



Monday, May 10, 2004

Two professors honored as diversity champions

By **Dawn Pauli**, contributing writer

Two Oakland University professors coming from different perspectives have one thing in common – their devotion to supporting diversity and making a difference in the community.

Mark Simon, associate professor of management and director of the Entrepreneurial Institute, and Jude Nixon, professor of English and director of The Honors College, recently were honored as “Diversity Champions” by the Race Relations and Diversity Task Force of the Birmingham/Bloomfield area. The task force, sponsored by the Community House in Birmingham, is devoted to fostering respect and inclusion for all people. It is working to build and maintain an open community that overcomes racism, prejudice and discrimination.

Simon tirelessly works to give underprivileged students the opportunities to succeed. OU's **School of Business Administration** nominated him for the award.

“I see people not starting out on a level playing field, and by reaching them at a young age, we’re helping them and society,” he said.

Through the Entrepreneurship Institute, Simon and the OU chapter of Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE) have impacted 6,000 underprivileged kids through 200 workshops designed to provide entrepreneurial experiential exercises.

Simon also works with other OU academic and social enrichment initiatives, including Project Upward Bound, Gear-Up and the King-Chavez-Parks programs that target similar students.

He’s passionate about his work with economically challenged youth and was inspired at an early age to help others. When Simon was in sixth grade, his parents took in a boy from the inner city to live with them during the summer. Simon saw firsthand the differences the boys faced in their lives.

“I was having problems reading and was labeled learning disabled. I got all sorts of extra help and had supportive parents,” Simon said. He soon was reading at grade level.

The other boy also had problems in school, said Simon, “but instead of getting help, he was beat up by other kids after school because he would study and his mother was on heroine. What he had to face was so different than my life. He had to overcome huge obstacles. It gave me perspective.”

Jude Nixon, co-chair of the Race Relations and Diversity Task Force, is motivated for different reasons.

He recalls the painful experience of living and teaching in Texas, where there was little diversity and the only minorities on campus were groundskeepers or kitchen staff. He was assumed to be a mailman by a colleague who hadn’t met him yet.

After moving to Birmingham, a community 15 miles north of Detroit, Nixon was shocked at how the community lacked diversity.

“My involvement grew out of frustration,” he said. “I was propelled very early to help make it diverse.”

He joined a predominantly white church, The First Baptist Church of Birmingham, where he eventually was voted chairman of the board.

“I’m in an elected position of the church; I carry the key,” he said. “I run the church and handle the finances.”

This was no small feat, and he uses his position to remind others of the importance of diversity and reaching out to a larger area – outside Birmingham. Nixon was nominated for the Diversity Champion Award by his church.

Through the Race Relations and Diversity Task Force, Nixon spearheads programs to educate people about diversity. A recent panel discussion explored segregation in schools, marking the 50th anniversary of Brown vs. Board of Education.

While Nixon doesn't enjoy the spotlight the award brings, he appreciates that it helps get the word out about the importance of the work that needs to be done. "And it's even better if that gets more people involved," he said.

SUMMARY

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