



# *The* **Desegregation** *of a* **University**

IN 1954, TULANE WAS POISED TO JOIN THE FLEDGLING RANKS OF SOUTHERN PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS TO VOLUNTARILY ADMIT AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS; IT WOULD TAKE NEARLY A DECADE, HOWEVER, FOR THE CAMPUS TO INTEGRATE.

*by Alicia Duplessis Jasmin*

#### **Outfielders**

Stephen Martin, second from left, poses with fellow 1966 Green Wave outfielders Mike Roos, Jim Crumley, Steve Costa and Mike Ward. Martin was the first African American to play varsity sports in the NCAA's Southeastern Conference.

Edwin Lombard ('13) enrolled at Tulane University last fall to fulfill the final credit hours necessary to obtain his bachelor's degree. To his 20-year-old classmates, he was no different than other non-traditional students returning to college later in life. But in reality, Lombard was different.

Lombard, 66, did his best to keep a low profile, but it was not long before his classmates discovered two things about him: He is a judge on the Louisiana 4th Circuit Court of Appeal and he was among the first African American undergraduate students admitted to a newly integrated Tulane University in the early 1960s.

For Lombard, returning to campus some 45 years after his initial matriculation from 1964–1967 was an exercise in self-fulfillment. The decorated judge, whose career has taken him around the world, was admitted to law school in 1967, before the completion of a full bachelor's degree was required in Louisiana. The jocular Lombard insists he holds "the record as being the guy who took the longest to graduate."

In May 2013, Lombard finally received his Tulane degree—the same year in which the university remembers the 50th anniversary of its desegregation in 1963.

During an interview in his office in the heart of the French Quarter, Lombard reaches into the top drawer of his desk to share a little piece of the past that he keeps as a reminder that "nothing is impossible." Out of the drawer comes his Tulane student ID card with a black-and-white headshot of his 18-year-old self.

Beginning with a recollection of the gasps heard during his high school graduation when it was announced that he would be attending Tulane, Lombard begins to recount life on the Tulane campus at the height of the country's civil rights movement.

**LIKE WATER**

Lombard admits he was no bookworm back in 1964. But it wasn't long before the freshman's inner politician began to surface.

In response to the complete lack of social organizations available to black students, Lombard created the African American Congress at Tulane. That organization is still active today.

"We didn't have anyone to tell us the best classes to take or which professors to avoid," says Lombard. "I started the African American Congress to do what I knew the fraternities and other social organizations around campus were doing for the white students."

It's not long before Lombard is reminiscing about his roommate in those days, Stephen Martin (A&S '68, B '73), who died earlier this year. Martin, who retired in 2012 as the chief financial officer for Tuskegee University, holds a particularly significant place in Tulane's history.

Taking the field with the Green Wave baseball team in 1966, Martin was the first African American athlete to play varsity sports in the Southeastern Conference, with which Tulane was then aligned.

In talking about Martin, the cadence and timbre of Lombard's voice changes. He begins sharing a story that seems difficult for him to recount.

Following an away game against Mississippi State University, Martin returned to their dorm room in Robert Sharp Hall wearing a disturbed look on his face.

"He came in really somber and began telling me about how the crowd was chanting 'give me an N, give me an I, give me a G-G-E-R.'

"It took a lot to bother this guy," says Lombard. "But that night I could clearly see this really messed with him."

Harold Sylvester (A&S '72), the Hollywood producer, director and actor who played for the Green Wave basketball team later in the '60s, was Tulane's first black scholarship athlete. He told *The Times-Picayune* following Martin's passing in May 2013 that Martin was the type of person who handled negativity "like water on a duck's back."

"He must have internalized it, but he was an absolute, total, complete gentleman," said Sylvester. "He was a bright scholarly guy. But he went through a lot, no question about it."

