment. The commission made specific recommendations intended to address all of the above-mentioned needs. It also attached a list of financial recommendations designed to meet them. Most interesting was the statement that “the college will have to pay more than the established pay scale indicates to recruit a qualified black professor.” The commission concluded by saying, “If Whitworth is serious in providing a broadly based educational community in which minority and majority cultures interact in the most positive and beneficial ways, the preceding recommendations will support the minimum viable program.”⁹

In April, Lindaman presented the recommendations to Whitworth’s Board of Trustees, including five options that required specific funding. Two of the five proposals supported paying salaries greater than the regular faculty salary scale for both a Black professor and a Black coach. The board decided not to authorize compensation for those positions above the regular Whitworth scale. The board did, however, approve continued funding for the Director of Minority Affairs, and added a new position entitled the Director of Tutorial Services, as well as a Black graduate assistant coach.¹⁰

It is likely that the Black Student Union was disappointed in the response, particularly the decision not to be more aggressive about hiring a Black professor and coach. Unfortunately, Whitworth began to suffer a series of financial problems by the mid-‘70s in part due to double-

digit inflation that plagued the entire country. These financial challenges made it difficult to direct additional resources toward the hiring of Black faculty.

From the outset of the decade, the BSU determined that one of its major functions was to provide an opportunity for Black students to express themselves culturally, in part to help white students better appreciate the richness of Black culture in America. For example, in spring 1971 the BSU hosted a campus event specifically oriented to the expression of “Blackness.” In addition, they held a Soul-food dinner, and a variety show with the theme “In Blackness.”¹¹

Consciousness and pride about being Black also found expression in 1972 when Whitworth student Yolanda Hargraves was named Miss Black Spokane and her Whitworth friend, Maria Hampton was named runner up.¹² Two years later, Jacque Frazier of Whitworth was also named Miss Black Spokane.

During the following year, Whitworth continued to invite controversial speakers on race to campus. In October 1973, Florence [Florynce] Kennedy, well-known Black feminist liberationist attorney offered several addresses. In one she urged Whitworth students to “get rid of ‘Scoop’ Jackson’ [one Washington state’s United States senators] and Richard Nixon.” She also encouraged them to protest the deployment of the Trident submarine. According to the student newspaper, Whitworth student reactions ranged from, “I walked out and I’ll walk out again” to “She was good but I don’t agree with her totally” and “Right on!” Some students seemed offended by her language, “She didn’t have to talk like that” while another “wasn’t offended. That’s the way she is and I could sort of relate to it.” BSU students were also reportedly divided in their responses, although they were not as critical. Most agreed she left “a lot of people thinking.”¹³

In February 1974, as part of Black History Month, Civil Rights leader, friend and close associate of Martin Luther King Jr., Reverend Ralph David Abernathy, head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, addressed “a disappointingly small” crowd in Cowles Auditorium. Abernathy pointed out that “In spite of the historical and economic contributions of blacks dating back to our country’s origin almost two hundred years ago,” Black Americans were only “being afforded second, third, even fourth-class citizenship.” Quoting from a largely forgotten part of Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream Speech,” Abernathy said “America has given blacks a bad check and when they took it to the bank it bounced.” He spoke about Black frustrations regarding judicial equality, health care, inadequate economic opportunities, education and especially a frustration with the Nixon administration. Abernathy challenged supremacy whether it was Black or white. He cited the need for a coalition between Blacks, poor whites, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans and American Indians.

Following the lecture, Abernathy agreed to meet and eat with students in Whitworth’s first Black Theme Dorm. Located in one of “The Village” units (a series of wooden dormitories that had been built to house people in anticipation of the 1974 World’s Fair in Spokane), the theme dorm housed fourteen Black students and six white students. The purpose, according to Bernard Harper, resident assistant, was to “create a living situation where blacks could see their own culture being emphasized as the primary part of the learning experience.” The goal was to have Black and white students learn Black history and experience the “beauty of blackness.” None of the six white students had previously lived in a situation in which they were in the minority.

The theme dorm provided a great venue for hosting Abernathy. Students served him an authentic soul-food dinner. After raving about the dinner, Abernathy commented about how

excited he was to see something like this at Whitworth and hoped that it would strengthen communication between Black and white students on campus.¹⁴

Whitworth's Student Life staff continued to provide opportunities for Black and white students to interact with each other. The Black Theme dorm continued for a few more years, and in 1977, Chaplain Ron White team-taught a course in "Black and White Religion" with African American Leila Brown, who was a staff member in Student Life and advisor to the BSU. The course coincided with the airing of "Roots" a prime-time television history of slavery based on the work of Alex Haley.¹⁵ Three of the students in the dorm and class, April Grayson (Talton), Keith DeVries, and Jerita Starr (Laforcarde), all remember the class nearly fifty years later as being one of their best experiences at Whitworth.

They also recall an incident that later became controversial because of the subject matter, but at the time was done as something of a joke. In 1978, prior to Halloween, students in the Black Theme Dorm in the Village gathered for a group picture. As all of them recall, the idea was to create a "scary" photograph. Students gathered in attire (leather jackets and sunglasses) that echoed the Black Panthers; one white student was made up in Blackface. Another African American student held up a noose. The students intended the photograph to appear with other photographs under the umbrella of Halloween.

