Collegiate activism covers more issues

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WASHINGTON (NNPA) - On Nov. 9, Michael Sterling showed up to class at the Thurgood Marshall School of law at Texas Southern University dressed a little bit, well, different.

He was wearing a pair of jeans, a solid red shirt and red and white shoes, not the attire of an aspiring civil rights lawyer. On that day he was not alone — thousands of law school students across America were wearing blood red.

They were all on a mission: to educate the world about more than 400,000 tragic killings, rapes and violence in the Sudan. With demonstrations and other activities, the 7,000-member Black Law Students Association continued its 37-year tradition of student activism on that day that they designated as National Day of Community Service.

BLSA is just one example of what appears to be growing student activism around human rights and public policy issues.

"We're lawyers. I tell our students this all the time. We're next in line," said Sterling, national chair of BLSA. "We've got to start understanding that our role is one of fighting for justice. And when you see an injustice occurring, when you see some legal issue, it's like, why wait until you're in a profession and then try to get involved? We ought to be involved right now."

With the growth of the Internet and ease of communications devices, some believe Black student activism may have surpassed that of the 1960s.

"Young people are more engaged than their predecessors," says LaToia Jones, the Democratic National Committee's coordinator of College Democrats, which has more than 4,500 chapters in 50 states. Jones says student activism is more dissipated than it was in the 1960s, making it less noticeable.

"In the 60s, you had everyone galvanized around civil rights and the Vietnam War," Jones says. "More young people in this generation are actually doing more civic engagement by studying abroad, helping people in Africa, helping in Uganda and Asia and things of that nature. They're actually doing things locally and abroad, so they're actually more involved than before."

Not everyone agrees that students of today are more active, but many agree that student activism of the 1960s has been overstated.

Jesse Jackson Sr., who dropped out of the Chicago Theological Seminary to participate in the Selma-to-Montgomery March in 1965, said: "The fact is there never was as many of us fighting as our faded memories suggest," Jackson said. "Even then, many students benefited from marches that they never participated in."

The difference between the generations, he says, is that during the 1960s, "We were not free and knew it. Today, these youths are not free and don't know it."

He says some students are fighting for the wrong issues.

"Many of them are fighting for the right to use self-degrading language, fighting for the right to express freedom, often without content," he said.

Curtis Jackson (no relation), Black Student Union president at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside, says the issue is more complicated than that.

"It's highly difficult because in our generation, [civil rights] issues are not first priority. Our people would rather know about what's going on in the rap groups or in hip-hop," he said. "So, we held a forum talking about the use of the n-word and the b-word."

Jackson says those forums have been use to organize other actions.

"We're going to Madison [Wisconsin] this week to protest for affirmative action. "[Black conservative Ward] Connerly is going to be here and we're taking a bus," said Jackson.

Today, student organizations, including BLSA, are finding themselves fighting multiple battles. Student leaders say they are often divided between justice for themselves on campus and justice for their surrounding communities.

For example, while busy

Laptop

tem, a 366-megahertz processor from Advanced Micro Devices Inc. and no hard disk drive. Instead it has 512 megabytes of flash memory, plus USB 2.0 ports where more storage could be attached.

But the main design motive was the project's goal of stimulating education better than previous computer endeavors have. Nicholas Negroponte, who launched the project at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab two years ago before spinning One Laptop into a separate nonprofit, said he deliberately wanted to avoid giving children computers they might someday use in an office.

"In fact, one of the saddest but most common conditions in elementary school computer labs (when they exist in the developing world), is the children are being trained to use Word, Excel and PowerPoint," Negroponte wrote in an e-mail interview. "I consider that criminal, because children should be making things, communicating, exploring, sharing, not running office automation tools."

To that end, folders are not the organizing metaphor on these machines, unlike most computers since Apple Computer Inc. launched the first Mac in 1984. The knock on folders is that they force users to remember where they stored their information rather than what they used it for.

Instead, the XO machines are organized around a "journal," an automatically generated log of everything the user has done on the laptop. Students can review their journals to see their work and retrieve files created or altered in those sessions.

Despite these school-focused frameworks, its creators bristle at any suggestion XO is a mere toy. A wide range of programs can run on it, including a Web browser, a word processor and an RSS reader — the software that delivers blog updates to information junkies.

The computer also has features anyone would love, notably a built-in camera and a color display that converts to monochrome so it's easier to see in sunlight.

"I have to laugh when people refer to XO as a weak or crippled machine and how kids should get a 'real' one," Negroponte wrote. "Trust me, I will give up my real one very soon and use only XO. It will be far better, in many new and important ways."

