

Invisible Men Speak Out at Guilford

"You know the best selling paint we got, the one that made this here business?"

"No, I don't."

"Our white, Optic White."

"Why the white rather than the others?"

"Cause we started stressing it from the first. We make the best white paint in the world ... Our white is so white you can paint a chunka coal and you'd have to crack it open with a sledge hammer to prove it wasn't white clear through!"

Invisible Man, Ralph Ellison

Mary Layton Atkinson
Staff Writer

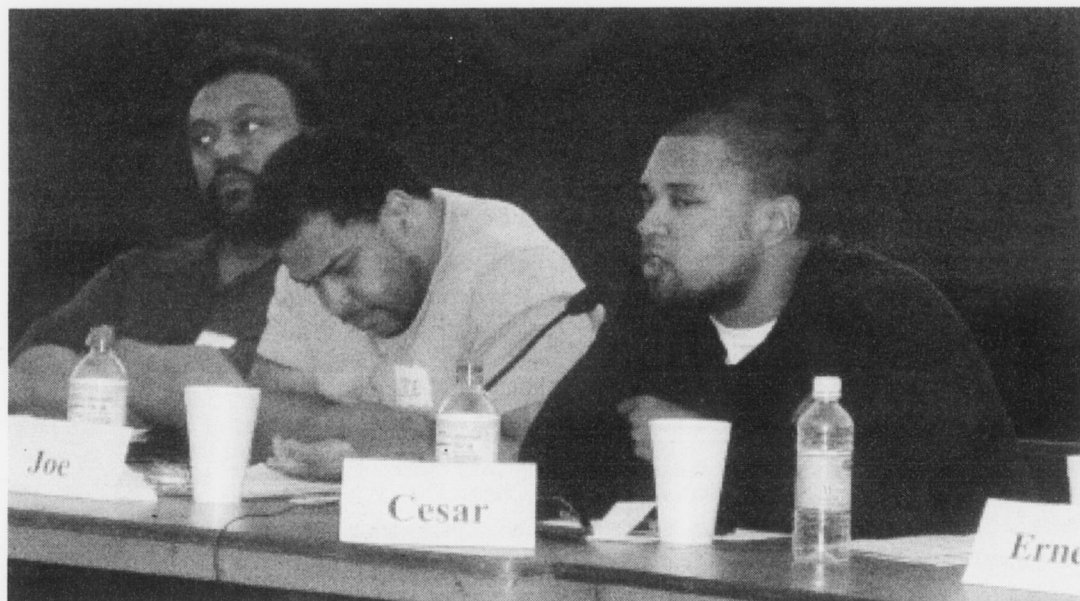
Eight panelists brought their sledge hammers to a discussion entitled "Invisible Men: Black Men at Guilford Speak" in a packed Bryan Jr. Auditorium April 2.

Community members Christopher Lett, Ernest McCoy, Abel Ndingwan, Rushdee Omar, James Shields, Isa Stokes, Joe Vereen, and Cesar Weston braved frigid conditions in the over-air-conditioned auditorium to share their

insights on what it means to be a black man and the challenges black men face at Guilford College.

The event was sponsored by Carolyn Beard Whitlow's Black Men Writers course. The panel began with brief opening statements by each of the men. Then the panelists answered questions prepared by the students of Whitlow's class. In closing, the panelists answered questions from the audience.

Junior Isa Stokes, the first



James Shields, Joe Vereen and Cesar Weston addressing black manhood at Guilford. Alexandra Stewart.

panelist to speak, offered a candid view of race relations at Guilford.

"If you think black men are treated differently at Guilford than in the rest of the world, then you are living in a bubble," said Stokes. "You need to pop that bubble."

Sophomore Cesar Weston, continuing the discussion, spoke about the challenges of being an African American student at a majority white college.

"I feel disconnected from many other black students at Guilford because there remains an unspoken standard of blackness that I, and many other students, apparently don't live up to," said Weston.

"I see that there is [also] a great disconnectedness between various white communities at Guilford and people of color because, as white people, they have the option of ignoring racial problems in their midst," Weston con-

tinued. "A system such as this opens a Pandora's box of problematic privileges that white students have, the most problematic being their power to ignore and deny their own passive racism and find reinforcement from like-minded peers."

Topics addressed by the panelists not only encompassed race on campus but in wider society as well. First-year Chris Lett described the difficulties of living in a society that constantly stereotypes black men.

"Being a black man in America, you must be above average just to be average. To be heard, you must be soft in your approach. If you approach people with full force, you will intimidate them," said Lett.

'White America's expectations for black men are pretty low, or nonexistent. We are supposed to be present in *our* community, and not impede on theirs. We are expected to smoke weed and not

support our children," he continued.

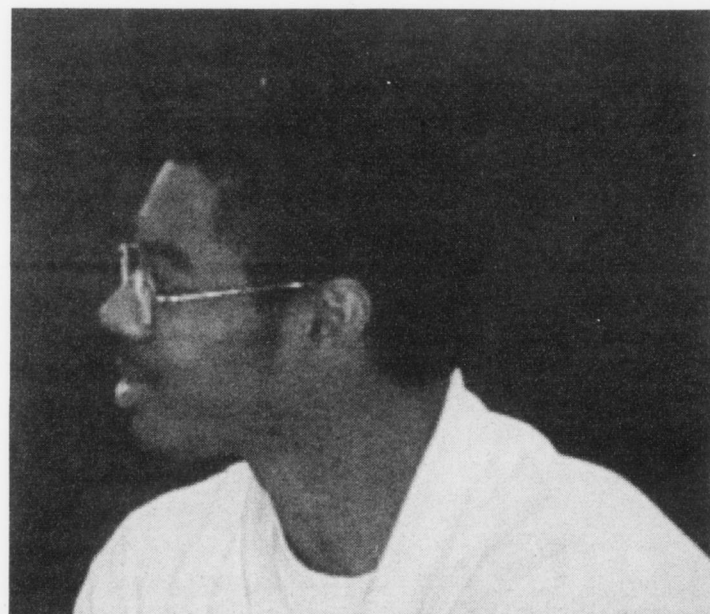
Many of the panelists discussed how perpetually being stereotyped leads to internal identity struggles.

"It is hard to be who you are when others are telling you who you should be," said Joe Vereen, Associate Dean for Campus Life.

"Often you are faced with 'respect your culture and your heritage or assimilate,'" said Junior Rushdee Omar.

The panel went on to discuss issues such as the use of the 'N' word in black culture, the taboo associated with homosexuality in the black community, and interracial relationships at Guilford.

As the discussion concluded, Director of Community Learning at Guilford James Shields shifted the focus from the challenges society imposes on black men to the challenges present in black



Panelist Rushdee Omar, a junior. Omar commented that black men must either assimilate or respect their heritage. Alexandra Stewart

See Panel, page 16