

Honoring the Past, Celebrating the Present & Preparing for Future Challenges

We are delighted to launch the first issue of our biannual newsletter. BLACK@UT is an important newsletter because it allows the Commission for Blacks (CFB) to keep in touch with the UT community. In our March 2011 meeting a student representative stated that most students don't know what the CFB can do for them and what the CFB is all about. The CFB is an advisory group appointed by the Chancellor to advise on planning, implementation, and evaluation of University programs, policies, and services as they relate to Black students, faculty, and staff of the Knoxville campus. Each year the chancellor appoints faculty, staff, and students to serve a one-year term. We believe this newsletter is an important way to increase awareness about the CFB. So what makes this a great newsletter? BLACK@UT will present human interest stories and highlight the accomplishments of Black faculty, staff, students, and local community members. Our theme for this issue "Honoring the Past, Celebrating the Present and Preparing for Future Challenges" commemorates the 50th anniversary of African American Achievement. The articles in this issue highlight our progress on diversity initiatives and challenge us to do more. We hope this information will inspire and motivate our readers to embrace diversity and model civility.

J. Camille Hall, Chair, Commission for Blacks & Associate Professor of Social Work



Pioneer, Social Activist, and Community Leader: An Interview with Margaret Gaiter

The admission of the first African American undergraduate students at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville was one of the most significant cultural changes of the 20th century for this institution, and while many UTK students have heard of pioneers like Gene Mitchell Gray, Hardy G. Liston, and Theotis Robinson Jr., many have not heard of the female heroines of the era. In this article, we explore the accomplishments of one unsung hero, Margaret Gaiter. Recently, Sekeenia Haynes interviewed Ms. Gaiter to discuss her role in this historical event.

Q: Who is Margaret Gaiter?

I am the youngest of three children born in 1925. I grew up in Knoxville in a single parent home. When I was three years old, my father deserted our family and my mother became our sole provider. My aunt, who was disabled lived with us and was our caretaker while my mother worked. In 1943, I graduated high school and joined Rogers Memorial Baptist Church, where I served as the minister of music and the director of the flower committee. In 1943 when I graduated from Austin High School we [Black people] couldn't attend UT; therefore, Black students who wanted to pursue a college degree went to Knoxville College or Maryville College. There were some Blacks who chose to attend Ani State College in Nashville; but my older sister and I graduated from Knoxville College. I completed my undergraduate degree in 1947. My husband, Felix grew up in

Sylacauga, Alabama. He came to Knoxville to work at Oak Ridge National Laboratory (ORNL). Shortly after we met, Felix was drafted and served in the U.S. Armed Forces. During this time, Felix and I corresponded regularly. When he returned to Tennessee, we were married at our home in Mechanicsville. "When Felix came to my house to propose marriage, we could barely ride the bus." We've been married for 62 years and have raised three children; twin girls (Kathy and Peggy), and a son Felix Jr. Felix is a retired contractor; he was the first Black to win a bid to build at ORNL. In fact, Theotis Robinson, Jr. was VP for Economic Development for the 1982 World's fair and facilitated Felix securing contracts to build the Philippine Pavilion and the African and African American Exhibit. I received a Master's degree at the University of Colorado, and a Certificate of Supervision and Instruction from the University of Tennessee. I worked at the housing authority and urban renewal for several years, and after 19 years I retired from the Knox County School System. As a member of the Knoxville community, I have experienced several firsts. I am one of the founders of the Beck Cultural Exchange Center and one of the first Black members of the Knox Children Foundation. "Some of my richest experiences involve working with people from many walks of life and over the years I have discovered that I have received more from them than I have given."

An Interview with Margaret Gaiter

Q: Who were your mentor(s)?

My mother; she worked hard to provide for our family. She had a lot of determination and she inspired me to rise above life's circumstances. My mother was a domestic worker; she was energetic and proud of her work. She taught me to be grateful and humble; and she encouraged me to set goals.

Q: When you think back to 1961 what memories, thoughts, come to mind?

When compared to Memphis and Chattanooga, Knoxville was not as progressive in the civil rights movement. I born and raised in the Jim Crow era, "segregation" was the norm; so, the idea of Black and White students going to separate colleges was not unusual.

Q: Where were you when the first African American undergraduate students were admitted to UTK?

I was working at the public housing authority, when I heard the news report that four Black students' were admitted to UT.

Q: Describe your relationship with Theotis Robinson Jr., Willie Mae Gillespie, and Charles Edgar Blair?

Theotis Robinson, Robert Booker, and Avon Rollins were the forerunners in the Knoxville civil rights movement.

They participated in lunch counter sit-ins and advocated for admission to schools and access to theaters, etc. Mrs. Gillespie and I were members of the same church, we sang in the church choir, and were parents of twin girls who were baptized at the same time. Charles Blair's parents were caterers and were well known in the Knoxville community.

