

MARKING 50 YEARS



The Legion of Black Collegians has helped the university improve by advocating for its goals. The group has served not only as a voice for black students at MU but also as a place to receive mentoring, learn leadership skills and commune with fellow students dealing with similar issues. Ten leaders from across the decades explain what the organization has meant to them.

BY KELSEY ALLEN

Despite the intervening five decades, some seminal details of founding the Legion of Black Collegians, or LBC, remain clear in the mind of Michael Middleton, BA '68, JD '71, deputy chancellor emeritus, professor emeritus of law and former interim president of the University of Missouri System.

The name itself materialized quicker than a hashtag during a conversation among Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity brothers. "Some of us Alphas were sitting in the student union in the corner that they had set aside for us and bemoaning the fact that we didn't have an organization that spoke for all black students," Middleton says. "Howard Taylor said, 'We need a legion of black collegians.' We said, 'That sounds pretty good. Let's form one.' That became the name."

Around that time, Middleton recalls, a galvanizing moment took place in the stands at a home football game. Middleton and his fraternity brothers were seated behind another body of students, and both groups had brought flags to wave. For years, he says, the other group waved a Confederate flag while Marching Mizzou played *Dixie* at halftime. "We got tired of it," Middleton says. In response, a black student brought a black flag, but they never got to wave it. "A policeman came scooting down our row with his hand on his side, appearing to be on his weapon, demanding that we give up our flag," Middleton recalls.

The students had no idea their countermove would prompt that reaction, but they weren't shocked, either. The first black student enrolled at Mizzou in 1950, and nearly two decades later, fewer than 500 black students attended MU. Neither were there black professors nor a black studies department. Until LBC launched in 1968 and became a formal student government in 1969, no organization focused on the black student population and the larger issues it faced at Mizzou.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the formation of the Legion of Black Collegians, and its mission — "to develop a lasting appreciation of social, moral, intellectual and, most of all, cultural values that will uplift the black student in the pursuit of academia and heighten the cultural consciousness of all students in all aspects of student life" — is as important as ever.

"There were struggles in 1978, and there are struggles in 2018," says Lt. Col. Al G. Keeler, BA '82, who was active in LBC during his time at Mizzou, as was his son Al Keeler Jr., BS BA '07. "I've been proud of the African-American students at Mizzou for sticking up for fairness and for doing what's right. There's a heritage of that at Mizzou."

BUILDING COMMUNITY

Brenda Wilson Etheridge, BS Ed '75, M Ed '77, grew up in Wardell, Missouri. Her sister attended MU, and when Ether-

idge came to Columbia 10 years later, she quickly connected with the Legion of Black Collegians. As activities chair, she made sure that social and educational events were open to everybody, whether they were members of Greek Life, African students, African-American students or white. “We tried to build a community where we could learn from one another’s giftedness and abilities,” she says. “It helped us to raise our heads from the books and be conscious of the greater world.”

FIGHTING FOR EQUALITY

An Army brat born in Germany and raised in Waynesville, Missouri, at Fort Leonard Wood, the elder Keeler arrived at Mizzou in the late 1970s on an Air Force ROTC scholarship. “LBC was active in those days,” Keeler recalls. “I saw them trying to fight for fairness and doing a lot of positive things around campus. LBC was trying to do things to make campus more hospitable to black students as well as give us a better chance to graduate.”

In addition to calling for MU to increase the number of black faculty members, recruit black students and set aside scholarships for black students, LBC also brought concerts, speakers and films to campus. Etheridge remembers that poet Nikki Giovanni and political activist Angela Davis came and spoke about how racism affected black students. When Keeler was a student, LBC brought African American civil rights leader and executive director of the NAACP Benjamin Hooks to Mizzou. “That was a big deal to see a black man come to campus and to talk about all the things that were going on in the world at that time,” Keeler recalls.

