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Realizing the dream

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Realizing the dream

Two generations work to promote racial diversity on campus



Charles Piccolo - HONOR BUSINESS

HE HAS A DREAM — President of the local NAACP and former UMaine student James Varner said he would like to see the minority population at UMaine increase to at least 20 percent.

By Ernest J. Scheyder
For The Maine Campus

James Varner lives in one of the wildest states in the nation, but he is arguably one of this region's most dedicated proponents of racial acceptance. A community activist working for the integration of all persons, regardless of color, into society's fabric, Varner is active on the University of Maine campus and in Old Town.

1957 graduate heads local NAACP

where he now lives. His work on behalf of such groups as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Human Rights Coalition, and various community outreach organizations has enabled him to bring his message of unity wherever he goes.

Born in Jersey City, N.J., during the height of the Great Depression, Varner saw firsthand the effects poverty had on the human spirit. Over the course of his childhood, Varner moved several times, living in the Bronx, attending school in Harlem and eventually settling with his family in Princeton, N.J. While at Princeton High School, Varner distinguished himself as an exceptional member of the track team and a stellar student. His athletic prowess did not go unnoticed by colleges, particularly those in the south. Varner, however, had his eye on a small school in New England — the University of Maine.

"I love Maine," Varner said. Unable to bear the financial responsibilities of a college education alone, Varner was awarded a full, four-year academic scholarship for college by the Princeton Rotary Club.

While at UMaine, Varner excelled as both a student and an athlete. He was a member of the track team, through which he made several records that still stand today. In the academic sphere, Varner was a double major in chemistry and education.

A precision and outspoken man, Varner said he had no trouble meeting new people and experiencing new clubs, including his time as the first minority brother in the Phi Eta Kappa fraternity. Varner was also actively involved in Army ROTC.

While in college, Varner met his future wife, Florence. They married not long after graduating in 1957 and now have four children. After graduation, Varner, who originally wanted to be a dentist, worked as a chemist at New York's Mount Sinai Hospital, before fulfilling his obligations to ROTC in the U.S. Army. Varner traveled many places with the Army, notably Guam, Okinawa and other Pacific islands. Upon the conclusion of his term in the military, Varner returned to science, working again as a chemist, this time for the State of New Jersey. Varner then entered a term as a science teacher at a local school district.

After already contributing so much to society, Varner decided to leave his teaching position and assume a full-time position as executive director of a non-profit community outreach program in upstate New York. While in New York, Varner managed services in more than 30 municipalities, seeing the positive impact that his work was bringing to that. Of particular focus were the lives and condition of minorities in the region he managed. He said he stroved to present a positive role model for previous of all colors in the community.

"I've always been interested in race relations," Varner said.

Alumnus a resource for black students

From VARNER on page 5

In all, Varner spent 19 years serving the community through his outreach efforts, but his activism didn't stop there. After leaving the program, Varner spent time working at high schools, advising black students at Drew University, and working with Earl Graves, the founder of Black Enterprise Magazine.

It was around this time that Varner received a call from the University of Maine asking him to return and focus on racial issues in Orono. Varner accepted and returned to his alma mater to assist a whole new generation of minorities, whom Varner

described as "fish out of water."

"Maine is an excellent spot to develop modules to address problems with race in this country," Varner said. "The educational system in this country is a racist system. Students are taught to be good, little, white male Americans. Black persons are taught to hate themselves."

Upon his return, Varner worked closely with the admissions office and other departments to ensure the equitable integration of all persons into university life. He served as adviser to the Black Student Union and, with help from students, formed the Bangor chapter of the

NAACP.

In all, Varner spent several years working with the university before officially retiring. His work, however, did not stop there. He continues to be active in various groups on campus and in the community, including the Maine Peace Action Committee and the Human Rights Coalition. He also teaches Intro to Black Studies from time to time.

"I'm on call to students in the black community," he said.

Varner stresses that there is still plenty of work to be done on the part of minorities at UMaine. The university could do more to attract and retain a greater racial

spectrum of students and faculty, he said.

"They can do it if they really want to," Varner said."

Varner said he would like to see the campus transform into approximately 20 to 25 percent minority students, saying it is unacceptable that white students do not have the chance to interact with students of other backgrounds while in college.

"I think the university is doing a great injustice [to white students] by not having them experience the real world," Varner said.

To accomplish this goal, Varner said a vice president for diversity or a similar position

could be established to address diversity issues. But, Varner said he doesn't see the rapid inclusion of minorities, specifically the 25 percent proposed population, happening anytime soon.

"This university is at the water, but they're not drinking," Varner said, referring to UMaine administration.

Despite the work that remains at UMaine, Varner acknowledges the positive aspects the Civil Rights movement had on this country and continues to press forward towards his goals.

"I think I'm really lucky," Varner said, looking back on his life of fond memories.

By Ernest J. Scheyder
For The Maine Campus

While most students spend their college careers worrying about GPAs and extracurricular activities, Paul Groce has taken it upon himself to devote his time to an extraordinary cause.

First-year leads Black Student Union

A first-year student of Caribbean descent, Groce is the president of the Black Student Union. A double major in social work and political science, Groce recently became president of the group when the former president resigned due to personal issues. Under Groce's leadership, the



Paul Groce

group has recently focused on preparation for Black History Month during February. While Groce admits that the group is lacking concrete organization this year, he notes that it does enjoy a good number of faithful members.

For Groce, achieving the presi-

dency of the Black Student Union meant he could bring to bear his own personal goals for the group. He said he hopes to focus on events beyond Black History Month in an effort to diversify the group's offerings to the student body. He will be involved in the Black History Month Dinner on Feb. 20, which will feature a Caribbean theme this year.

One such area Groce feels needs to be addressed is the existence of Black History Month itself.

"We need to make history as colorless as possible," Groce said.

By focusing solely on black history during this time, members of other ethnic groups feel left out or not welcome, he said.

"I don't find [UMaine] to be discriminatory at all," Groce said.

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BSU leader focuses on similarities

From GROCE on page 5

speaking of the atmosphere towards persons of varying ethnic groups in Orono.

He did say, however, that he would like to see a greater emphasis on multicultural issues by university administration. Groce suggests more lectures for the public regarding black and other minori-

ty issues. He also feels UMaine could benefit from having an African-American Studies department, calling it a "positive step."

Groce said that at the end of the day, however, what we have in common is far more important than what sets us apart.

"You can't put your emphasis on diversity ... Commonality is

the most important thing," he said.

In the future, Groce plans on working as a social worker in the inner city or as a political lobbyist for children and minority issues. In his time remaining at UMaine, Groce plans on remaining an ardent supporter for issues that relate to minorities and the university community.