

In UGA history, no greater event

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The University of Georgia today marks the 50th anniversary of what some historians say was the single most important event in its history - the day university officials, forced by a federal judge's order, admitted its first two black students to classes.



Alfred Holmes, left, escorts his son, Hamilton Holmes, right, and Charlayne Hunter, center, to the registrar's office at the University of Georgia on Jan. 9, 1961. Holmes and Hunter were the first black students admitted to UGA. (Associated Press)

The bare facts are simple.

On Jan. 6, 1961, federal Judge William Bootle found that Charlayne Hunter and Hamilton Holmes were fully qualified for admission to UGA and would have been already if not for their race and color.

On Jan. 9, the two enrolled, met by students chanting, "Two, four, six, eight, we don't want to integrate."

Three days later, a student mob - helped by outside agitators, historians later wrote - gathered outside Myers Hall, where Hunter lived, throwing bricks and bottles before they were dispersed by Athens police and legendary UGA Dean of Men William Tate, who started demanding student IDs.

UGA officials suspended Holmes and Hunter - for their own safety, administrators said. Bootle ordered UGA to re-admit them, and after that the violence was over.

Holmes, who died in 1995, and Hunter (now Hunter-Gault) went on to become two of the university's most distinguished alumni, Hunter-Gault as a world-famous journalist, Holmes as an orthopedic surgeon and medical school professor.

And soon, a trickle of other black students joined them.

Young people today can grasp the historical facts, but have a harder time understanding how much courage it took, said Savannah Mayor Otis Johnson, another one of UGA's earliest black students.

Johnson, already a Navy veteran then, enrolled in UGA in 1963 - a year after he became the first black student ever to enroll in previously all-white Savannah State College.

One UGA professor told Johnson in class that the only reason he had come to UGA was to get close to white women, he said.

Many white students simply shunned him and the other black students on campus - a total of about 65 when Johnson graduated in 1967, he estimated.

"When you're in an environment like that, you have to really work at not becoming bitter," said Johnson, who went on to get a Ph.D. from Brandeis University. He now is finishing up his second term as Savannah mayor after retiring as dean of the School of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences at Savannah State University.

Some white students were more welcoming, like members of the Phi Kappa Literary Society, who invited black students who could pass the society's academic standards to join.

And many of UGA's earliest black students did have strong academic backgrounds, Johnson said.

"If you weren't a good student, you wouldn't put yourself up for that attention" as the first black students, he said.

Longtime Athens educator Elizabeth King also was among UGA's earliest black students, enrolling in summer school classes the year after Holmes and Hunter were admitted.

"I was out of school and I had finished college, but I wanted to see how things would be," King said.

She had followed Holmes and Hunter's historic entry into UGA from a distance, but with admiration.

"I was very proud of them, with their courage and trying to do what they were doing. They were citizens just as anyone else was a citizen," King said.

King got her share of abuse, but it was nothing like what Hunter and Holmes faced, she said.

"You were afraid that somebody might get hurt," King said.

Sometimes as she walked on campus, young white men would let her know she was unwelcome.

"They barked at me like I was a dog," King said. "I didn't pay it much attention. I just went right on."

No white student would sit next to her, King recalled.

"That was all right, too," she said.

Hunter-Gault and Mary Frances Early, UGA's first black graduate student, will be on campus this week to retell their stories, along with some others who played critical roles in breaking down the wall of segregation.

Athenian Charles Stroud watched the desegregation of the university closely as well - he dreamed of attending UGA as a young man in the 1950s, but knew he'd be turned away because of his race.

"Growing up here in Athens, it was a hard thing to take (being barred because of his race), because right here you had this big, fine institution. It made you a little bitter," he said.

Stroud, like King, got to know Holmes, mainly through playing basketball at a little gym where Rocksprings Homes is now.

Stroud got to see why Holmes was a success in life, too - Holmes would sometimes come to basketball games at black Athens High and Industrial, and would break out a book and start studying at halftime.

Jan. 9, 1961, was not just a history-making day for Georgia's black citizens, said UGA emeritus professor of history Tom Dyer, author of "The University of Georgia: A Bicentennial History."

"I think the desegregation episode here, beginning really in the 1950s (when the legal battle to open UGA's doors began) was the single most important development in the history of the university. It had the most impact on the state and on the institution itself," Dyer said.

Today, people don't realize just how widespread - and normal - racism was half a century ago, he said.

“I think one thing we have lost sight of is just how deeply embedded racism was,” Dyer said.

“(Ending segregation) opened the university to a whole class of citizens who had been systematically excluded throughout the entire history of the institution. And second, it had an impact on the university in ways not contemplated at the time,” he said.

UGA became a real university after it desegregated, Dyer said: By closing its doors to black students, UGA also closed its doors to ideas.

“It went to the heart of a university is,” he said.

► [**View more historical photos of UGA's desegregation pioneers.**](#)

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