INSPIRING CHANGE

Many LBC alumni recall Sundiata Cha-Jua, who directed the Black Studies Program starting in 1991. “He was a big inspiration to me and was helpful in terms of encouraging me to voice my views, stand up for what I believe in and try to make a difference,” says Timothy Smith, BS BA ’93, who served as president of LBC during his time at Mizzou. “There were other African-American administrators on campus: Dr. Keener Tippen [assistant director of admissions], Dr. Clarence Wine [coordinator of student diversity programs in the business school]. They understood.

“I don’t think that most people in the majority culture can really understand or appreciate this — not because of any fault of their own but just because they haven’t walked in these shoes,” Smith continues. “It is totally different when you are a part of a small minority group on campus and the campus is geared toward the majority. When you are 18, 19, 20 years old and you are away from home for the first time and you’re in



+ Facing page, LBC members danced the night away Oct. 18 at their Homecoming gala. During Homecoming week, students also participated in service and entrepreneurship activities. At left, Michael Middleton was a founding member of LBC 50 years ago.

LBC MILESTONES

1968: The Legion of Black Collegians is founded to improve the climate for black students. A year later, MU recognizes LBC as a student government.



1969: MU creates the Black Studies Program with the help of Arvarh Strickland, the university’s first tenured African-American faculty member.

1971: MU establishes the Black Culture House at 511 Turner Ave.



Jill Young-Menears, Arts ’72, is crowned the first black Homecoming Queen.

1972: LBC charges that MU has been discriminatory in its recruitment of black students. The university responds with efforts to improve minority recruitment, increasing the number of black students from 375 in 1971 to 655 in 1974.

1973: The Office of Minority Student Programs develops as a result of pressure LBC applies to the MU administration.

lecture halls where, out of 300 students, there are maybe one or two individuals who look like you, it can be uncomfortable and intimidating. LBC was there. LBC brought African-American students together. It was a great support system. It helped African-Americans understand that we’re more effective when we move as a group or take action collectively rather than individually.”

Kim Rogers Crouch, BJ ’93, saw college — through her involvement in LBC — as an opportunity to make change. She participated in a sit-in at the chancellor’s office to fight for the university to recognize Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday as a holiday. In 1992, the year she was president, Crouch successfully campaigned to get students to give LBC 50 cents from each student’s activity fee, which resulted in the LBC budget going from \$2,378 to \$17,000. “We spent a lot of time talking to fraternities and sororities, to athletes, to everyone,” Crouch recalls. “We tried to make clear that LBC wasn’t a competitor to MSA [Missouri Students Association]. Many of us in LBC were also in MSA. We recognized the importance of the partnership between those organizations.”

For Jason Hill, BJ ’95, who was LBC president during its 25th anniversary, the group was more of an informal network. “The students who were involved were seasoned students,” says Hill, referring to his mentor, Smith. “People were hanging out in Brady Commons. We were downstairs in the LBC office studying or talking about things that were relevant in society at the time. You had older students who were on the path to success. That made me feel good about being a black student at Mizzou.”

LEGION OF BLACK COLLEGIANS

1974: LBC successfully advocates for the removal of Confederate Rock from the corner of Ninth and Conley. The United Daughters of the Confederacy presented the memorial to Columbia in 1935.

1978: LBC creates the Big Eight Council and Conference on Black Student Government. Now known as the Big XII Council on Black Student Government, the national meeting annually attracts students who focus on issues related to black students in higher education.

1978: The Black Culture House relocates to 823 Virginia Ave. and becomes the Black Culture Center.

1988: LBC protests the Homecoming theme, "Show Me Ol' Mizzou," which reminded the group of a past that was not supportive of black students, and organizes its own festivities with its own theme, "Show Me a New Mizzou: Black to the Future."



1990: Led by LBC, more than 150 students march to Jesse Hall to stage a sit-in at the chancellor's office to compel the university to make Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday a recognized holiday on campus. A year later, it becomes a campus holiday.

1993: LBC celebrates its 25th anniversary, and the Black Alumni Organization sponsors a yearlong celebration of the black experience at MU.



