

F O C U S

Coming full circle: Activism returning to original level

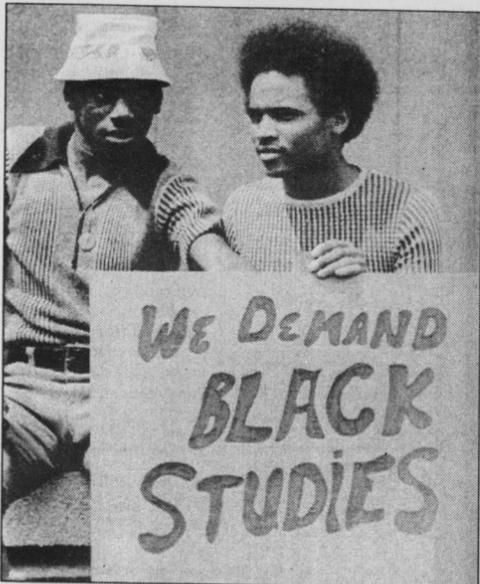
By Deepa Perumallu
Staff Writer

A visitor to UNC 25 years ago would have witnessed many of the same things distinctive to the campus today — the Old Well, a competitive research program, legendary basketball coach Dean Smith.

But one element now inherent to student life at the University was missing then — the Black Student Movement.

The BSM first opened its doors in Upendo Lounge in Chase Hall in October of 1968.

Former Chancellor J. Carlyle Sitterson, who served from 1966 to 1972, said there was



no question about the need for such an organization. "It's almost impossible for me to convey the difference of status between blacks on campus then and now," he said. "(Blacks) were isolated to a certain degree because the campus was virtually all white then."

Sitterson, who implemented recruitment programs that increased the number of black students at UNC from 200 to 1,000 during his term, said few visible signs of controversy over the newly established BSM existed until it presented an official list of grievances and began its activism in earnest.

Within four years, the BSM had won a fight to improve cafeteria workers' conditions and place them on the state payroll. And it had begun an African-American studies program, a black library, an off-campus tutorial program, its own newspaper — the Black Ink — and a black radio program.

NEW DECADE, NEW PROBLEMS

A tragedy in November 1970 forced the BSM to focus inward and address the problem of unity among blacks on campus. James Cates, a black youth from Chapel Hill, had been stabbed to death behind the Student Union in a clash between local gangs.

The BSM organized a 200-person march a year later in commemoration of Cates' death. In the Pit rally that followed, BSM President Jimmie McRae stressed the need for blacks to band together and tackle problems such as the University using blacks for cheap labor.

By 1973, the BSM had conducted investigations concerning discrimination in departmental hiring of faculty members and put the issue at the top of its agenda.

Vice Chancellor Harold Wallace, 20-year faculty adviser to the BSM, recalled other major challenges during his first year advising the organization. "That was when we first began talking about and fighting for our budget with the Campus Governing Council. My advice was to ask them whether they really wanted to do that because it meant relying on an outside agency to carry out our destiny."

The response from BSM members was an overwhelming yes, and they began doing everything possible to be appropriated student funds, Wallace said. "And Suite C, the legislative branch and the executive branch have played games with the BSM ever since."

Gloria Carney Shealey, 1974-75 BSM president, said the budget problem had detrimental effects on BSM programming. "No

CELEBRATING BLACK HISTORY MONTH

one understood that African Americans needed to be addressed more independently. Instead, they saw us as a special-interest group."

Such accusations reached a climax when two white students filed a lawsuit in June 1974 charging the University and The Daily Tar Heel with discriminating against nonblacks. The students requested a court order to end the allocation of student fees to support the BSM. The BSM voluntarily added its name to the list of defendants, but the case was dismissed in August 1975 because the BSM had opened to nonblacks.

A MORE INTEGRATED OUTLOOK

D. Lester Diggs, BSM president at the time of the case's dismissal, began moving the organization a little more to the center, he said. "The perception of the BSM had been that it was too far to the left, something only for the benefit of black students, and that was hindering our campuswide effectiveness."

Diggs even started lobbying the Campus Governing Council on behalf of other campus organizations, both minority and nonminority. "You see, I inherited the presidency after one of the most intense racial dilemmas during my four years at Carolina," he explained.

That dilemma arose when the Carolina Union Forum Committee invited Klansman David Duke to speak at UNC. Three to four hundred black

students banded together to prevent him from speaking.

"After his introduction, we clapped along with everyone else, but we kept on and on long after they had stopped," Diggs said. "Finally, the program was canceled."



