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First African-American Student Focuses on Honesty and Unity

CEDARVILLE, OHIO -- When James D. Parker Sr. arrived at Cedarville University in the fall of 1954 as its first black student, the United States was going through historic changes in the area of racial equality. The U.S. Supreme Court had ruled earlier that year that racial segregation of children in public schools was unconstitutional.

This fall, Parker will be honored as Cedarville's newest residence hall will bear his name and the names of Pat Bates, former dean of women, and George Dunn, who served on the board of trustees in the 1950s.

As Cedarville prepares to celebrate Parker, the country once again finds itself torn apart by racism after the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

"We live in a sad time," Parker said, who lives in Syracuse, New York, with his wife, Mary. "It seems like we're going backward in a lot of things."

As the first African-American student at Cedarville, community was a big part of his experience. "I had my own room on campus, but I was never lonely," he said. "I regularly had to kick the other guys out of my room so I could go to sleep. Everyone was always hanging out in my room."



His white classmates also learned lessons about being black in America. "I remember one time four or five of us went out to eat," Parker said. "The restaurant wouldn't serve us because I was black. We went somewhere else."

Some Cedarville students in 1954 had questions about admitting a minority student to the college. But President James T. Jeremiah quickly addressed that, informing the student body that Parker would be attending, and anyone opposed should withdraw.

“I never had a problem during my time at Cedarville,” said Parker. “Dr. Jeremiah had a lot to do with that. He made sure I was welcomed with open arms. He was a great man.”

Despite attending a predominantly white school during a time when racial tensions in America ran high, Parker flourished at Cedarville. He became an instant hit among his classmates, serving as vice president of the freshman class and sophomore class chaplain.

From those days, Parker saw progress in race relations. “There were a lot of things done that have been corrected, but there’s still more that needs to be corrected,” he said. “I’m going to a meeting tonight at church, both black and white, and we’re going to discuss the problem that we have.

“We have to be Christians first, not white or black. And we have to be honest with each other. We’ve been sweeping it under the rug, and that rug is overcrowded and spilling out.”

For current students who will live in the residence hall that bears his name, Parker’s hopes mirror his hopes for the nation.

“I hope they develop a love for one another,” he said. “That they’ll learn to listen to each other, and to consider the other person’s viewpoint.”

Located in southwest Ohio, Cedarville University is an accredited, Christ-centered, Baptist institution with an enrollment of 4,380 undergraduate, graduate and online students in more than 150 areas of study. Founded in 1887, Cedarville is recognized nationally for its authentic Christian community, rigorous academic programs, strong graduation and retention rates, accredited professional and health science offerings and high student engagement ranking. For more information about the University, visit www.cedarville.edu.

Written by Clem Boyd, Communications Content Manager, Cedarville University