



University of Idaho Black Student Union co-chairmen Jowi McMillan (left) and Josh Hoston enjoy a lighter moment at a community mixer Sunday at Moscow High School. The pair are working on reviving interest in the student group and promoting the interests of black students at the UI.

UI's Black Student Union being revived

Transplant from South Carolina recounts his experiences coming of age in the South

By JOEL MILLS
OF THE TRIBUNE

MOSCOW — As a boy growing up in Reevesville, S.C., Jowi McMillan says he was initially oblivious to the institutionalized racism that would eventually drive him from his home.

"I don't think I had an idea of what race was until middle school," says McMillan, a 30-year-old doctoral student in environmental science at the University of Idaho. McMillan, along with graduate student Josh Hoston, is the co-chairman of the recently renamed and reinvigorated UI Black Student Union.

McMillan remembers having several white friends who as children seemed to be color-blind. That is, he says, until they were old enough to become conditioned to the deep racial divisions in the South. He can even re-

member one close friend by first and last name.

"After fifth grade, he disappeared."

His racial awakening continued and eventually led to his disillusionment and disgust with the region. He began to notice impolite stares from strangers while shopping. His ears began to hear the racial slurs and his eyes noticed the racist graffiti. He realized the police were pulling people over just because they were black.

"South Carolina is a socially sick place," McMillan says while taking a break from a potluck and community mixer Sunday at Moscow High School. "It wasn't worth living there."

Before he left, however, he cut his activist teeth organizing and participating in what he calls radical activities at his undergraduate alma mater, South Carolina State University at Orangeburg. The writings of the Sene-

galese scholar and activist Chiekh Anta Diop taught him that civilization began in Africa, and he started to think the history taught in public schools cheated Africa out of the credit it was due.

"Many people don't understand it was the Moors that got Europe out of the Dark Ages," McMillan says.

In his years at the South Carolina university, he found himself and others protesting for things as simple as warm classrooms and respect from instructors.

"They know me still," he says of a university administration that resisted the changes he was fighting for. "And this was a black school."

After earning an undergraduate degree in biology, he finished a masters degree in environmental science and agriculture at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University.

Then, on July 4, 1997, he left the South for good. "I just wanted to get away from the racism."

McMillan says he doesn't celebrate Independence Day because black America was not freed on that date. But he wanted a piece of the happiness white America feels as it celebrates its freedom, so he left that day to celebrate his own freedom from the South.

And despite leaving his sister and parents behind, he says it was one of the happiest days of his life.

McMillan came to Moscow, where he earned a second masters degree in public administration and met Hoston. Both men see it as their responsibility to help change local perceptions of what black America really is.

I can't tell you how many times I've been a person's first black friend," says Hoston, 24, a self-described mili-

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tary brat who did most of his growing up at the Air Force base in Mountain Home.

McMillan and Hoston say Americans have been force-fed images of blacks that revolve around "homeboy handshakes," violent rap music and a steady diet of other stereotypes that belittle the true feast black culture has to offer.

"You never see the black doctors, the black lawyers and other black professionals," on TV or in the movies, McMillan says. Popular media focuses almost solely on the comedians, musicians and other entertainers that draw attention away from the pressing issues of race, he adds.

"Part of the problem here is people don't have a realistic view of what other cultures are like."

McMillan says he has slowly learned to take a less radical approach to bringing change. He's discovered the most efficient way is to work from the inside, and has settled on a career somewhere in federal government.

"To build bridges, people have to find common ground," he says.

And Moscow has been a good haven from the racism McMillan remembers from the South, in spite of northern Idaho's reputation as a white supremacist hotbed and the occasional racial epithet, he says. "Despite some of the racism here, it really affords a peace of mind."

Hoston also wants to change the system from the inside. He is working on a master's degree in education and wants to work with adults in his work as a firefighter and in the military as a member of the Idaho National Guard. Another option is staying at the UI to teach Ameri-

can Studies.

The Black Student Union was originally formed at the UI in 1996 as Recognizing African American Concerns in Education, Hoston says. But McMillan thought the term African American wasn't representative of blacks from other continents, so they changed the name. Membership in the union is open to anyone at the UI, Hoston says. About eight people have joined, he estimates.

In addition to promoting a positive image for blacks, the Black Student Union's goals include securing scholarships for black students and helping them find jobs after graduation.

And within that job market resides the most insidious form of racism, McMillan says.

"The (job) application process for blacks is more difficult than for other races," he says.

"You already have your race counting against you. Because of the educational system, on paper it says we have certain intellectual deficiencies."

That kind of bias is even more difficult to overcome than blatant racism because those who practice it might not even realize it, he says. Many employers look at standardized test

results, he says, which are economically and socially skewed to favor white culture.

He learned of job interview biases while working in the UI's human rights compliance office. The office does a good job of promoting diversity at the university, he says, and the Black Student Union hopes to contribute to their work.

Another project is getting a human rights library installed in the compliance office so literature and other media about different cultures will be readily at hand. And they are gearing up for next month's Juneteenth celebration on June 19, the 1865 day recognized as the official end to slavery in the United States.

For more information about the UI Black Student Union, visit <http://www.webs.uidaho.edu/bsu>.



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