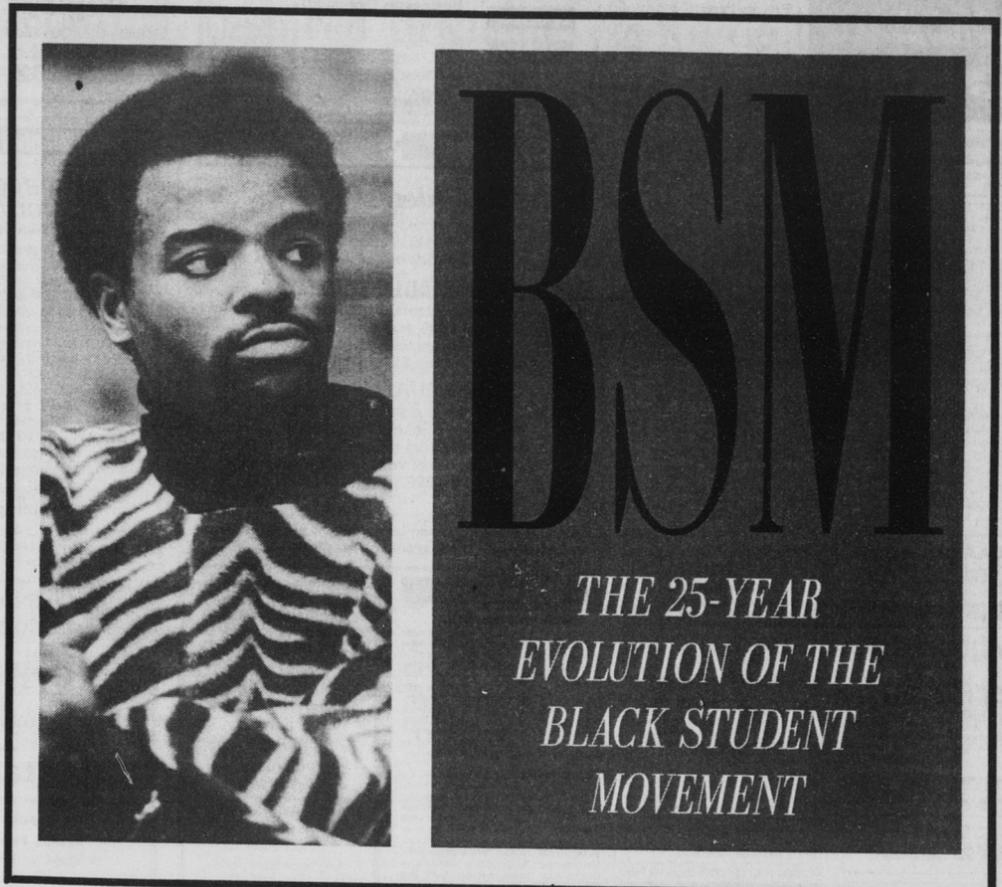
The BSM soon brought a more positive speaker — boxing champion Mohammed Ali — to UNC. "As one of the most sought-after speakers in the world, he was well-attended by all races," Diggs said. "He spoke about everything from world politics to local affairs." Diggs said his own perception of the BSM changed as a result of his work. "I got involved initially because I was black. As I learned more, I realized the BSM was a benefit to the entire University."

FIGHTING TO KEEP ITS SPACE

Serious confrontations again surfaced the next year, under the administration of the BSM's first chairwoman, Jackie Lucas.

Approximately 200 students marched from the Pit to Memorial Hall on University Day to protest the University Space Committee's decision to reallocate the BSM's space in Chase Hall to Servomation Inc.

The showing embarrassed the University because so many "bigwigs" attended the cer-



emony, Lucas said. "We did it as a show of infidelity. We did not disrupt ceremonies All we did was make our presence felt."

Although Lucas had received threats prior to the march, with one dean even warning that the National Guard might be called in, the BSM forged ahead with plans. "I felt it was the only thing we could do," she said.

The confrontation ended in a victory for the BSM, and the administration conceded the space. "It wasn't the space so much as what it represented," Lucas explained. "We were always struggling to keep that space."

Lucas' administration also faced and helped resolve problems within the black community, namely the harmful competition among various fraternities and black cultural groups, which resulted in a fight in the Pit.

"That was a great embarrassment for me," Lucas said. "As an umbrella organization, (the BSM's) whole premise was built on

"Even though we were facing pretty much the same issues as now, there is definitely much more advising and mentoring now as well as more ties to other on-campus organizations."

The BSM was also in the forefront of pushing the University to divest out of South Africa, long before it was a popular issue across the country, Anderson-Thomkins said.

In 1986, the Board of Trustees approved a proposal by the BSM for a black cultural center. "But the administration still grappled with the idea a while. We wanted commitment instead of promises," she said.

