

Four Girls Discover White Penn State

By MARGE COHEN
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All she could think about was her first day at college. For the past four years she had worked for that day.

As she packed her belongings in the family car to make the trip to Penn State, thoughts of a faceless roommate and the blank walls of the room the two girls would share floated through her mind. The four-hour drive from Philadelphia was unbearable.

She was thrilled with the idea of entering the college world — until she arrived at the University.

Before she had even greeted with a warm hello, she heard a forced welcome and saw phony smiles on the faces in the parking lot and in her residence hall.

People offered to help her with directions, unpacking and all those things any newcomer is helped with — not only because she was a freshman, but also because she is black.

Stares, Comments, Giggles

Because she is black, her new white "friends" were condescending and artificial and nervous and awkward, but, worst of all, the white students stared. And they still stare.

They watch her walk through the HUB on her way to class. In the dining hall they ignore her or make derogatory remarks intended for her ears. On the floor in the residence hall she is the only one and they make her feel like an outcast. All because she is black.

But what they don't know is that she is more aware of her blackness than they are. And she is proud of it.

Among the 3,400 freshmen who entered the University this Fall were an "indefinite" number of black students — indefinite, because the University allegedly does not differentiate between students on the basis of color or creed — bringing the total number of blacks to an estimated 310 out of 25,000 students.

Four black freshmen girls discussed their first few weeks of exposure to the environment.

"I'm restless," said one of the girls. "There is little here for me. Not even the victorious Nittany Lions make me feel a part of this school."

Not My School

"When I was home, I always went to my school's football games," she said, "but Penn State is not my school. White kids here are really conscious of race." The other girls agreed.

Though none of them were "really excited about coming here," they were determined "to make the most of their Penn State experience."

"Penn State was not my first choice," one of the girls remarked. She wanted to go to an out-of-state university, but could not afford it. She was forewarned that Penn State is a predominately white school, but her high school guidance counselor did not pressure her to reject her acceptance.

Black Schools 'Encouraged'

Another girl was "encouraged" by her high school counselors to go to a black school.

"There wasn't any literature in my high school about many black colleges — other than Howard and Cheyney," she explained. "You must find out on your own about these schools."

Nonetheless, she, too, decided to matriculate at State — "it is not too far



Why can't white people be themselves? Do they have to stare?

from home plus it is reported to be a good school. But now that she is here, she has misgivings. She is restless and feels confined.

Discussion with roommate
She realized from her first day here, confronted with the surprised stare of her white roommate, that the next ten weeks could be strained unless they immediately brought the color conflict into the open. They sat down and spent an evening discussing it.

So did one of the other black girls when she walked into the makeshift room-study lounge she was to share with a number of white girls.

"They can understand me better and I can understand them better," she said after their talks. All it takes, the girls commented, is common sense and integrity.

"Most white people up here can't think for themselves," one of the girls observed. "They only accept what their parents have told them."

Unaware of Problem

Her comments were centered primarily on the students who come to the University from Pennsylvania's many small towns.

Because of the small black population in most of these towns, many of their residents have little, if any, contact with blacks, let alone "know one." For this reason, the girls said, they "are unaware of the problem. Kids in small towns cannot understand why there are revolts and riots."

City Students More Aware

Students from the cities, however, are aware of the problem because they have lived with it.

"They have made up their minds to either accept or reject the black man as a person," one of the girls observed. "They made up their own minds."

"We really have to try to educate the small-town person," one of the girls interjected. "They have to realize that the black man wants respect — but not respect out of pity."

"And the black man does not have to 'earn' respect," another girl said.

Cultural Problems Different

"Too many people think blacks should be like the Jews and accept the culture," a third girl explained. "But our problems

are very different from those of the Jew and the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant — with them, you cannot always tell by looking!"

"That's right," one of the other girls agreed. "I have a lecture class in Forum Building and, if you look around the room, the three or four blacks in the class do not blend in." "That's nothing," another girl remarked. "I am the only black in my phys-ed class. The first few classes when my instructor told us to 'pair off', almost everyone had a partner but me. What were the white girls so afraid of?"

