

'Against All Odds' FBI's Succeeded Despite Racism On Campus

By Deb Aronson

The 1950s were somewhat of a quiet time in the United States. On the University of Illinois campus, majestic elm trees graced the Quad; women wore sweater sets, pearls and bobby socks; men were mostly clean-shaven; and shirts were button-down. The idea of walking on the Quad grass, wearing one's hair long or dressing casually was unthinkable.

Yet, for all the outward appearances of calm and order, the 100 to 200 black students on campus in the 1950s were living behind enemy lines. They played the same bridge and whist games; they studied hard, partied hard and worked hard just like their white classmates. The difference was the students of color knew not to visit the basement of Kam's. They never hung out at the area on Green Street where a Confederate flag was on display. They never ate in Neil Street establishments unless spoiling for a fight.

"There were certain places we just knew not to go," said Sid Miller '54 ALS, MS '58 ALS.

Discrimination was "a fact of life; get on with it," said Preston "Pat" Ransom '62 ENG, MS '65 ENG, PHD '69 ENG, a UI electrical engineering professor since 1969. "It's why so many of us achieved great things – because there was no affirmative action, no money, no people to help. ... We were proud because we succeeded in the face of adversity."

That adversity forged strong bonds, spurring some of those alumni in the mid-1970s to begin holding biannual reunions in Urbana during a football weekend. Sometime during those early gatherings the name FBI – "Fifties Black Illini" – was created, but no one can quite remember who came up with it or when. Today the group, organized by Miller and Marie Johnson '54 LAS, MS '58 ED, numbers more than 250, approximately 50 of whom attended the 2001 reunion held Nov. 9-11.

Though they wear bright orange buttons proclaiming their "FBI" status while on campus, there is nothing stealthy or secretive about them.

"It is unreal, the fact that after 50 years we can go back, and it seems as if we've never left," said Marcella Comer Gillie '54 LAS. "We are like brothers and sisters, we are so close. We network; we mentor each other's children. Our children even network with each other."

The forming of the FBI's in some ways mirrors the groups



Posing in 1952 in the lobby of the Main Library are, from left, Archelene Amos Martin '55 FAA; Barbara Anderson Hocker '54 ED; Minnie Talley Clay '55 CBA, MSW '62; Marie L. Johnson '54 LAS, MS '58 ED; and Dorothy Jordan Posnick '54.

the black students relied upon during their campus days. The black fraternities (Kappa Alpha Psi and Alpha Phi Alpha) and black sororities (Delta Sigma Theta and Alpha Kappa Alpha) "were our salvation," said Lorenzo Martin '57 LAS, editor and publisher of the Chicago Standard News. "It was like being inside of the circled wagons."

"We all had a bond because we went through so much hell just to exist, to get through school," he said. "People who didn't hang with us dropped out; they couldn't go to school and fight racism on their own, in terms of their mental health. A lot of people did go home. Those who did stay got close. The fraternities and sororities – they kept us sane."

With support from family, church and their fellow Greeks, the students who made it through went on to be teachers, judges, doctors, professors and prominent business people. Many returned to Chicago; another contingent landed on the West Coast. Most are now retired, but time has not worn away the lifelong bonds forged inside the wagons' circle.

When the FBI's look back at their campus years, they are alternately bitter at how the University treated them and philosophical about the experience. While proud to have graduated from the U of I, some won't return to campus; others haven't missed a single FBI reunion. Several have sent their children here; others have refused.

Though their reunions bring up happy days, hard times are recalled, too. For instance, Miller and Ransom talk about the barbershop signs – "We Don't Cut Hair of Dogs or Niggers." The signs finally came down, but "just closing" took their place (anytime a black person walked in, the shop would be "just closing").

"We worked in shifts," Miller said of the campaign that he, Ransom and others organized as a response. "We sent someone to every shop with annoying regularity. We hit them in the pocketbook and interrupted their flow of business." Within a month of experiencing a black student walking into their shops every hour of every day – forcing the establishments to utilize their "closing" tactic – the barbers eventually gave in.

"There were times when the adversity left me ... very angry, but there comes a time in your life when you have to rise above it," Miller said. Ransom also puts the experience in perspective: "[The barbershop problem was] an ongoing situation that we

tried to do something about in our spare time, but we were too busy partying and having a good time to spend much time worrying about that."

As a student athlete on campus in the 1950s, Govoner Vaughn '60 LAS remembers his time at the University as the best four years of his life. He and his childhood pal, Mannie Jackson '60 ALS (now owner of the Harlem

Globetrotters), helped their Edwardsville high school win the state basketball championship, which was held on the Urbana campus. After the game they were escorted into the office of coach Harry Combes '37 ED, MS '42 ED.

"I was astonished, astounded that this school wanted me," Vaughn recalled. He and Jackson, the first two black basketball players at the University, also were the first UI black basketball players to get a full ride – room, board and an athletic scholarship.

"In my four years I never did experience any discrimination from players or coaches," Vaughn said. "I had the best accommodations, got everything they promised me. Now when we went down to Kentucky, that was scary. The fans called me the 'n' word and 'black boy.' We lost by one point. Kentucky was No. 1 or No. 2 in the country. I remember I took the last shot of the game and missed. Coming off the court, one guy said to me, 'Good thing you missed it, boy; we'd've had to cut your ears off and send them to your parents.'" But things changed once Vaughn left the cocoon of campus. "I was very sheltered on campus," he said, "but when I was talking to an NBA scout in Denver, he faced me and told me his team was not going to waste another draft choice on another colored guy. It was like he told me I had terminal cancer or AIDS and had three months to live. It was not like that at the University of Illinois."

Martin, another UI athlete, recalls a mostly positive academic experience. A walk-on with a track scholarship, he especially appreciated Jack Peltason, HON '89, a hard-as-nails professor of constitutional history who would go on to



Preston "Pat" Ransom '62 ENG, MS '65 ENG, PHD '69 ENG, at far right, stands on the porch of the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity house in 1956.

racism," Martin said. "After that there was nothing I couldn't tackle out in the corporate world."

Gillie remembers having a professor who returned all her papers and exams unmarked except with a grade of "C." After receiving several such assignments back, she made an appointment to see the teacher. "The professor was not angry, upset or emotional," Gillie said. "He told [me] straight out, 'I am not reading anything you write. Negroes have only an average intelligence. Since you're an undergraduate, I'll give you Cs.'"

"It did not bother me at all," said Gillie. "Whatever the reasons, I had a positive enough self-concept that he was not big enough to destroy it. My immediate response was, 'You're an ignorant man,' and I made the vow to teach children to be intelligent and to think for themselves, and I will destroy everything he stood for."

In her more than 40-year career, Gillie dedicated herself to teaching students of all races, from pre-kindergarten to post-graduate, throughout the Chicago area.

Gillie's reaction was similar to the responses of many of her black classmates who answered racism by redoubling their efforts. "Our attitude was,

"You can't let those white folks beat you," said Martin. "You gotta stick with it, gotta fight."

"As a group, we set out to prove ourselves," said Ransom. "Those ones who made it had a lot of inner strength. We were into proving ourselves against all odds."

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Enjoying the November reunion of the FBI's on campus are, from left, Alpha Kappa Alpha members Christine Muse Everett '56 ED; UI seniors Jamie Wideman of Evanston and Arlecia Taylor of Chicago; Bernice Wright Gardner '58 FAA; Janice Simpson Hancock; Barbara Spencer Penelton '58 ED, EDM '61; Marie Johnson '54 LAS, MS '58 ED; and Jackie Abrams Mitchell '59 ED.