Q: In your opinion what is the significance of the 50th Anniversary celebration?

The 50th Anniversary celebration is an opportunity for Black faculty, staff, students and the community to commemorate a historic event that remind us of how far we have come and how much farther we have to go. I commend UTK's efforts to celebrate African American achievements.

Q: What role did you have in the 50th Anniversary celebration?

I helped the committee locate some of the honorees' family members for the kick-off celebration. I was able to contact Charles Blair's son. I knew that Gene Mitchell Gray had a nephew who lived in Knoxville and Willie Mae Gillespie's son, Michael, attends my church. I was delighted to take part in this event.

Q: What advice would you offer UT students?

I would tell students to recognize their talents and take advantage of every opportunity. I would encourage students to prepare for leadership and challenge them to use their knowledge and skills to help others. Finally, I would advise students to learn the history of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Over the past 50-years, UT's faculty, staff and students have become increasingly diverse. Diversity on campus is not just good for minority faculty, staff and students. It is good for UT, because we know, and reports have confirmed, that students on diverse campuses learn problem solving, communication, and other skills so critical to success in the new economy. The courage, perseverance, and leadership demonstrated by this heroine are inspirational. The CFB applaud Margaret Gaiter's efforts to promote intercultural/interethnic diversity at UT.

Sekeenia Haynes, PEER, Program Administrator

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Connect with the CFB

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We welcome you to send your thoughts, comments, or suggestions to our email address above or use our Twitter and Facebook.

2011 Chancellor Award Recipients

The Hardy Liston Symbol of Hope Award was presented to Lashaun Oliver, a University of Tennessee graduate who previously served as a corporal with the UT Police Department. He is now a member of the Vanderbilt University Police Department. As a UT police officer, Corporal Oliver promoted and facilitated diversity awareness programs on campus and throughout Knoxville. Before leaving UT, he served on the East Tennessee Civil Rights Working Group and was actively involved with the Urban League. He also served as a liaison for UT Minority Student Affairs and international students on campus.

Ja'nay Bryant, a senior in psychology and African Studies received the Gene Mitchell Gray Pioneer Award. She is the president and co-captain of Minority Enhancement for the University of Tennessee or ME4UT and frequently visits high schools to provide a student's perspective on UT. Ja'nay gives back to the community, as well volunteering with at-risk high school students and modeling the behavior of a servant leader.

Coming OUT the Corporate Closet

As chair of the UTK Chancellor's Commission for LGBT People, I am often asked whether the LGBT community on campus is "just white folks." I am happy to report that our community reflects the same diversity we see all over campus: white people, African Americans, Asian Americans, Latino/as, and most likely even more identities of which I am unaware. Last February the LGBT Commission opened OUTreach: the LGBT & Resource Center [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Ally] and on any given day you might walk in and see a room of students from every part of Tennessee, across racial, ethnic, and class lines.

One of the African American, lesbian students who volunteers at the OUTreach resource center recently introduced me to a friend of hers, who told me a story so powerful that I have not been able to stop thinking about it. I have asked her to share it with all of you.

In 2010, I received my accounting degree and in May 2011, I will receive my Master's in Accounting-Audit Concentration from UT. I will leave Tennessee for the first time to join an accounting firm in Atlanta. I was introduced to the firm in the fall of my junior year, when I accepted a competitive internship. As the spring internship came to an end, I found myself at a restaurant sitting across from one of the senior executives.

A few months before the internship began we [interns] were flown to the company headquarters for orientation. During orientation we had an opportunity to learn more about company, employee benefits, and the people in the company. When I looked around the room, I counted a handful of Blacks and from my vantage point there were no LGBT people. Once again, I felt isolated; but this [feeling alone] was not an unusual experience for me. In fact, I have come to believe that feeling isolated and alone was "normal" for a

minority, i.e., especially a Black, female, lesbian.

Throughout the internship, I managed to hide the gender of my partner of two years. I was the only female out of six interns in our office, so if I needed a male equivalent to Zoe Saldana [acclaimed actress] at a moment's notice was never a problem for me. It's customary for firms in the industry to offer a full-time position at the end of the internship. My lunch invitation arrived around the time the board of directors would be meeting to decide which interns would receive an offer for permanent employment (i.e., after matriculating through the accounting program). Essentially, my meeting with the manager was a "matchmaker" lunch for the firm. As we [me and female, senior manager] sat waiting for the arrival of our meal, she told me how impressed she was with my work ethic, performance, and personality.

