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## Vincent: First black undergraduates at UT triumphed over injustice

OPINION

By Dr. Gregory J. Vincent - Special to the American-Statesman



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As we celebrate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first integrated class of undergraduates at The University of Texas at Austin September 8-11, it's a good time to look back at how the history of racism and higher education can inform a better future.

A good place to begin is the first time that Leon Holland went to a Longhorns football game. It was the fall of 1956, and Holland was a freshman.

The school's football team remained all white, but its opponent that day, the USC Trojans, had some black players on the team. In particular, they had future NFL running back Cornelius Roberts, who decimated the Longhorns' defense, running for 251 yards on 12 carries.

UT fans weren't happy.

"Throughout the game, we're sitting here ... surrounded with nothing but [the chant] 'Kill that nigger,'" Holland told the student newspaper in 2014.



White and African American students gather inside one of the many white only restaurants on the Drag (Guadalupe street) for a ... [Read More](#)

Holland, now a retired US Army Colonel, was sitting with the UT fans, but as a black student in a sea of white he wasn't sharing their experience. By the end of the game, which USC won 44-20, he was so disgusted that he told his girlfriend Peggy Drake, who would matriculate to UT in two years, that he was glad the Trojans won.

The racism encountered by these pioneering black students at UT wasn't isolated to the football stadium. Life for black students in those early years was "integrated" in deeply restrictive and discriminatory ways. They could live only in certain dorms. They couldn't eat in the cafeterias. They couldn't play on the sports teams, or participate in most student organizations. Explicit racism was routine, and came at them from every level of the system.

No one would have blamed Holland or Drake, who would later marry, if they'd just kept their heads down, gotten their degrees, and never looked back.



Students gather main mall on the University of Texas at Austin campus. (Courtesy of the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History ... [Read More](#))

Instead they and many of their fellow African-American students fought to make the university their own. They protested treatment in the residence halls. They boycotted segregated theaters on the main shopping drag. They risked suspension and expulsion. Holland became the first black student at the university to graduate from the Texas Army ROTC program.

After they graduated, many of these students stayed connected to each other, to the university, and to the struggle to transform the university into a place that would be more welcoming and inclusive toward future students of all colors.

It's a testament to their commitment and struggle that today, when Leon Holland and Peggy Drake Holland and many of their fellow black alumni are on campus, they feel at home. And proud. But it would be a terrible mistake, and a disservice to their struggle, to take that to mean that they've forgotten what it felt like when they were first here.

So much of the racial progress we've made as a university has been dependent precisely on not forgetting. Every time a discriminatory rule has been struck down, the weapon that struck the blow was forged of stories of injustice and perseverance. It's on a foundation of

remembrance, and for the sake of deeper remembrance, that we've created new departments, hired diverse faculty, funded student groups and alumni outreach.

When my colleagues and I go out now, to recruit students of color, we don't whitewash the past. We don't pretend that the university has ever been a utopia of racial harmony. The students and their parents know the past.

What we do, instead, is talk about the immense progress we've made. We talk about the extraordinary opportunities we offer to students, now, that wouldn't be possible without the struggles of Holland and Drake and so many other alumni of color. And we celebrate the opportunities our current students have to become leaders and legacy-builders in their own right. Even if, or especially if, that requires new struggles.

Our university, after all, isn't a racial utopia now. It can't be, even with our best intentions, when it exists within a larger system in which racial discrimination and injustice are so pervasive. What the university can be is a place where we remember and retell our history of both injustice and triumph over injustice.

That's not a simple story to tell ourselves, the world, or potential students. But if Leon Holland, Peggy Drake, and so many thousands of alumni of color have taught us anything, it's that this is the story that matters most.

*Vincent is vice president for diversity and community engagement at the University of Texas at Austin.*

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