Though these girls feel alone in the classroom, the atmosphere in their residence halls helps somewhat to compensate for it. Because, as the girls pointed out, "people will never change their ideas unless they live with other people." Otherwise, they merely "regurgitate what they have heard."

One of the young women is the only black on her floor. "It's a good experience for me to live with an all-white society," she said. When a vacancy on a sorority floor with all black girls was called to her attention, she decided to remain with the "all-white society." She did not want to "limit" herself.

Education in Rooms

Another girl agreed. "I am educating my white roommate," she said. "We are learning from each other."

A third girl, living in a study lounge with white girls, said the "worst catastrophe" came about over the selection of "records-to-get-dressed-by."

"When I get dressed to go out, I play soul music," she said. "If they don't like it — and one of the girls isn't so crazy about it — they can change to more quiet music when I leave."

Not only do the white and black girls share rooms, but they also lend and borrow clothes, like any woman conscious of her appearance and bored with her own wardrobe.

"The girls on my floor are very liberal-minded, but more important, they are sincere," one of the girls said. And the other girls agreed.

Rudeness at Dinner

But in the dining halls, the girls said, many people are "just rude." Some of

In Dorm, on Campus, in Class— A Black Freshman Feels Alone

girls do "mix", but, for the most part, stares from other students inhibit integration.

At one meal, one of the girls overheard a conversation at a nearby table concerning the racial problem in America.

"They should send them all back to Africa," she heard a girl say. The other girls at the table laughed until they noticed "one of them" at the next table. They suddenly lowered their voices.

When she later made an attempt to talk about the incident to some of the girls involved, they were "too embarrassed to even discuss it."

"People who don't understand should just keep their mouths shut," she said, still visibly disturbed by the remark she heard three weeks earlier.

"Aren't you going to ask about our social life?" one of the girls asked.

"What social life?" interrupted a second girl.

"White girls up here are so concerned about having dates every night of every weekend," one of the girls commented. She advised them to try going to a concert en masse. "It can be fun," she said.

Socially, the girls feel limited. "Freshmen girls have no one," she said. They all agreed that the "only things here for black people are the black fraternities and sororities."

"Everyone wants to feel like they belong," another girl noted. And, she said, the fraternity men tended to "stick to Greeks."

'Something To Do'

"I've gone to the in-between campus jammies — not out of loneliness, but for something to do," one of the girls offered. "You can't expect to find fraternity guys there — they have their houses."

Since there are only three black fraternities, the girls also find themselves trying not "to play two brothers in the same house against each other" — a common gripe with many Penn State coeds because of "Greek protocol."

The girls said fraternity parties are stereotyped.

"No wonder people get drunk" one girl said. "There is little to do here." In their residence hall areas, the girls' dorms have arranged mixers with boys' residence hall units.

Blonde Expected

One of the girls told of such an event. "We were supposed to sign up on a date list and then we would all pair up for the mixer," she explained.

"Couldn't you see it now? I would sign up and some boy would be waiting in the lobby for a voluptuous blonde to step out of the elevator!"

The girls laughed, but the social situation as it exists isn't funny. It is true that many of their grievances are shared by their white classmates, but the black freshmen are inhibited both by the racial barrier and term stinging.

And, they said, "even if there were more blacks here, it would not change the situation."

There must be "interaction," they said, which results only from understanding and trust.

Dating 'Personal'

Interracial dating is a personal matter, the girls said. But living together is not so difficult.

One of the girls feels "indoctrinated" — as black militants put it — in the white man's society. Both races must understand and know each other, according to these four freshmen.

For this reason the girls are glad to see the introduction of courses in Afro-American history and literature at the University. "But how many people really get exposed to it?" they asked.

Some advisers do recommend the courses to their students. And, in some other courses, discussion of the black contribution to American culture are held.

All four of the girls plan to enroll in these courses as their studies here progress. They only hope more white students will take advantage of the courses. Because as long as the white-black ratio here remains so large, only through courses like these will students receive a more complete "cultural education," the girls explained.

But the girls believe that classroom study is only a first step.

"Why can't people be themselves?" one of the girls asked. "Instead of being afraid to offend, or making remarks like 'one of my best friends is black...', why can't they be sincere and relax?"



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