DUKE DESEGREGATES:

THE FIRST FIVE

BY BRIDGET BOOHER

In the fall of 1963, five undergraduates arrived on campus for their freshman year. Like their classmates, this group experienced the usual nervous excitement associated with starting college. But they had an added element of apprehension. Although all five were from the South, including two from Durham, they entered a foreign environment. They were the first black undergraduates to enroll at Duke, and, by the time commencement took place four years later, one had gotten married, most had changed their undergraduate majors, and two had dropped out altogether.

And then there were three; by their 1967 graduation, Wilhemina Reuben-Cooke, Nathaniel White, and Mary Mitchell Harris had made history.
From childhood, Wilhelmina Reuben-Cooke recognized the power and importance of education. The eldest of six children, Reuben-Cooke learned about social issues and the application of ideas from her parents after-work conversations. Her father, Odell Reuben Ph.D. '70, was president of Morris College in Sumter, South Carolina, and her mother was on the faculty there.

As it turned out, she and her father were both on campus at the same time, earning their respective undergraduate and graduate degrees. At the suggestion of her father's graduate school adviser, Professor Emeritus of Christian Ethics Waldo Beach, Reuben-Cooke applied. Until then, she had planned to enroll at either her mother's alma mater, Fisk, or at Oberlin, where her father earned his master's. But a visit to Durham changed all that; she fell in love with the Duke Gardens and campus.

As a first-year student, the highly-motivated South Carolina native immersed herself in the social and academic whirl. By the time she graduated in 1967, Reuben-Cooke had been selected Phi Beta Kappa, held leadership positions with the YWCA and the university's religious council, and was listed in "Who's Who Among Students in American Universities and Colleges." To crown her achievements, the political science major was elected May Queen by a majority of her Woman's College peers. (There was no slate of candidates; each student nominated whomever she wanted and Reuben-Cooke won with the most write-in votes.) She also signed in 1967 the open letter protesting the membership of key administrators and faculty at the then all-white Hope Valley Country Club.

After graduation, Reuben-Cooke began work on a doctorate in American studies at Harvard, but took time off to get married. She switched her sights to law school.

She taught and then practiced communications law in Washington, D.C., until 1986. Now a law professor and associate dean at Syracuse University, Reuben-Cooke has maintained her ties to Duke. She was appointed to a five-year term on the board of trustees in 1989.

Wilhelmina Reuben-Cooke

When I decided to come to Duke, I knew it wouldn't be an easy task. The majority of the students were from the South, and most of them had never dealt with African-Americans as peers. I assumed my social life wouldn't be great, and I knew my expectations about college would be tempered by reality. But I had a sense of personal commitment; it was the Sixties and the quest for change and civil rights was gaining momentum. It seemed to all of us that we had a role to play.

What I discovered was that I never had any regrets about choosing Duke. I was socially active and had a lot of friends. And an important part of that experience was being forced to meet people and develop relationships that I probably wouldn't have made in another context. That created in me a sense of optimism about the ways people can grow and change.

I still ask myself how I managed to do everything I did. I guess it goes back to the way I grew up. My parents believed that you should be involved in your community. So that would have been my way of life no matter where I went to school. You have a responsibility to create the environment you desire; you can't criticize what you don't participate in. Duke made it a comfortable possibility for me. And it was fun! I'm making it sound so deadly serious, but it was always fun....

One of the things that concerned me about Duke at the time was that I wondered how political we really were. I was at Harvard when I heard that students had taken over the Allen Building [in 1969]. To embrace issues and feel strongly about them was a good thing for Duke. And it was part of a general awakening across the nation. Those were tumultuous times. For a school not to have had demonstrations and marches would have said something negative about the intellectual commitment of the institution.

In terms of numbers and comfort levels, that continues to be a question. Not only did I not have any African-American professors, but I only had one class in which there was another black student. And that does make a difference in your learning. The basic dynamic of a white institution is that the comfort or 'safety' level is far different for students of color than it is for the majority. That's the beginning point and it colors everything.