Still, I was surprised when she politely asked, "What do you think about [our firm] and could you see yourself working here in the future?" I remember replying, "I enjoy Atlanta and everyone in the firm is fantastic." I paused and said, "But as much as I like it [meaning the internship], I would have to say no." No? I remember thinking how several of my friends who were graduating with stellar resumes and glowing transcripts and that many of them would barely get a management job at a local grocery store, and here I was telling a dream employer in a great city that I would not accept their job offer. At the time, I didn't have any other prospects.

The manager and I were both startled by my response. When she asked why I'd declined the job offer, I explained that based on my review of the employee benefit brochures I believe that the company did not offer domestic partner benefits and/or value LGBT employees.

I also concluded the firm did not wish to recruit LGBT employees. And, I knew that I could not dedicate myself to a company that was not equitable. I didn't need a support group, symbol, or a hotline like many other firms offered. All I needed was the wording of a pamphlet to be phrased in a manner that made me feel accepted. She [senior manager] was shocked by my openness and told me the issue would be addressed in the board meetings. She [senior manager] wondered how many potential candidates had been scared away, because they failed to speak up.

Before I completed the internship, some of the partners invited me to lunch to discuss my joining the firm. During lunch they talked about the conversation I'd had with the senior manager and genuinely expressed their support. Shortly after my discussion with the senior manager, the brochures were revised and new information packages were distributed to interns and employees. After the company respectfully responded to my observations, I accepted the job offer and will be joining the firm upon completion of my master's degree.

*Whitney Hardy
Lynn Sacco, Chair, Commission for
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Mentoring Diverse Faculty

For decades colleges and universities have sought to make their campuses more diverse by recruiting underrepresented students, faculty and staff and enhancing programming to create a feeling of inclusiveness. Those efforts have met with varying degrees of success, but the challenge of meeting diversity goals continues.

The approach is built on the idea that diversity embracing cannot be mandated, but must be learned and that efforts should center on campus-wide “ownership” of inclusiveness and cultural awareness. There is a strong case for diversity initiatives. While diversity initiatives often do a good job at educating people on the challenges and obstacles faced by women, people of color, or LGBT in the academy, the result is that behavior rarely changes, so the institutions fail to realize the value they’re seeking by investing in these programs.

For example, a person identified as not of color attends a training class in diversity. S/he completes the course feeling more sensitive to the issues facing people of color at the university. But then s/he never interacts with employees who are different from them, so s/he loses the opportunity to change their behavior in a meaningful way. The desired behavior changes that diversity initiatives aim to achieve cannot occur without real-life interactions at the university. So how can the university ensure that the money it spends on diversity initiatives yields desired result? By offering a mentoring program to supplement training. Mentoring promotes real diversity.

The goal of mentoring is to pair talented, experienced faculty to serve as mentors for promising, less experienced faculty—i.e., mentees within the University of Tennessee. Ideally, over time, the mentee gains skills, knowledge, and a better understanding of the institution. The mentor, in turn, typically gains a new perspective and learns about an area of the organization that was previously unknown. The true benefit and impact of mentoring is often seen not in achieving goals and objectives but in the personal exchange between the mentor and mentee. Successful mentoring creates real relationships and the opportunity for positive behavioral changes—an outcome that is especially beneficial for the University of Tennessee’s commitment to promoting diversity. In light of the University of Tennessee’s Top 25 initiatives, it seems logical that recruitment and retention of diverse faculty include a “Diverse Faculty Mentoring Program” (DFMP), which supplements, in important ways, the required faculty mentoring program. In fact, some Top 25 institutions have implemented similar programs (e.g.,

University of Georgia).

During the fall 2011 semester, the Commission for Blacks (CFB) will host a DFMP workshop. Top scholars will provide training sessions for faculty and key administrators regarding successful strategies for mentoring diverse faculty. All training sessions will be videotaped for the development of modules that will be uploaded onto a host website and made available for future use. In addition, all participants will complete pre- and post-test surveys. Pre-test data will provide important “needs assessments” information to deans and department heads, academic administration and post-test data will be used to evaluate the effectiveness of each training session.

The workshop is free and open to tenured and tenure-track faculty (registration is required) and will provide opportunities for diverse faculty to network with senior faculty; the purpose of this interaction is to offer junior faculty the opportunity to engage informally with prospective mentors. The CFB in collaboration with the Commission for LGBT, Commission for Women and Council for Diversity and Interculturalism will launch and host a website which will manage information with multiple curriculum areas (i.e., leadership, training, mentorship, etc.) that focus primarily on strategies for retention of diverse faculty members. I am excited about the workshop and grateful for the support of the administration and the Chancellor’s advisory groups. For additional information, please telephone (865) 974-1914 or email cfb@utk.edu.

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Diverse Faculty
Mentoring Workshop

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Carolyn P. Brown Memorial
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Registration and details available at www.web.utk.edu/~dfmp