**EDUCATING 'WHITE YOUNG PERSONS'**

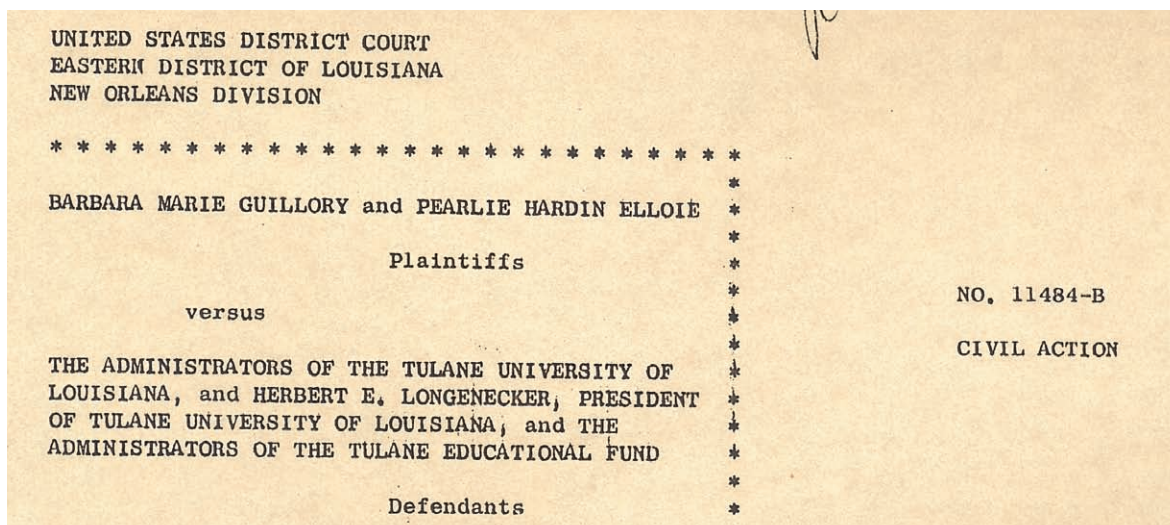
In the 1950s and '60s, life in the Deep South was played out against the fallout from generations of racial inequality. As the American civil rights movement slowly began to gather momentum, some of the drama would take place in the boardrooms and on the campuses of the nation's institutions of higher education.

At Tulane, the first formal step toward desegregation occurred in April 1954 at a faculty meeting of the Graduate School. According to John P. Dyer in his history, *Tulane: The Biography of a University*, out of that meeting came a recommendation by the faculty "that steps be taken to clarify the policy of admission to the Graduate School in order that admission of Negroes may be facilitated." The resolution was sent to the Tulane Board of Administrators for approval.

That was nearly a month before the Supreme Court's May 1954 landmark ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which provided that segregated public schools were inherently unequal and violated the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment.

If Tulane had a chance to get ahead of the curve regarding integration, the opportunity was squandered when the board ultimately failed to act on crafting a desegregation policy.

"The division of opinion within the Board of Administrators was never fully revealed," writes Dyer, "but it is known that some



**Plaintiffs**  
 Barbara Guillory and Pearlle Elloie are the plaintiffs in the lawsuit against Tulane filed in the U.S. District Court, Eastern Division, in 1961.



PAULA BURCH-CELENTANO

of the members were opposed to the integration of Tulane. ...”

Clarence Mohr and Joseph Gordon in their history of the university, *Tulane: The Emergence of a Modern University* (published in 2001, three decades after Dyer’s work), draw with a somewhat finer point: “No members of the Board expressed enthusiasm over the prospect of admitting black students, and it seems likely that most who supported the idea did so reluctantly.”

Whatever personal views board members may have had toward admitting blacks to Tulane, two pragmatic concerns served to foster their inaction during the next several years. The first had to do with a limitation prescribed by the gifts of the university’s major benefactors Paul Tulane and Josephine Louise Newcomb, who expressed the desire that admission be limited to white students. (A letter written by Paul Tulane in 1882 directed that income from his donations be applied to “the promotion and encouragement of intellectual, moral and industrial education among the white young persons in the city of New Orleans, State of Louisiana.”)

A second concern of the board was that the university might lose its status as a private institution if its admission policy was overturned on the basis of the 14th Amendment. Board members held no desire to answer to the state legislature as a public institution.

The Tulane board ended the 1950s without moving toward desegregation, but things came to a head at the outset of the next decade.

In 1960, Herbert Longenecker took over as the university’s president, inheriting a substantial budget deficit and facing pressure from national funding agencies that were disinclined to financially support segregated institutions.

“Any doubt about the consequences of keeping Tulane white vanished on Feb. 15, 1961, when the Ford Foundation officially notified Longenecker that the university would not be included in the challenge grant program,” write Mohr and Gordon.