As a trustee, I have been impressed with the concern for diversity. We should be looking not only at increasing numbers of African-American students, but also at how we educate overall. We should be moving toward a society where all kinds of people work together. The demographics of the twenty-first century will be far different than today's. And part of our responsibility is to educate students on how to live and work with other people. These are the challenges we face.”
W hile attending St. Anne's Academy, an all-girls Catholic high school in Winston-Salem, Cassandra Smith Rush decided her life's goal was to be a doctor. Because of Duke's reputation for its outstanding undergraduate and medical schools, she applied for admission during her junior year. At that point, the university was still segregated and her application was denied. Months later, she read that the university's board of trustees had voted to admit black undergraduate students, so she reapplied—and was offered a scholarship to attend. Her family was "absolutely thrilled," she says, especially her father. (His boss' daughter had applied and been turned down.)

As a first-year student, Rush was a zoology major, but, after a particularly rigorous comparative anatomy course, she switched to French. Other changes were taking place as well. Rush became caught up in the political and social currents of the time, specifically in the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), a national organization that established a Duke chapter in 1963. Unsure of her career goals, Rush left the university after the first semester of her junior year. She now works as a staff specialist at Southern New England Telephone in New Haven, Connecticut, where she lives with her two sons.

I'm proud to say I went to Duke, and sometimes I wish I'd stuck it out. But at the time, I wasn't happy and I didn't know what I wanted to do. I was tired of the fights with townspople, who could be absolutely hostile, very brutal. And even some of the students would cross the quad rather than speak to me. Or they would look the other way when they walked past.

I grew up in a very sheltered environment and it really hurt. I hadn't ever been treated like that. For a long time I put it out of my mind because it was so unpleasant, especially the off-campus encounters.

I was arrested in Chapel Hill in early 1964, Martin Luther King Jr. had spoken [at Duke], and our CORE group walked from Durham to Chapel Hill to hold a sit-in protest in front of a [segregated] restaurant there. We were thrown in jail for trespassing and resisting arrest. But it was fine, because we were all together....

For my sons, it is so, so different. They were born and raised in integrated neighborhoods and schools. They grew up in an environment where we didn't label people black, white, Chinese, whatever. Our house always looked like a United Nations meeting. My sons would describe their new friends to me and tell me how old they were, where their parents lived—everything you could think of—but until I met them, I would have no idea what race they were.

I taught them to look at other people as human beings. And maybe I've done them an injustice because we live in a racist society. But as little kids, they were never aware of racism. And it shouldn't be an issue children have to deal with. Consequently, they fit right in and feel they're entitled to the same rights as anyone else. When they see instances of [racism] they ask me, 'Why? Why do people raise their children that way?' And I tell them that it's a form of child abuse when parents raise their children to be racist....

After I left Duke, I worked in Washington, D.C., for the government and then the Navy. I went as far as I could go without a college degree; not having that piece of paper kept me from going ahead to the next level. So I started thinking about returning to school, but it wasn't until I was at home with my first child that I really felt I was vegetating. I felt that my brain was turning to mush! I'd go shopping just to encounter other adults.

When I went back to work part-time at the Federal Reserve, I applied for and won an employee scholarship which paid for my college tuition. So when I got my degree [a bachelor's in economics from Philadelphia's Chestnut Hill College], it really meant a lot to me because I was so ready. I graduated on Mother's Day in 1979. Because of my experience, my sons understand why I'm so determined for them to stay in school."

In August of 1963, I was in the March on Washington. An uncle from New York was there, as was another one who lived in Washington...we

H is family lived only three miles from campus, but Nathaniel White Jr. remembers little about the university from his childhood in Durham. Segregation meant that he and his classmates at Hillside High School only interacted with white students during weekly science seminars at Durham High. White recalls that the prospect of going from a completely black academic environment to a nearly all-white one was "an appealing challenge"; once there, White discovered it was "like going to a whole new city.

all met there. It was probably the last family reunion we had. Within a week of that, I was starting my classes at Duke.

