First Degree Awarded In Black Studies

GARFIELD A. JACKSON wanted to become a biology teacher when he enrolled at Ohio State. But his campus experiences led him to major in black studies and created new possibilities for him.

On Friday March 16, Jackson was the first student to receive a bachelor's degree in black studies at the University.

"I'm just not the same person I was when I came here," he said. Three experiences have resulted in a changed outlook on his future: studying black history and literature, editing the literary magazine, "Proud Black Images," and getting an education, he said.

"Black studies gives you a new concept of yourself as a person," Jackson said. "You begin to feel pride in the accomplishments of your ancestors. You study slavery and injustices, but you concentrate more on what you (as a people) did than what was done to you.

"I've come to realize that the passive black man never existed—it was a myth. I've learned that blacks generally have been a people who never gave up, who endured, who had strength. You lose the angry edge when you gain a larger view of history. Black studies gives you a new perspective on the past and gives you a different perspective on the future," he said.

Now 32, Jackson grew up in Cleveland's inner city and began writing poems as a teenager.

After four years in the U.S. Air Force, he started writing again while he worked in various government jobs in Washington, D.C.

He returned to Cleveland in 1968 and enrolled full-time in Cuyahoga Community College. Jackson took a course taught by a teacher he knew from junior high school. "She encouraged me to write when I was in junior high, but I wasn't the greatest student then."

He temporarily dropped out of college, but another instructor notified him of a writer's conference at Cleveland's Karamu Theater. He attended and found "there was a market for black literature. Then, I started making another serious effort."

In 1970, he won a national honor—the Gwendolyn Brooks Literary Award sponsored by "Black World" magazine—for the poem, "Juba."

Jackson entered Ohio State in the autumn quarter, 1970, and began efforts to establish a magazine as an outlet for black poets, writers, artists, and photographers on campus and elsewhere. He and other contributors sold magazines themselves as each of the three issues a year were published.

Also, he and two others in a group called the "Proud Black Images Poets" have read poetry in many performances with the Ohio State University Black Choir.

He decided to study black history and literature following establishment of a black studies major at Ohio State. Charles O. Ross, an associate professor of social work and then the chairman of black studies, had helped him with "Proud Black Images."

About 30 of Jackson's works have been published, excluding contributions to "Proud Black Images." He now writes essays and articles on various aspects of his experiences and thought. "One of the purposes of writing poetry for me was to learn to improve my writing," he said.

His future plans are still indefinite, but he is interested in a full-time job and attending graduate school part-time. A grant to study in Africa is pending, and he would hate to turn this opportunity down, he said.

Generally, he plans to keep writing, of course, and to "work with people, like in a community program or a human relations program." He has taught an introductory black studies course at Ohio State and is enthusiastic about helping black students to become aware of their ancestry.

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