

Black students discovering new sense of empowerment

By KAREN NEUSTADT

(CPS) — College campuses throughout the nation celebrated Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday on Jan. 18, marking the end of a year of unprecedented black empowerment fueled by the fires of Los Angeles and inspired by a film about the life of Malcolm X.

Racial incidents and institutional neglect brought a flurry of peaceful protests, sit-ins, and demonstrations by mobilized African-American students, some of whom say they have a powerful new sense of identity and purpose.

While King is being honored on most campuses, his message of peace that galvanized the civil rights movement of the '60's has been modified by the more urgent motto "by any means necessary" adopted by slain black leader Malcolm X.

Some students suggest that resurgent interest in Malcolm X clothing, hats, buttons, and tee-shirts is connected with feelings of disenchantment with current black leadership.

"People are more aware of their heritage. I think people are finally beginning to recognize we don't have to sit at the back of the bus, that we are a viable presence," said Iyailu Moses, director of the African-American Cultural Center at N.C. State Uni-

versity in Raleigh.

"It is empowering," she added. Moses said that black students at NCSU are learning "to maturely approach" the school's top administration in a way that would not have been possible a decade ago.

"I think there is a revival of interest in our culture, and it is being translated into students taking more of a responsible role in addressing issues that were incorrect," Moses said.

For example, 65 black NCSU students recently staged a sit-in at the college radio station to protest its programming policies. The students, who requested more prime-time hours for African-oriented music, crowded into the broadcast booth and adjoining lobby for about two hours. The demonstration was scheduled after students approached the station's general manager and were told no changes would be made in the music format.

Black students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill recently used new-found clout — including a visit from filmmaker Spike Lee, who made the movie "Malcolm X" — to convince officials to build a free-standing black cultural center.

"The protest started in 1991. They had given us a renovated snack bar for an office, and though they promised us a cul-

tural center, it wasn't going past that," said Tim Smith, a quarterback on the UNC football team and a founding member of the Black Awareness Council, a group of black activist athletes.

While black students debated the wisdom of a separate facility, a consensus was finally reached and Chancellor Paul Hardin endorsed a plan in November for the center, which will include a gallery to display African-American art.

"We take everything from Malcolm X to Martin Luther King and the Black Panthers, and we incorporate it into what we do today. It's a different time, so some things may not work for us today," Smith said.

Smith said watching television coverage of the Los Angeles riots last year changed his life. The violence erupted after the acquittal of four white police officers in the beating of black motorist Rodney King.

"I don't remember this, but my mom said I just sat transfixed, saying over and over, 'I've just got to do something. I've just got to do something,'" he said. "It is obvious (since the riots) that students have become more aware of their treatment."

Smith noted that the white student population was supportive of the Black Awareness Council efforts, and many joined black students in the demonstrations.

"Once you give people the facts, the truth speaks for itself," he said.

The two North Carolina campuses were not the only ones to confront racism directly.

In early November, 200 black students at the University of Rhode Island demonstrated when they learned that a Malcolm X quotation carved in granite on the front of the school library had been edited to omit a reference to "fighting the white man."

The students were also angered that the quote was paired with one from Thomas Jefferson, a U.S. president who owned slaves.

At Alabama State University at Montgomery, a predominantly black college, thousands of students took part in a demonstration demanding lower parking fees and a vote on the board of trustees. Football players boycotted games, and as many as 5,500 of the 21,000 students filled



Martin Luther King Jr.

the halls of the administration building at one point.

Student leaders say black students are searching for their place in history.

"The Malcolm X movie has just come out and a lot of students are trying to find out more about themselves and their history," said Raul Hoxie, chairman of the student-run University of Texas Institute for the Healing of Racism.

"We need to take responsibility for our own racism and hope that it will be contagious so that others will emulate us," Hoxie said. He said the riots spurred many students into action on the Austin, Tex., campus.

"There have always been black organizations on campus, and they have been doing projects on black issues, but we are now fortifying old values," he said.

Hoxie meets with a group of students each week whose goal is to fight racism on campus. The institute says education and communication are the keys to wiping out a generation of racism.

But institutional racism is only a piece of the equation, say black students who have responded during the fall semester to racial slurs by protesting until a public apology was made.

At the University of California at Los Angeles, 200 black students marched in October to demand that the student government stop giving money to fraternities after media reports focused attention on racist and sexist lyrics in Theta Xi and Sigma Phi fraternity songbooks.

University of Georgia students protested the same month when it became known that a Pi Kappa Phi fraternity handbook included the phrase "no niggers." The president of the fraternity apologized publicly, although the fraternity is appealing its suspension. Officials at the university ordered fraternity members to work in a department that deals with services to minority students.

Black students at Georgia State University in Atlanta staged a sit-in in October outside the office of President Carl V. Patton after a racial slur was written on a trash receptacle in the student center.

While most students are sympathetic to demonstrations by black students, some worry that ethnic pride can sometimes escalate into ethnic chauvinism and further isolate the races.

A demonstration by black students at the University of Florida in Gainesville in 1991 divided blacks and whites alike. More than 300 students from the Black Student Union angrily took over the student government office, ousted workers, and demanded increased funding for Black History Month.

After many tense hours, the demonstrators listed their demands, which included protection from criminal action. The electric power to the building was cut off, and students eventually left.

A year after the event, campus reaction remains split, with some charging that the students used force and intimidation rather than peaceful methods in the spirit of Martin Luther King, Jr.