There seemed to be a lot of advance preparation for our arrival. My roommate had been pre-picked; he was a sophomore. I got the impression that the faculty, undergraduates, and graduate students were ready [for desegregation] and that it was the board of trustees that delayed it from happening as long as it did.

We were a novelty effect because we were new; you know, 'What are they really like?' My bottom-line approach became, as a function of that, that I had high expectations for my friends [regardless of color], so the people who I had problems with, who didn't live
Gene Kendall

Born the second of six children in Greensboro native Gene Kendall was approached by MIT, Princeton, and most of the historically black colleges to apply for admission. But Duke offered him a full scholarship, and Kendall’s decision, he says, was thus essentially made for him. With his sights on a mechanical engineering degree, Kendall took the mandatory pre-major classes, only to find that his high school coursework left him unprepared for the university’s math and science requirements. A low grade on the semester’s first physics exam left him scrambling to catch up, and by sophomore year, Kendall knew he would lose his scholarship. Financial considerations forced him to drop out.

Now a captain in the Navy, where he is a director of the U.S. Naval Academy’s math and science division, Kendall says his Duke experience was a turning point in his personal and professional life.

I attended James B. Dudley High School, in Greensboro, which was a large, segregated school. There were 230 people in my graduating class. I knew that Duke had no blacks in their undergraduate programs, but I didn’t really consider any other school once I was offered the scholarship.

My community was ecstatic and my family was happy, but there was really no pressure [to be the exceptional child]. I was simply going away to college.

The single most difficult thing about coming to Duke was that I had no reference for how things would be. My high school had prepared me well for liberal arts courses but I was woefully ill-prepared for science and math. And that feeling prevailed throughout: ‘My God, what have I gotten myself into?’ There was no hostility or anything like that on campus or with any of the people I associated with. I was well received and was expected to participate in the university, and I did.

My score on the [freshman] physics exam was so low that it was impossible for me to pass the course at that point. If I’d known that I was in that much trouble, I would have gone for help earlier, but I thought I knew the material. I really did.

You’ve got to remember that I was coming from a high school environment where I was at the top of everything. Nothing had ever been difficult; my studies came easily. I was devastated by my failure and I asked myself, ‘Hey, am I as smart as everyone says I am, or has it all been a terrible joke? Should I have taken a lesser scholarship in a more caring environment and given myself a chance to grow?’

In retrospect, my chances at Duke were very, very slim. Even though my SATs were the highest of anyone at my high school, they were below the average for other Duke students and way lower than those of the average engineering student. I didn’t know that when I arrived, and things started piling up and before I knew it, I realized I would essentially be flunking out because my scholarship wouldn’t be renewed.

I joined the Navy and did quite well, so the Navy wanted to send me back to school. I asked them to send me back to Duke, but because of tuition costs, they would only agree to send me to UNC within the state. And I figured if I couldn’t go to Duke, there was no point in going to Carolina. Stanford was my next choice, but the military science building had been burned down by students the year before, so the Navy wasn’t sending anyone there. So I went to the University of Kansas, where I earned an engineering and physics degree. I graduated with honors and was president of the physics society.

My Duke experience put things into perspective. It showed me that no matter how you think things are, there are always holes in your preparation. It taught me to look for whatever I was uncomfortable with and work on that, rather than assume everything is okay because the surface seems fine. It also taught me how to recover from adversity and setbacks—how to return from the end-of-the-world syndrome. And it reinforced some interesting beliefs that sometimes even the most noble experiments don’t work.”
Both my parents worked at American Tobacco, so I was aware of the Duke family and their influence on the tobacco industry. But I never considered what it would be like to attend the university. Once I was there, it was like being in a world inside a world I'd known all my life. My only connection was with the people who worked in the dining and residence halls. And that connection was friendly, but loose and detached.