† Clockwise from top, in 1998, a 12,000-square-foot Black Culture Center was dedicated on campus at 813 Virginia Ave. In 1990, Tim Smith, seated second from left, discussed diversity in Homecoming activities with George Walker, standing left, then executive director of the Mizzou Alumni Association. In 2004, Lamont Walker soloed at Memorial Union with the LBC Gospel Choir, which he directed from 2000 to 2003. The choir won the national Baptist Student Union choir competition in 2002.



LIFTING VOICES

Lamont Walker, BA '08, wanted to be part of the LBC Gospel Choir ever since he saw them perform at a church in his hometown of Kansas City, Missouri. "I came from a very religious background, and I wanted to stay connected to that while I was away from home," Walker says. "And they seemed like they were having a lot of fun." Walker directed the LBC Gospel Choir from 2000 to 2003, eventually changing majors from business to music. "I had discouragement from family to go into music," he says. "But something about it gave me so much life. LBC became a community and support system for things I needed while I was at Mizzou."

As a high school student, Al-pachino Hogue, BJ '04, toured the newly constructed Black Culture Center during Summer Welcome and made a mental note to check it out when he became an MU student that fall. "It was a think tank for how the student experience could be improved at Mizzou," Hogue says. "I don't know if I would have developed the same voice as I have now if LBC didn't exist. I have an awareness of things that hang in space and that people either aren't acknowledging or aren't aware of. There are structures that exist. Mizzou isn't the only entity that deals with it. LBC helped me develop a vocabulary I didn't have going into college."

MOLDING LEADERS

In fall 2015, some black students, including members of LBC, formed Concerned Student 1950. A reference to the year the first black students were admitted to the University of Missouri, CS

1950 demanded that the university create policies and reform that could further shift the culture of Mizzou, echoing the Legion of Black Collegians' original demands presented in 1969 for the betterment of the black community.

Kelsie Wilkins, a senior journalism major from Chicago, was a freshman at Mizzou during the protests of 2015. "I like to make a community wherever I go, and I was at Mizzou," Wilkins says. "I wasn't going to change schools." She joined LBC's Freshman Action Team, which encourages involvement in campus and community and links freshmen to a network of resources. The group, designed to groom students for leadership roles, propelled Wilkins to the presidency. "My freshman year made me realize the potential we had on this campus to be the best we can be and to make sure we're getting the same tools and resources as everyone else," she says. "It made me want to do more and

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— Kim Rogers Crouch

be more."

In addition to planning the Welcome Black Block Party, Black Love Week, LBC Homecoming and the 50th-anniversary festivities, LBC leaders are preparing to host the Big 12 Conference on Black Student Government Feb. 21–24, 2019.

Crouch calls LBC a training ground: "It made me into the leader and the successful person I am today. It taught me how to interact with institutions: How do you collaborate with people who have no understanding of what life is like as a person of color? How do you get beyond those things? LBC is one of the main reasons that I have such

love of and loyalty to MU. It allowed me to see the university in a different way, through a network of students who I made lifelong friendships with.”

LBC is not only an organization that fosters friendship. It also supports the academic values of the university. “We advocate for our black students,” says Kierra Jones, junior political science major and LBC vice president. “It’s not easy trying to get a degree in four years. It’s not common for black students and underrepresented students to go to a [predominantly white institution] and get out in four years. LBC is a place where you can feel comfortable. It’s easier to come up to students who look like you when you need help.”

Crouch agrees. “One of LBC’s greatest gifts to us was the ability to connect with people like you, so you knew you were not alone,” she says. “We then worked to make sure everybody made it through.”

WORKING TOGETHER

As interim University of Missouri System president in 2016, Middleton appointed Kevin McDonald the system’s first chief diversity, equity and inclusion officer. Middleton charged him with implementing the Inclusive Excellence Framework and appropriated about \$3 million in initial support to spearhead the effort. At MU, McDonald is vice chancellor for inclusion and diversity. McDonald notes a growing desire among the UM System, MU administration and the campus community to collaborate. “We’re done overpromising and underdelivering,” he says. For example, in fall 2018, UM System President Mun Choi committed \$8.5 million to the Missouri Compact for Inclusive Excellence. The money is for recruiting and retaining diverse faculty, students and staff and creating a climate that is supportive and respectful and that values varied perspectives and experiences.

