

## Hunter-Gault: We still have miles to go

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One of the University of Georgia's first two black students called for a new national conversation on racial and other kinds of prejudice.



Charlayne Hunter-Gault speaks at the Georgia Center on Monday. (David Manning / Athens Banner-Herald)

"Let the conversation begin about ignorance and its wicked companion, intolerance," said Charlayne Hunter-Gault in a speech to mark the 50th anniversary of when she and the late Hamilton Holmes became the university's first two black students, on Jan. 9, 1961. "Let the conversation begin about the ignorance that is threatening to engulf us here in America."

[See more photos from Hunter-Gault's speech.](#)

About 250 people braved Monday's treacherous weather and roads to hear Hunter-Gault speak in Mahler Auditorium at the Georgia Center for Continuing Education.

Hunter-Gault paid tribute to the giants who helped pave the way for her and Holmes to enroll at UGA, ending more than 150 years of white-only law.

The university, the state of Georgia and the country have come a long way since 1961, when legal separation of races was the law in Georgia, Hunter-Gault said.

A black lawyer, Kasim Reid, now is mayor of Atlanta; another, Barack Obama, is president of the United States.

But the United States has not come close to eliminating prejudice, Hunter-Gault said.

"His (Obama's) victory has yet to be America's victory," she said.

Fifty years after desegregation, the university's student body is only 8 percent black and its faculty 6 percent, in a state where 30 percent of the population is black, she said.

"I'm sure there are good reasons and good explanations for these realities. But they are realities," she said.

Before preparing the talk she delivered Monday, Hunter-Gault asked many friends and family members what she should talk about. One friend told her to talk about the future - which took Hunter-Gault aback, she said.

"How am I ever going to imagine challenges that will make today's challenges as obsolete as pay phones in the airport?" she asked. "I'm not a soothsayer."

But one challenge the country faces is clear, she said - an atmosphere of anger, prejudice and hatred that taints American politics and even journalism, which no longer always strives to be objective.

"Some of these attitudes have led to a dramatic rise in racial hate groups," she said.

The hateful atmosphere may have fueled Saturday's shooting in Tucson, Ariz., where a gunman killed six people, including a 9-year-old girl, and seriously wounded U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, she said.

"I decided to posit that our greatest challenge is overcoming ignorance and intolerance," she said.

Hunter-Gault and Holmes stood on the shoulders of giants, she said, offering her own shoulders and those of Holmes to young people brave enough to take up the struggles she and Holmes were a part of.

Hunter-Gault broke down in tears and for a while could not continue as she recalled Holmes, her friend.

Those hatreds and prejudice stem from ignorance, she said. Too many Americans are ignorant about the values of diversity, respect for diversity, even about the world - and the United States has fallen into the second tier of countries as measured by how many citizens get college degrees, she said.

The question that Hunter-Holmes asked herself as a 19-year-old at the University of Georgia still is valid today, she said: "Why do they hate me?"

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