Although the end result is new, the lead software integrator, Chris Blizzard of Red Hat Inc., said 90 percent of the underlying programming code was cobbled together from technologies that long existed in the open-source programming community.

In keeping with that open nature, details and simulations of the user interface, nicknamed Sugar, have been available online, to mixed reviews.

Some bloggers have said that even as Sugar avoids complexities inherent in the familiar operating systems from Microsoft Corp. or Apple, it just creates a different set of complexities to be mastered.

How hard that is should be one key measure of the project's success. One Laptop plans to send a specialist to each school who will stay for a month helping teachers and students get started. But Negroponte believes that kids ultimately will learn the system by exploring it and then teaching each other.

Still, no one appears to doubt the technical savvy Sugar represents.

Wayan Vota, who launched the OLPCNews.com blog to monitor the project's development because he is skeptical it can achieve its aims, called Sugar "amazing — a beautiful redesign."

"It doesn't feel like Linux. It doesn't feel like Windows. It doesn't feel like Apple," said Vota, who is director of Geekcorps, an organization that facilitates technology volunteers in developing countries. He emphasized that his opinions were his own and not on behalf of Geekcorps.

"I'm just impressed they built a new (user interface) that is different and hopefully better than anything we have today," he said. But he added: "Granted, I'm not a child. I don't know if it's going to be intuitive to children."

Indeed, the XO machines are still being tweaked, and Sugar isn't expected to be tested by any kids until February. By July or so, several million are expected to reach Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Nigeria, Libya, Pakistan, Thailand and the Palestinian territory.

Negroponte said three more African countries might sign on in the next two weeks.

Ruling

because we can alter legislation. We can have an impact now on priorities in the U.S. Congress."

Poverty and raising the minimum wage must be one of those key issues this year, says Bill Spriggs, chair of the Economics Department at Howard University.

"Getting out of Iraq is probably the most important issue of 2007. It's costing us a fortune as a nation. Already we've spent more than $500 billion," he said.

Recalling the often-used term, "urban agenda," Spriggs said geographic changes mean that language must be clarified for 2007.

"The reality is that people are using 'urban agenda' as a

euphemism for race. And the reality is that more Black people live in suburbs than the city... We ought to cut to the chase. If what you want to do is deal with racial disparity, then you ought to have a racial disparity agenda."

Some African-Americans think Black leadership itself is among the crucial issues facing Blacks in 2007.

"The challenge is to become honest about Black leadership. Look at where we are. They play the game the same way," said civil rights lawyer Thomas N. Todd. "The whole point, I thought, was to get leadership into a position where the games would be changed for the benefit of the masses."

Todd questions whether

Blacks in Congress will hold any real power.

"A person who has been consistent like John Conyers, they are not favored by the Democratic political establishment. And as a result of that, they don't enjoy the kind of popularity and power," Todd said.

In 2007, African-Americans must make tough decisions about its leadership, agrees Julia Hare, co-chair of the San Francisco-based Black Think Tank.

"I don't understand why Black people would want to continue doing what they've always done and think they're not going to get what they've always had," Hare said. "Get away from the Martin Luther King day lead-

ers. Get away from the Marcus Garvey leaders... What we have today are leading Blacks, self-appointed leaders."

Both Hare and Todd say Black leaders have gone along with too many government regulations not good for African-Americans. Todd cited how some presidents of Historically Black Colleges and Universities are now establishing standardized tests for admissions instead of open admissions as many HBCUs have in the past.

"I guess when we access the White man's way, we think his is a better model for us. What we should be saying is mine is no better than yours, but mine is just as good," Todd said.

Hare, an educational psychologist, says Black leadership going along with governmental child disciplinary standards has helped lead to record numbers of Black males in the criminal justice system.

"We need to strengthen the Black boys for Black manhood in our own Black way," Hare said.

"We have got to tell the government you cannot come in and tell us how to discipline the children. And then every day on the six o'clock news, you tell us how bad they were."

On the other hand, Ron Walters, director of Government and Politics at the University of Maryland, says continued attacks on Black

leadership by other Blacks would cause a decline in Black progress in 2007.

"We need to have some confidence in our leadership. We seem to not have the correct posture with respect to our leadership. We seem to think that it's time for those civil rights folks to go sit down in a corner somewhere and for the new people like [U.S. Sen.] Barack Obama to lead us to the Promised Land," said Walters.

"No. That ideology is the key to our weakness. I'd much rather have confidence in the proven leadership that we have before us. These people didn't get there by accident you know. They got there because they had something on the ball."