

UNC-CH SPENDS AN EVENING WITH JOHNNIE COCHRAN



By Jonathan Friday

Pursuing justice is Johnnie Cochran's mission. For this lawyer, it's a mission that has proven to be both attainable and quite distant at times, which unfortunately may have more to do with the racist culture of this country, than it does with Cochran's legal ability. And that's a fact that Cochran knows without a shadow of a doubt.

After being introduced by the performances of Brigida Mack, a member of Ebony Readers Onyx Theater, and Harmonyx, two Black Student Movement subgroups, Cochran spoke to a large crowd in Memorial Hall on Sunday, Feb. 20. He (like many others concerned with race) quoted W.E.B. DuBois's famous words, "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line." But now as the 21st century begins, Cochran said that, "If America is to progress, we must acknowledge that racism still exists." And

since racism still exists, "Everyone—not just black folk—must help to end it."

"We can only help ourselves when we understand the system," he said. And part of that system is the courts, Cochran's home turf. Although he respects the court system, he acknowledged that the courts, like all other American systems, are inherently racist. Moreover, he said the most powerful figures in the criminal justice system are the police officers, who, according to Cochran, "can take your life and your freedom."

That's why Cochran believes that this country's background aids in the racist justice that is handed down; racist justice primarily handed down against minorities. "Our nation's historical background makes it difficult for minorities to receive equal justice," he said.

Cochran gave many examples of the unequal justice doled out to minorities. He noted that in Maryland, 80 percent of police searches were conducted against African-American drivers—drivers who make up less than 20 percent of the state's drivers; a practice that he called "automotive apartheid."

He also noted that the United States has _ million more prisons than China, even though the US has _ the population of China. Which may be the reason that, for Cochran, "the US has "first-class prisons and second-class schools."