

Washington University alters preferences

By Alvin A. Reid
Special to Sentinel-Voice
ST. LOUIS (NNPA) - Washington University held out as long as it could, but the reality that attacks on affirmative action programs could lead to federal litigation has forced one of the nation's highest-ranked academic universities to bend to the pressure of conservative activists.

Washington University has announced that its Ervin Scholars Program, a scholarship program that has been available for African-American students, is now open to all students.

The scholarship program is named for John B. Ervin, a nationally renowned African-American educator who was a longtime administrator at the school.

The university "will continue to foster a richly diverse educational atmosphere

at Washington University," according to Chancellor Mark Wrighton, an affirmative action proponent.

The Ervin Scholars Program will continue to seek students who demonstrate exceptional intellectual and leadership achievements. Community service accomplishments and the commitment of applicants to meeting the needs of less-fortunate segments of American society also will be important considerations.

Special consideration will also be given to applicants interested in a career in education. The 'all students' criteria goes into effect with the selection of Ervin Scholars for the 2005-06 academic year.

The changes should not affect current Ervin Scholarships, including Ervin Scholars for the 2004-05 school year, who already have been

identified, although several current scholars are not happy with the change.

"Looking back, we are very proud of the accomplishments we have encouraged through our support of the Ervin Scholars Program. The students we have attracted to the university as Ervin Scholars have been outstanding and have made important contributions to our community while obtaining a great education. Those who have graduated have distinguished themselves as they have taken up graduate or professional degree programs or have started their independent careers. These highly talented and well-educated men and women are enriching our world, and we are grateful to them for their continuing engagement with Washington University as distinguished alumni," said Chancellor Wrighton.

"Our current Ervin Schol-

ars will continue to receive our support and encouragement as they complete their degree programs with us. Looking forward, the successes we have realized with the Ervin Scholars Program reaffirms our conviction that a diverse community is a stronger community. We will continue our efforts to strengthen our quality by recruiting a talented and diverse student body."

Wrighton and Washington University filed a brief with the Supreme Court in support of affirmative action last year as debate raged on the subject.

"When it came down to it, WU held out as long as it could—it is clear that if the University could do more, they would. But, the fact is that they are a corporate entity, responsible for 6,000 undergraduate students—not just the Black ones. The school will simply lose fund-

ing if they continue in the same vein," said Brittney Packnett, an Ervin scholar.

James E. McLeod, vice chancellor for students, said last summer's Supreme Court's decision involving the University of Michigan's undergraduate admissions program "and other legal enforcement policy guidance to which we tried to conform the Ervin Program. As a result, we have confirmed to the government that we will modify the Ervin Scholars Program."

The Bush administration sided with conservatives and filed a brief opposing affirmative action programs. Secretary of Education Rod Paige, while a backer of such controversial issues as vouchers and charter schools, also sides with the right wing on the issue of affirmative action.

McLeod, who is also dean of the College of Arts & Sci-

ences, said, "We are confident that the Ervin Scholars Program will remain a nationally pre-eminent program, and one that continues to foster and enhance the overall quality and diversity of the University's student body in a way that continues to honor the legacy of John B. Ervin."

Another Ervin Scholar, Aneshia Griffin, called the decision "a setback." "But we must have hope that universities around the nation maintain diversity without race-specific programs."

Many of the nation's elite universities, including Harvard, Princeton, MIT, Yale, Johns Hopkins, Stanford, the University of Michigan and Saint Louis University, are revising eligibility guidelines for programs previously open only to minorities.

Alvin A. Reid writes for the St. Louis American.

Color

(Continued from Page 1) showed toward light-skin slaves, some of whom he had sexually exploited against their will.

"That is one theory as to the origin of it, the twisted mind of an evil White man who just wanted to separate and divide the Black race so that we were pitted against one another as opposed to working collectively together to overcome," Taylor says.

Books, such as Delores Phillips' "Darkest Child," published earlier this year, addresses the issue of prejudice among people who have been the object of prejudice for years. She observes, "Attitudes of prejudice have been adopted by its victims. And the resulting struggle of those who are darker complected is a struggle, not only against outsiders, but against the closest of kin."