“LBC is a strong partner in the diversity and inclusion efforts at MU,” McDonald says. “They are the boots on the ground, have a strong understanding of what the student population needs and desires, and are an important partner helping us identify not only issues that exist or gaps that need to be filled but also solutions that can be led by the administration, by students or collaboratively. I appreciate the LBC leadership because they allow the administration to engage, and they challenge us in ways we can be better.”

Middleton also sees collaboration as the path forward. “We are all citizens of a country that is tainted by this history of slavery, racism, marginalization, Jim Crow, white supremacy,” he says. “It is as much a problem for the majority as it is the minority. And we have to work together to get through this.” **M**

Making Excellence Inclusive

In summer 2017, MU and the University of Missouri System adopted the Inclusive Excellence Framework, which strives to embed diversity, inclusion and equity into the fabric of MU. In fall 2018, UM System President Mun Choi committed \$8.5 million to the Missouri Compact for Inclusive Excellence. The initiative works toward recruiting and retaining diverse faculty, students and staff and creating a supportive and respectful climate that values varied perspectives and experiences. The strategic plan, *Mizzou 2020*, outlines ways of enacting the university’s commitment to a diverse and inclusive learning, living and working environment. Its goals include:

Diversify Faculty

MU aims to increase faculty from underrepresented groups to 15 percent in 2023 from 8 percent in 2017. Strategies include implementing inclusive hiring practices and onboarding orientation materials and mentoring new and midcareer faculty from underrepresented and underserved groups.

Reduce Graduation Rate Gap

When it comes to the gap in the six-year graduation rate for underrepresented undergraduates, the goal is to reduce that gap to less than 5 percent by 2023 from a three-year average of 13.1 percent in fall 2018. One approach will be to leverage involvement in Men and Women of Color, Honor and Ambition programs (MOCHA/WOCHA programs). These systemwide initiatives not only foster a sense of community among students of color but also provide personal, academic, cultural, social, professional and leadership development.

Boost Underrepresented Student Enrollment

MU will continue promoting the Land Grant Scholars Program, which helps make college more attainable for low-income students from all backgrounds. A goal is to increase historically underrepresented undergraduate student enrollment to 20 percent by 2023 from 14.6 in 2018.

Become a Leader in IDE Scholarship

Along with a goal to increase cultural competencies of all faculty and staff, MU seeks to become a leader in inclusion, diversity and equity scholarship. The Faculty Institute for Inclusive Teaching fosters a campuswide network of faculty who learn about inclusive pedagogy, explore promising practices, and develop skills for managing diversity and inclusion in the classroom.

1998: A new 12,000-square-foot Black Culture Center opens at 813 Virginia Ave. Two years later, the center adds the name Gaines/Oldham in honor of Lloyd L. Gaines and Marian O’Fallon Oldham, civil rights pioneers at the University of Missouri.

2004: Students gather outside administrative offices in Jesse Hall with a list of grievances calling for, among other things, a renewed commitment to minority recruitment.

2013: The Black Studies Program officially becomes the Black Studies Department, offering nearly 100 black studies courses.

2015: Students from LBC and beyond form Concerned Student 1950 and demand that the university create policies and reforms that could further shift the culture of Mizzou. Alumni organize to relaunch the Mizzou Black Alumni Network.



2016: MU hires its first chief diversity, equity and inclusion officer, Kevin McDonald.

2017: MU and the UM System adopt the Inclusive Excellence Framework.

2018: UM System announces \$8.5 million for Missouri Compact for Inclusive Excellence.



2018: MU dedicates the Lucile Bluford and George C. Brooks residence halls and the Gus. T. Ridgel Atrium in honor of three African-American trailblazers who shaped Mizzou’s history.