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Hunter-Gault Returns to University

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Charlayne Hunter-Gault returned to the University of Georgia on the 40th anniversary of its integration, running her hands over a sign giving her name to a building governors, administrators and angry mobs swore she would never enter.

The school named its Academic Building for Hunter-Gault and the late Hamilton Holmes, the two black students who strode through the university's arch and registered for classes Jan. 9, 1961. Their enrollment ended 175 years of segregation and came years before other Southern state schools were integrated.

"Let it be a place of knowledge that embraces rather than recoils from change," Hunter-Gault said. "Let it give light and hope and heart to the leaders of this institution give them the courage to do what is right, not what is politically expedient."

In a full day of ceremonies Tuesday to mark the anniversary, Hunter-Gault alluded frequently to the school's court battle to defend an admissions policy giving a boost to some minority applicants.

Blacks make up about one-quarter of the state's population but less than 6 percent of the student body of its flagship university. The dispute is before a federal appeals court.

"If anyone had given (Holmes) and me a crystal ball into which we could have looked to the future 40 years hence and seen only 6 percent students of color in a student body of 30,000, I think instead of walking through that arch we might have sat down and cried," she said.

Holmes, a prominent Atlanta surgeon, died in 1995. Hunter-Gault is the South Africa bureau chief for CNN.

The anniversary brought her together with former Gov. Ernest Vandiver, who was one of Georgia's strict segregationist governors and who considered closing the university rather than allowing blacks to enroll.

"When I ran for governor, I made some intemperate remarks," Vandiver said. "They shouldn't have been made."

The university touts its desegregation as a critical moment in the nation's civil rights struggle. It was more peaceful than later integrations in Mississippi and Alabama.

Hunter-Gault said she and Holmes were far from unique merely two of thousands of young people doing brave things in a turbulent time.

"To walk in front of a police dog or fire hose, to sit at a lunch counter with the very real possibility that your head would get bashed in, in a real sense required a greater courage than ours," she said.

University president Michael Adams and several professors used the occasion to build support for the school's admissions battle, drawing connections between Hunter-Gault's historic entry and today's campus.

"We must confront the reality that major inequities continue to exist," said Maurice Daniels, a social work professor. "The struggle is not over, and the battle is not won."

On the Net:

UGA: <http://www.uga.edu/news/desegregation>

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