REVITALIZING ACTIVISM IN THE '90S

Sabrina Evans, 1990-91 BSM president, said that because the previous decade had brought frustration to blacks on campus, her main goal was to re-establish the BSM's credibility as a voice of advocacy and activism and to prove that it was by no means a

ist, Thomas said new ones often were formed on the spot to carry out special projects. "If someone has an idea, they become the chair for that project. Each person should feel ownership of the organization and be able to make changes if he can carry them out."

The BSM's weekly meetings are likewise structured but informal, with members sitting in a circle to remove hierarchy and to represent the African symbol of unity.

The BSM oversees subgroups such as the Ebony Readers/Onyx Theater, the Opeyo! Dancers and the BSM Gospel Choir as well as the more recently formed group BSM Buddies. Started last semester, BSM Buddies pairs BSM members with nonblacks, and each learns about the other's life and culture.

Such strides often are overshadowed by the still-remaining budget problem. Last year alone, the BSM's funds were cut \$5,000.

Wallace, with his 20-year perspective, said the problem did not surprise him because he had seen the BSM go full circle in other respects. "In the last two to three years, I've seen activism come back to its original level," he said, referring specifically to last semester's marches for a free-standing BCC and the housekeepers' movement. "The last 10 to 15 years had taken us back because of the people in Washington and several backwards court decisions."

But BSM's relations with other on-campus groups has improved drastically, Wallace said. "People have become more politically sophisticated. We now realize we have common interests and goals and have been getting together more."

Wallace attributed the BSM's longevity to the consistency of its name and goals. "The BSM has been the BSM from day one, unlike at Duke (University), where the African-American group has gone through many changes over the years."

When asked whether the BSM will ever become unnecessary, Wallace said no. "Because even if we could write down our agenda for the rest of the century and have it implemented, there are still issues like women's rights to address."

"Even if we realize all our political goals, we still need to educate people about current issues. That is and will continue to be the secret to our longevity."

Phuong Ly contributed to this article.

Photos courtesy of the Yackey Yack



unity That was the lowest point of my tenure." But toward the end of her tenure, the BSM leaders met with the groups involved and helped to calm the situation.

REORGANIZING IN THE '80S

After a relatively smooth transition into the '80s, during which the group had supported Professor Sonja Haynes Stone as she vied for tenure, Jo Watson took over as BSM president in 1981. Watson, now chaplain of the Black Interdenominational Student Association, said one of her greatest contributions to the BSM was reorganizing. "You know, the little things like record-keeping, office management, more office space. But those little things went a long way."

Watson's administration succeeded in getting the BSM Gospel Choir the highest funding in its history and questioned the privileges given to the student body president and cabinet officers but not to BSM officers.

"They often used funds to go to the beach for retreats and the like but never hinted that the BSM could do that," Watson later was able to gain similar privileges for the BSM.

Through it all, Watson learned the true pressures of her position. "People really underestimate what heavy responsibility falls on leaders of minority groups," she said.

"Being SBP, for example, can be a fun learning experience because everything you need is already there — heavy resources, office space, nothing material to struggle for. When you're BSM president, you have to pull together issues that affect the lives of a significant portion of this campus."

Watson also remembers the many phone calls — both hostile and curious — she received, as well as the parties and homework assignments she missed while trying to balance a student's life with an adult's position.

Sibby Anderson-Thompkins, now an assistant dean of students and BSM adviser, experienced the same pressures when she became BSM president in 1985. "We were desperately seeking mentors then," she said.

dead organization. "When I came in, black students were in that space between wanting to do something and just wanting to graduate and get the heck out of here," said Evans, a second-year UNC graduate student.

Though membership had been suffering, cultural activities improved through new programs like the Umoja Dinner Theater.

Members also rallied around two racially offensive incidents, Evans said. The first occurred when an employee of Rite Aid at 109 E. Franklin St. admitted that the store kept black hair-care products at the front because the management thought blacks had higher tendencies to steal. After students pressured Rite Aid about the stereotype, it moved all products to the appropriate shelves.

The second incident involved a group of statues that were placed in front of Davis Library. Some students believed the statues, including a black man spinning a basketball, played on the stereotypes of blacks. The BSM worked closely with a UNC student coalition, alumni and students at colleges as far away as Cornell University to get the statues moved behind Hamilton Hall.

"We wanted to make sure black students felt just as comfortable as white students walking around campus, that they were doing more than just surviving," Evans said.

NOW AND THE NEXT CENTURY

Today, the BSM has more than 400 paid members, and much of the student body participates in the events it sponsors.

"The BSM is more active within than I've ever seen it," said current President Michelle Thomas. "There are more people in leadership positions and more taking the initiative."

Although five standing committees ex-