Omara-Alwala knows about that struggle.

"I can't remember the first remark ever made, but I can remember the snickering, the pointing," she says.

She recalls an instance when she was in the sixth grade at Matoaca Middle School in Chesterfield County, Va.

"I would get on the school bus and I would try to find a place to sit," she recalls, slowly. "It wasn't like I couldn't sit next to anybody, but if I tried to they would be like, 'No, this seat's taken.' Or, 'No, you can't sit here.' Eventually, some White kid would feel so bad for me that



"I was always self-conscious of my complexion when I was younger. Everybody wanted to talk to light-skin girls and they called me, 'Black girl' or made little names to make fun. It was like it was this disease or something because of my complexion, like it was bad to be dark-skinned."

— Danielle Smith

he or she would just let me sit next to them."

That was mild, compared to some of the other insults she faced.

"There was a [light-skin Black] kid sitting by himself and I sat down. He picked his leg up and took his foot and pushed me. I remember his foot against my back and pushed me into the aisle. I didn't know what to do and everybody was laughing at me at this point. And the bus driver was saying, 'I'm not leaving until she sits down.'"

"I found another place and I think at this point, one of the kids saw me coming. He kind of acted like I was the creature from the Black Lagoon, for lack of a better phrase. And he jumped over the back of the bus seat into the next seat. And everybody laughing and screaming and it's like the biggest joke ever and I sat by myself and I just sat there and you know. This was on my way to school. This was the start of my day every day."

With her voice almost cracking, she says, "I cried

for the longest time."

Fortunately, the bus route was changed so that Omara-Alwala could board first, but that did not end the cruelty. After a string of similar incidents that followed her to college, Omara-Alwala eventually sought professional counseling.

Sandra Cox, director of the Coalition of Mental Health Professionals in Los Angeles, says the perceptions of African-Americans of themselves has changed little since the studies of husband and wife team, Kenneth and Mamie Clark, founders of the Northside Center for Child Development in Harlem. They conducted an experiment in which Black kids were offered the choice between a Black doll and a White one. Invariably, the children selected the White one.

"Nothing has changed among African-American people. You give a kid a doll in 2004, you'd find the same thing that Kenneth and Mamie Clark found over 50 years ago. In fact, it's prob-

ably worse," says Cox, a psychologist.

She explains, "All you have to do is pick up Ebony and JET or Essence or any of those magazines that appeal to African-American people, specifically women. You'll see it as clear as it was over 50 years ago. We are doing everything to not look African and to look as White as we possibly can," Cox says.

Not Danielle Smith, a dark-skin cashier for a national grocery chain, in Washington, D.C.

Customers in her check-out line can also check out the "Black & Beautiful" tattoo that she wears proudly on her wrist.

"I was always self-conscious of my complexion when I was younger," Smith says. "Everybody wanted to talk to light-skin girls and they called me, 'Black girl' or made little names to make fun. It was like it was this disease or something because of my complexion, like it was bad to be dark-skinned."

Even some family mem-



Danielle Smith's tattoo expresses her love of self.

bers contributed. Smith recalls, "They just teased me, called me 'little Black girl.'"

Omara-Alwala has been called that and worse.

"You realize how racism and discrimination, even within your race, has shaped your experience and your life," she says. Like Smith, she hasn't let the bad experiences erode her self-esteem.

When not working in constituency services for Gov. Mark Warner, Omara-Alwala

is busy helping other women who might have had similar experiences. She is vice president for publications for the Virginia Chapter of the National Organization of Women (NOW) and is active in many feminist and political causes involving the rights and issues of women.

"I was Black to the White community, so that sort of made me an outsider," explains Omara-Alwala. "And I was too Black for the Black community. And so, I found myself developing my own individual characteristics."

"Although some people would say that feminism is gender parity, it's also a basic need that women have to be completely who they are, not defined by anything, but just who they are. I intend to work hard and to be a mentor to a lot of my younger women of color."

Smith's hard work on her self-esteem has paid off.

"I'm happy with my complexion now," she says. "Black is beautiful."

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