**“We didn’t have anyone to tell us the best classes to take or which professors to avoid,” says Edwin Lombard. “I started the African American Congress to do what I knew the fraternities and other social organizations around campus were doing for the white students.”**



PAULA BURCH CELENTANO

### Now & Then

*Opposite page:* From his desk in his downtown New Orleans office, Edwin Lombard recalls his days at Tulane.

*This page:* In that desk, he still keeps his original student ID card.

Two months later, in April 1961, the board acted and formalized a desegregation policy and in a statement said that it had “voted that Tulane University would admit qualified students regardless of race or color if it were legally permissible.”

For some time, a plan had been in the works to challenge the university’s admission policies. With the backing of Tulane political science professor Henry Mason and Dillard University political science professor John B. Furey, as well as the financial support of Rosa Freeman Keller, the wealthy, liberal daughter of Tulane board member Albert B. Freeman, two black women—Barbara Marie Guillory (G ’74) and Pearlle Hardin Elloie (SW ’65)—applied for admission to the university.

In April 1961, Elloie received from the School of Social Work a rejection letter reflecting the board’s newly minted policy statement about the legality of admitting black students. In part, the letter stated, “pursuant to the policy recently enunciated by the Administrators of the Tulane Educational Fund, we would approve your admission except for the fact that we believe it is not legally permissible for us to do so.” Guillory received a similar response from the Graduate School.

By June, Elloie and Guillory were represented by legal counsel and by the following September, a suit was filed against Tulane on the behalf of the women, beginning what would be 15 months of litigation.

U.S. District Judge Skelly J. Wright, whose history of rulings included the order to admit black students to Louisiana State University, heard the case’s initial phase.

Sensing the likelihood of a favorable ruling, counsel for Elloie and Guillory motioned for a summary judgment based on the submitted facts without a full trial. Wright complied and in March 1962 delivered an opinion that Tulane was indeed subject to the provisions of the 14th Amendment, questioning whether any school or college was “so private as to escape the reach of the 14th Amendment.”

Shortly after the ruling, Wright accepted an appointment to the Circuit Court in Washington, D.C. Fearful that Wright’s ruling would expose Tulane to interference from the Louisiana legislature, the board asked Wright’s successor, Judge Frank Ellis, to vacate the summary

judgment. Ellis complied, granting the stay and ordering a new trial.

“To many outside observers, the Board’s decision to seek a new trial in 1962 seemed inconsistent with the previously announced policy of admitting black students as soon as legally possible,” write Mohr and Gordon.

The trial took place over four days in August 1962. “By this point,” write Mohr and Gordon, “the contest before Judge Ellis had less to do with black admission per se than Tulane’s desire to recover its legal standing as a private school.”

In his summary statement, Tulane’s attorney said that the university’s objective was simply to be “recognized as a private institution” with the “freedom to determine our own salvation. ...”

On Dec. 5, 1962, Ellis rendered his opinion that Tulane was indeed a “private activity” and not subject to the prescriptions of the 14th Amendment. Furthermore, he stated that Tulane could voluntarily admit blacks because it would be unconstitutional to compel discrimination.

Within a week of Ellis’ ruling, the board voted to implement the policy decision of April 1961, voting unanimously to integrate beginning with the acceptance of Guillory and Elloie.

A total of 11 black students registered for the spring semester of 1963. A year later, 57 black students had been accepted to Tulane.

### AN EDITOR TAKES A STAND

In 1962, Dean Gottehrer (A&S ’63) served as editor of the *Tulane Hullabaloo*. Now 71, Gottehrer recalls writing as a student about the events surrounding desegregation 50 years ago.

“Of course,” he says, “everyone was watching what happened over at the University of Mississippi,” where a riot erupted between segregationists and law enforcement as James Meredith, the first black student arrived on campus on Oct. 1, 1962. Two people were killed.

While a growing number of Tulane students were active in protests in New Orleans, only a couple of sit-ins would take place on the Tulane campus.

According to a *Hullabaloo* article published Oct. 12, 1962, 20 white



**Joined in History**

Pearlie Hardin Elloie (left) and Barbara Guillory Thompson visit the Tulane campus in summer 2013, 50 years after they entered the university. *Inset:* Elloie and Guillory as young women before they enrolled at Tulane.

**As for her time on campus, Barbara Guillory Thompson says her experience was pleasant. As long as she felt comfortable with herself—and she did—“if someone else had a problem, it was theirs,” she says. ... “I was there for one reason and I was going to accomplish my goal.”**

students and seven black persons “entered quietly, bought coffee, and seated themselves at tables in the coffee shop” of the University Center cafeteria. While there, they made “no effort to cause a disturbance of any kind.”