However, when the yearbook was released, the photograph appeared to represent the dorm. More than a few Whitworth students have stumbled across that disconcerting photograph in subsequent years and wondered about its menacing tone. In fact, the actual context of the photograph suggests that, at least among this group of Black and white students, race-related issues could be addressed somewhat tongue in cheek.¹⁶

It was during this period that many of the African American students that came to Whitworth were recruited from the Phoenix area. As was the case with Black students who had been recruited a few years prior from New York, the Phoenix students made connections to Whitworth through Young Life. When interviewed, several of these Phoenix-area Black students recalled generally positive experiences at Whitworth. They noted that, importantly, a critical mass of Black students helped create a sense of community. In addition, they cited the value of faculty who took a special interest in them. In 2022, six female African American students from that era organized an informal reunion back on the Whitworth campus in which they shared their memories from that period.¹⁷

Nevertheless, evidence of backlash from some white students on campus surfaced in the *Whitworthian*. Greg Grant wrote several provocative columns including one in which he endorsed the far-right political organization, the John Birch Society. The piece drew the ire of other students when he made the statement that “in the history of the United States the movement for civil rights has been the greatest con game ever perpetrated upon the people of this nation.” He went on at length about allegations that Martin Luther King was a communist. In response, another student, Doug Canfield, offered an extensive critique of Grant’s assertions.¹⁸

Other incidents reported in recent oral interviews with students of the 1970s reveal overtly racist behaviors. For example, after arriving on campus, an African American student discovered that her assigned roommate in the South Warren dormitory insisted she would not share the room with a Black person. After some tense conversations, the African American student agreed to live with another white student who was willing to be her roommate.

An even more chilling incident occurred in the late ‘70s outside of McMillan Hall. A white alum reported that an older student from Africa was subject to a hazing episode involving

a burning cross placed on the lawn outside the dorm. Details are sketchy, but the alum recalls the frightened African student.

As the decade wore on, efforts to recruit more African American students diminished. In the '73-'74 school year there were an estimated forty-five Black students on campus. That number dropped to thirty-six during the next school year. By the end of the decade there were fewer than twenty. Dr. Jim Hunt, who worked for a short time in admissions and later became a tenured member of the history department, remembers that the focus of admission efforts turned to more high-profile white students enrolled at elite high schools.¹⁹

As the 1980s opened, Whitworth reaffirmed its commitment to becoming a more diverse and multicultural campus. It would do so under new presidential leadership, and efforts would yield far fewer students of color than had been the case a decade before.

¹ By fall 1970, 34 African American students were registered out of a total student body of roughly 1,000. 16 students were newly enrolled. Of the 34, 20 were from Washington state, and only 4 were from New York. 3 were from California, 3 from Texas, 2 from North Carolina, 1 from Oklahoma, 1 from Colorado and one from Kenya. 20 were men, 14 were women and 2 were married to each other. Of the 23 who were enrolled in Fall 1968, only 9 were still at

Whitworth. Black Student Union Papers, "College Business," Box 1, Folder 6, Whitworth University Archives.

² Author Interview with Curt Kekuna, October 14, 2022.

³ Interview with Walt Oliver, February 8, 2022; *Whitworthian*, October 2, 1970.

⁴ *Whitworthian*, October 2, 1970, p. 3.

⁵ Document, "The Way We Feel: Proposals for Change by the Black Student Union at Whitworth," December 2, 1972, Black Student Union Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, Whitworth University Archives; *Whitworthian*, December 8, 1972, p. 3.

⁶ Letter, Perseal King to Department of Health, Education & Welfare. Edward Lindaman Papers, Box 1, Folder 32.

⁷ *Whitworthian*, December 8, 1972, p. 4; Edward Lindaman, Forum Statement, December 5, 1972, Lindaman Papers, Box 1, Folder 32.

⁸ Document, "Response to Proposals for Change," January 17, 1973; Black Student Union Papers, Box 1, Folder 3; Academic Affairs Council Minutes, December 11, 1972, Black Student Union Papers, Box 1, Folder 7; memo Student Affairs Council to the President, January 7, 1973, G3 Folder 3 (Black Studies File?);

⁹ "Black Education Report," Spring 1973, Black Student Union files, Box 1, Folder 11; "Black Student Union: Black Education Committee – 1972-73," Edward Lindaman Papers, Box 1, Folder 32.

¹⁰ Minutes of the Whitworth College Board of Trustees Meeting, April 13-14, 1973, Edward Lindaman Papers, Box 1, Folder 32.

¹¹ *Whitworthian*, April 21, 1971 p. 4.

¹² *Whitworthian*, May 12, 1972, p. 4.

¹³ *Whitworthian*, October 12, 1973.

¹⁴ *Whitworthian*, February 22, 1974, p. 5.

¹⁵ Author interview with Ron White, September 18, 2022.

¹⁶ Author interviews with April Grayson (Talton), November 14, 2022; author interview with Keith DeVries, November 18, 2022; author interview with Jerita Starr (Laforcarde), November 30, 2022; *Whitworthian*, April 21, 1978 p.2.

¹⁷ Interview, April Grayson (Talton), November 14, 2022; and interview Jerita Starr (Laforcarde). November 30, 2022.

¹⁸ *Whitworthian*, March 29, 1974 p. 5.

¹⁹ Author Interview with Jim Hunt, June 15, 2022.