The transition was a lot easier than I thought it would be. I did spend a few nervous moments wondering if the strength of my elementary and high school academics would stand up at Duke. But I made the dean's list the first year.

By my second year, I had fallen in love and [my fiancé's and my] grades were slipping. So we decided to get married and stabilize our lives. Marriage was a big surprise to me and the people who knew me. It's one of those decisions that pulls its way into your life without it really being your choice. But at the time, it wasn't that unusual for people to marry young.

I was pre-med throughout my undergraduate career, although I changed from biology to psychology my junior year. I don't remember classes interacting that much with the social issues of the time. There was an anthropology course that addressed the origins of humanity, and I recall that the professor included supportive statements about the role of Africans.

We didn't have open conversations about racial issues, not even informally. I guess my just being there was enough of a statement. It really was. What conversations we did have focused more on com-

**MARY MITCHELL HARRIS**

Mary Mitchell Harris made up her mind in the tenth grade that she wanted to attend Duke. An honors student at Durham's Hillside High School, Harris wasn't dissuaded by a well-intentioned guidance counselor who told her she might want to make alternative plans. By the time Harris was valedictorian of her senior class, the trustees had voted to desegregate and Harris was offered admission.

alive and well; professors are comfortable with the approach and are open to the ideas and orientations of their students...

One of the things I'm interested in is corporate psychology. There are some communications theories regarding race relations in the corporate world. Often, there are [surface] acquaintances which are comfortable and polite, but that never move beyond the cursory level. And moving beyond that to real friendships is necessary because whenever issues come up that can be divided along racial lines, a demarcation is in place.

It's the same thing for academic institutions; there have to be real, true friendships among faculty and administrators [that cross racial lines] in order for students to think that there's really something new under the sun. When you talk about creating a multicultural environment, you have to look at the staff and administrative level as much, if not more so, than the student level.

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**THE WAY IT WAS (AND SOMETIMES STILL IS)**

For the first black students at Duke, joining a racially unified community was both formidable and exciting. In the years that followed, the country's social and political upheavals touched Duke as well. Soon, racial discrimination and disparity became a burning issue.

For Divinity School professor William Turner, who matriculated in 1966, black students' hopes and ambitions were tempered by an unspoken understanding of how to follow the guidelines already in place.

"You have to remember that we grew up in a pre-civil rights era," says Turner B.S.E. '71, M.Div. '74, Ph.D. '84. "Our experience was one of segregation: segregated communities, segregated churches, segregated schools. We remember separate water fountains. We remember sitting in the back of the bus. It was American apartheid, and we grew up learning rules of behavior and conduct around that reality. It's hard to describe for someone who wasn't there what an alien world it was."

Despite the alienation, Turner never considered leaving "because there was a pioneering spirit among us. You weren't just doing it for yourself; you were doing it for your parents, your school teachers, and for your community. Back home, we were celebrities; we were doing something new and revolutionary. "And you always knew what the rules were. Eventually it became a matter of deciding which rules you were going to follow and which you were going to break. You do that according to your own personal and moral integrity. You break them when you just can't continue with the way things are. And you don't break them when you don't feel like putting up that energy."

"That is something that many people never fully comprehended about the difference between segregation and separation. Some things that we've developed—forms of expression, cultural conventions—are things that we as African-Americans like [more than the white equivalent]. In many cases, we've never been sold on the superiority of the white culture or the white way of doing things. So you don't break the rules and put out the energy when you are going to like what you get less than what you had. But that was never the issue. The issue was the equality of opportunity; how funds, privileges, and benefits are allocated...."

"Even after twenty-five years, I still have the feeling that I'm breaking rules by being here. My son feels at home here; he can run around the Gardens and go to the top of the Chapel and he feels that this place is his. And on one level I feel like that, too. But on a deeper level, I know the history of my presence here."