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Project 100 at the University of Detroit made college possible

BY CASSANDRA SPRATLING • FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER • OCTOBER 14, 2008

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As the city bus to Mumford High School cut through McNichols at Livernois, Estella Nicholson would look over at the pristine campus of the University of Detroit and wonder what went on there.

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She was among the high-achieving students at her high school, but Nicholson -- Estella Neal at the time -- never considered going to the college, even though it was within walking distance of her home.

What little she knew about what happened in those august brick buildings ruled it out for her: It was private, pricey and almost

exclusively white.

That changed 40 years ago, when what is now the University of Detroit Mercy implemented programs to open its doors to promising Detroit children who would not have been able to afford it.

Begun in 1968, the era of civil unrest and the demand for equal educational opportunities, Project 100 was highly touted. The program, so-named because the goal was to admit 100 students every year, laid the foundation for those students -- most of them black, but some whites as well -- to build lives that wouldn't have been possible otherwise.

This week, alums of Project 100, and faculty and staff members who made it



WILLIAM ARCHIE/Detroit Free Press

Project 100 alumni including Estella Nicholson, left, Patricia Vinson and Al Ward helped raise money for the Black Madonna and Child statue on the campus of the University of Detroit Mercy in Detroit.



Ronald Quincy

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Reunion and commemoration, including panel discussions and memorial service.

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University of Detroit Mercy

happen, will reunite to remember and celebrate. They'll also re-dedicate a campus statute of the Black Madonna that the former students commissioned.

"Project 100 is more than a footnote in the university's history; it's a story that needs to be told," says Sheryl McGriff, dean of Cooperative Education & the Career Center and the organizer of the commemoration on Thursday and Friday.

Support and roadblocks

Within that story are people who became community activists, newspaper editors, librarians, university administrators and more -- several holding key state and national positions of power and influence they never imagined.

Nicholson was the oldest of six children. Her parents stressed education, seeing it as a road to opportunities they never had. Her mom stayed at home; her dad worked in a steel factory.

"My dad always said, 'You have to be the example,' so I had to set the stage for everybody else," says Nicholson, the assistant director of career services at Oakland University.

She earned a bachelor's degree in education in 1972 and later a master's in educational administration from Marygrove College.

"I love the U of D; it gave me my start, not only in terms of education, but you really learn to think, to share your knowledge and to become a leader," says Nicholson, 58, an administrator at U-D at one time.

Except for mandatory attendance in a summer enrichment and orientation program and required study sessions, the Project 100 classes were the same as those for other students.

"We weren't asking for a handout," says Nicholson, a Southfield resident.

"We were asking for an opportunity that everyone else has. My parents were great people, but they didn't sit and read to me. I learned the importance of that from watching other people."

An early university study showed that the majority of the first class graduated and about 10% of them made the dean's list at least once. The program ended in 1981 when public and private funding for it ended.

Patricia Vinson, 58, a medical librarian at DMC Surgery Hospital in Madison Heights, says the Project 100 students were inspired and encouraged by each other, supportive faculty and staff members, and most notably the late Father Malcolm Carron the university's president for 13 years, and a former director, the late James Woodruff.

"Going to a university where you truly are in the minority is a culture shock,"






Cost: \$40.

Details: 313-993-1019,
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says Vinson, who graduated in 1973. She recalls students who would not speak to them, disparaging remarks and an instructor who could never explain the mediocre grades he gave her.

"They weren't all good experiences, but I learned it's a combination of the good and bad experiences that help to shape who you are," she says.

Commitment to service

The university helped Project 100 students develop skills they didn't know they had, inside and outside the classroom.

Al Ward, 57, a manager for the Michigan Department of Human Services in Wayne County, says he got his start in community and political activism as a student activist at U-D.

"The university gave me an opportunity to become active in the way I wanted to be active in the university community and beyond," says the 1973 graduate. "I was encouraged to do that. It wasn't just about scholarship; it was about the mission. What are you going to do with the stuff you're learning?"

He was one of the primary leaders of a student effort to erect the statute of the Black Madonna and Child.

The alumni raised about \$6,000 to commission the statue. A former administrative assistant served as the model for the face.

"My student activism led to my community involvement and political activism," Ward says. The Detройter worked on the executive staffs of former governors William Milliken and James Blanchard and was a campaign organizer for Coleman Young.

"I pretty much dedicated my life to community and public service and youth development after U of D," he says.

Ronald Quincy, 58, a [business](#) consultant in Washington, D.C., and former director of the Martin Luther King Jr. Center in Atlanta, credits the university's special programs for giving him his start in government and national and international civil rights work.

"I was appointed a White House fellow by President Reagan, and worked closely with Mrs. Coretta Scott King and other icons from the civil rights movement," Quincy says. "I have also had the great honor to have had a number of interactions with Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Desmond Tutu, and other icons of the ANC antiapartheid movement in South Africa."

In the late 1960s, his first counselor at Murray-Wright High School laughed at him when Quincy told him he wanted to go to college. The counselor didn't believe Quincy was college material.

But he and his parents knew differently.

"My father had a very rough, rough childhood. As a teenager, he was doing the work of grown men and he wanted something different for me," Quincy says.

Another counselor pointed him toward the University of Detroit.

"University of Detroit was life-changing for me," says Quincy, who graduated in three years.

"I was born in what was then Black Bottom. All five of us were born in the house; we couldn't even afford to be born in the hospital. The University of Detroit opened up a whole new world to me and other students. Until then, many of us had had very limited exposure.

"Some of us on the east side had never been on the west side. My first plane trip was when our football team played St. Louis University."

The Project 100 students were not "just takers," Quincy says. "We were about serving the university and the community. The university gave us a chance to become leaders in our local community and beyond."

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