At some point during the sit-in, which lasted less than an hour, tension escalated as three students paraded through the cafeteria carrying small burning crosses. Their action encouraged other pro-segregationist to begin shouting racial slurs. Sit-in participants left the cafeteria peacefully.

According to the article, one Tulane graduate student who agreed to comment said that he felt solidarity with the sit-in participants, but “thought it would have been a better idea to wait” until after Judge Ellis ruled on the case.

As editor, Gottehrer ardently supported and wrote about desegregation—a stance that was not entirely popular within and around the Tulane community.

Following the *Hullabaloo*’s coverage of on-campus sit-ins, the Louisiana branch of the National States Rights Party placed leaflets on cars along Broadway that criticized the student paper for “promoting” the protests. The text of the leaflet, which also was distributed at a White Citizens’ Council meeting, included a reference to the *Hullabaloo* article and described the accompanying photograph as showing “negroes taking over the cafeteria while the manager looks calmly on.”

Gottehrer responded in a pithy editorial saying “the letter speaks for itself reflecting the ignorance of its writers.”

Gottehrer says he was fully aware of possibility for reprisals. The *Hullabaloo*’s adviser at that time, Hodding Carter Jr., a Pulitzer prize-winning journalist renowned for his civil rights advocacy, once had crosses burned on the front lawn of his home in Greenville, Miss. Gottehrer says he knew that things could get ugly.

“A leaflet on cars was enough to give me pause and to make me wonder if there would be anything worse, but this was before the Internet so they didn’t know where I lived and they couldn’t find out,” says Gottehrer. “For a moment I wondered if my physical safety was at risk, but it was a fleeting thought.”

#### **WHY COMMUTE?**

Barbara Guillory (now Thompspon) and Pearlle Elloie, the plaintiffs on the lawsuit to desegregate Tulane, were hand-picked to represent all African Americans who hoped to benefit from the kind of education that their forebears had been denied through segregation.

In Pamela Taylor’s *Silk Stockings and Ballot Boxes*, John Furey says he identified the women “with the same care with which the Brooklyn Dodgers selected Jackie Robinson for big league baseball.”

Thompson, who had already obtained a bachelor’s degree from Dillard University and a master’s degree from Louisiana State University, sought admission to Tulane’s PhD program in sociology while Elloie, who also had earned a bachelor’s degree from Dillard, wished to pursue a master’s degree in social work.

In their minds, they were simply two highly qualified women with an interest in furthering their education. Having their role serve a larger purpose was *lagniappe*.

Today, both women agree it was a win-win situation.

“One of my college professors came to me and Barbara and talked about this group of good people who wanted to force Tulane to open its doors,” says Elloie. “I said fine because it met their needs and it met mine. I just happened to be there at the right time.”

As for her time on campus, Thompson says her experience was pleasant. As long as she felt comfortable with herself—and she did—“if someone else had a problem, it was theirs,” she says.

“The faculty was great, and for the most part, the students were great as well,” says Thompson, who adds that her experience at Dillard and LSU had thoroughly prepared her for her time at Tulane. “There will always be that one person who has a problem with you. But I was there for one reason and I was going to accomplish my goal.”

Today, Thompson resides in McComb, Miss., and is a retired chair of the Division of Social Sciences at Dillard, where she served in several other capacities during her 42 years with the university.

Elloie resides in New Orleans and serves as director of the Office for Children, Youth and Families at Total Community Action. She has been with the same organization since graduating from Tulane in 1965.

“I didn’t do this because I wanted the university to open its doors to African Americans or because I was compelled to make the wrong right,” says Elloie. “I was married and had a young child. So why should I have to commute to Baton Rouge with Tulane right here in the city?”

Confident that her decision to participate in the lawsuit was the correct thing to do, Elloie says she still could not bring herself to tell her parents, who lived in Houston, the truth about what she was a part of. Since neither of the women was required to make court appearances, it wasn’t until the first day of school that their families were able to register the reality of what had transpired.

“I downplayed the whole Tulane thing to my mother and father because I felt like my mother would have been fearful for my safety,” says Elloie. “Fortunately, Tulane turned out to be a great experience. And it opened doors for so many others to experience it as well.”♥