
“50 Years of Affirmative Action: What Went Right, and What Went Wrong” --from *The New York Times*, March 30, 2019

By Anemona Hartocollis

On cold mornings, Les Goodson shows up early outside the University Club, on a wealthy stretch of Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, and races two panhandlers he has nicknamed Catman and Pimp-the-Baby for a warm spot in front of a steam vent. He launches into “Take Five” on his saxophone, leaving his case open for bills and coins.

In a good week, it’s a living — enough to pay the rent on his railroad flat in Harlem and put food on the table. A few times, he has seen a former classmate, Gregory Peterson, bound into the social club without so much as a nod.

Mr. Goodson, 67, and his classmate were among a record number of black students admitted to Columbia University in 1969. Columbia and other competitive colleges had already begun changing the racial makeup of their campuses as the civil rights movement gained ground, but the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, and the resulting student strikes and urban uprisings, prompted them to redouble their efforts.

They acted partly out of a moral imperative, but also out of fear that the fabric of society was being torn apart by racial conflict. They took chances on promising black students from poor neighborhoods they had long ignored, in addition to black students groomed by boarding schools.

Those who were able, through luck or experience or hard work, to adapt to the culture of institutions that had long been pillars of the white establishment succeeded by most conventional measures. Others could not break through because of personal trauma, family troubles, financial issues, culture shock — the kind of problems felt by many white students as well, but compounded by being in such a tiny minority. And universities at the time, they said, did not have the will or the knowledge to help.

“I think it’s a fair question to ask: Did we really understand or know what we were doing, or could we have predicted what the issues would be?” said Robert L. Kirkpatrick Jr., who at the time was dean of admissions at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Conn., which was part of these early efforts. “The answer is no. I think we were instinctively trying to do the right thing.”

Columbia — an Ivy League campus right next to Harlem — was a particularly revelatory setting. Perhaps nowhere else were the divisions more striking between the privilege inside university gates and the troubles and demands of black people outside them.

The New York Times tracked down many of the nearly 50 black students in Columbia’s Class of 1973, who arrived on campus as freshmen in 1969. Some of them have remained close friends and helped locate others from directories and photographs.

The number of black students admitted to Columbia more than doubled in 1969 from the year before. About half of those who enrolled received their degrees four years later. Many, like Mr. Peterson, went on to comfortable lives and professional success. His classmate, Eric H. Holder Jr., rose from a strivers’ neighborhood in Queens to become the first black attorney general of the United States. But others, like Mr. Goodson, strayed from prescribed paths.

The debate over race in college admissions only intensified. By the late 1970s, colleges began emphasizing the value of diversity on campus over the case for racial reparations.

Today, Harvard and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill are facing legal challenges to race-conscious admissions that could reach the Supreme Court. The Trump administration is investigating allegations of discrimination against Asian-American applicants at Harvard and Yale. University officials who lived through the history fear that the gains of the last 50 years could be rolled back.

One of them is Lee Bollinger, the current president of Columbia, who first arrived on campus as a law student in 1968.

“In that time, there was a sense, pure and simple, that universities had to do their part to help integrate higher education,” Mr. Bollinger said. “We are still on that mission, but the sense of purpose and urgency and connection to the past have dissipated.”

Mr. Goodson sits on a plastic milk crate covered by a clean, brightly colored cushion. He is wrapped in layers of flannel shirts, sweatshirts, a canvas jacket, and wears stylish suede shoes. A watch cap and a graying goatee hide his face.

He resents it when people assume he is homeless and plop down bags of food next to him without even asking. He is more forgiving of the police officers who routinely ask him if he would like to go to a shelter. He jokes: No thanks, he has a place at Trump Tower, across the street.

Mr. Goodson grew up in a housing project in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, and in those days he was known as Ervin. His mother was a housekeeper for a wealthy family on Park Avenue; his father was a tailor and owned a dry-cleaning shop for a time. He took an early liking to music, learning to play the viola from Cora Roth, his fifth-grade teacher at Public School 46 in Brooklyn, now a painter in Los Angeles who still remembers him as “a pure soul.”

A number of programs sprang up at the time to find talented students from tough neighborhoods. In junior high school, Mr. Goodson was chosen to spend three summers in enrichment classes at Hotchkiss, a Connecticut boarding school, where he read incessantly. He was accepted to New York’s Stuyvesant High School, which at the time was mostly white. Now Stuyvesant is mostly Asian-American, and under attack for its test-based admissions. This year, [seven black students were offered admission](#) out of 895 slots.

When a racially fueled teachers’ strike broke out during Mr. Goodson’s senior year, his parents managed to transfer him to the Wooster School, another boarding school in Connecticut. He had been a middling student at Stuyvesant, but vaulted to the top of his class in private school.

An English teacher drove him to Columbia for the admission interview, and he remembers feeling “a little bit phony” as he answered questions. He was also accepted at Dartmouth, but chose Columbia because it was closer to home.

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