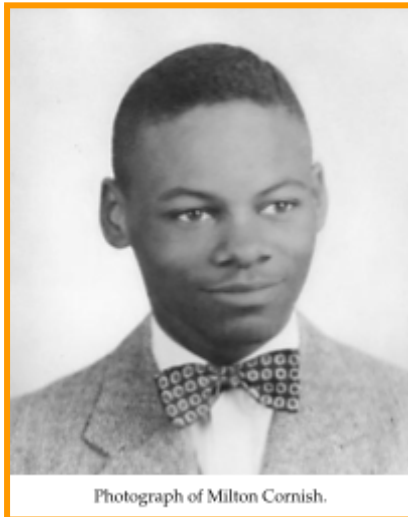


THE POLYTECH EXPERIMENT

QAMRYN ASKEW

The 1950s America was a paradoxical blend of post war comfort and blooming social change. If you were a teenager right around this time, you saw the full picture: an optimistic nation at the end of the last world war, an era of suburban expansion and manicured lawns, the golden age of television and rise of rock stars like Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley that swept the country with the new electric sound. To call it one of the American gilded ages would be nothing short of truth- as its golden cultural renaissance offset a drawn out social division. The momentum of equality and progress was changing teams, as the social identity and contributions of marginalized communities became undeniably evident, and had entered the foreground in the portrait of the American identity. In 1952, educational segregation was still the norm. Despite the "Separate but equal" clause in the 14th amendment, students of color were relegated to lesser facilities, including schools, housing and other public amenities. It's important to remember that by now, it would be 2 years before *Brown v. Board of Education*, constitutionally demanding integration in schools, 5 years before the Little Rock Nine integrated in the south, and 12 years before the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Poly was no different. The school had been standing for 69 years by



Photograph of Milton Cornish.

now, and remained all-white despite the fact its foundation was laid by the taxes of the general population. To add some context, the school then shares some parallels to today. We still played City (and beat them that year in a 21-0 shutout). You could still buy a 10k gold poly ring, but for much cheaper at \$19.75 (just over \$200 in today's cash). There was one thing about Poly that made it stand out among thousands of schools in America: the unusual yet prestigious "A" course. No longer with us today, it was a college engineering preparatory course which included classes like calculus, analytical chemistry, electricity, mechanics and surveying. By the time a student was done, they could enter college as a sophomore. These subjects were rare for a high school, and surely nowhere to be found in Baltimore's black schools. As a result, that summer in 1952, 16 students backed by the Baltimore Urban League and the NAACP, applied for the "A" course- and all 16 students were rejected. They sued. The trial would start on June 16, 1952, and the NAACP had a clear agenda: to challenge the segregationist policies that denied Black students equal

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access to educational opportunity. The center of their argument was that the specialized courses offered by Poly violated the “separate but equal” doctrine, noting that these courses were prominently absent in Black schools. Milton Cornish, one of the black students affected, had this to say: “...There were 16 of us selected, all strong math students, to go to Poly for ninth or 10th grade in 1952—two years before the Brown decision—and that was really a change, of course, for all of us to go to a white school. The Urban League and the NAACP attorneys, including Thurgood Marshall, had argued before the city’s school board there wasn’t anything comparable to Poly’s ‘A’-course curriculum in the black schools. I hadn’t really been aware of who Thurgood Marshall was, but I was mesmerized when he spoke before the school board.” In another interview, Cornish stated that he went home the night after hearing Thurgood Marshall speak, and searched up certain words he used in the dictionary. A month later on July 10th, the school board had its last scheduled meeting for the summer, and this decision with Poly was front and center. Dr. J. Carey Taylor, the assistant superintendent, proposed that a curriculum equivalent to the “A” course be set up in a black school, Douglass High. 15 days later, when the parents received the letters; they were advised by the Urban League to say no, as it would be impossible to have the course ready by September. Negotiations would continue, and both sides prepared for a final meeting on September 2nd. Marshall Levin, and would be Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall spoke on behalf of the NAACP. Levin said that he was doubtful that the then Mayor of Baltimore, Thomas D’Alesandro, would be willing 2 years from that date, to construct the facilities at Douglass similar to the ones at Poly. Douglass, in his arguments, cited the harmful psychological effects of integration on children, followed by witness testimony from several sociologists. Walter Sondheim, a member of the board at the time, had this to say, “My recollection of Thurgood Marshall was that he gave us hell and told us we were scared of doing it, without knowing what we were going to do... He irritated me.”. With a 5-8 vote in favor of integration, Poly would open its doors 6 days later to the 13 boys, with 3 of them unfortunately being held back by the School Board, as they were deemed as unqualified. On September 8th, 1952, Leonard Cephas, Carl Clark, William Clark, Milton Cornish, Clarence Daly, Victor Dates, Alvin Giles, Bucky Hawkins, Linwood Jones, Edward Savage, Everett Sherman, Robert Young and Silas Young would enter Poly alongside more than 2,000 students. Following them was another man who would mold the school we know today: Wilmer A Dehuff, who entered as director that school year. He was the longest serving director of the school to date, demanding excellence from his students, showing it clear with the creation of Poly’s six words: “Freedom, Responsibility, Perseverance, Achievement, Goodness, Mercy”. That historic moment on September 8th was a landmark date in Polys history, and a significant step towards equality and complete integration. While the hundreds of white students at Poly took it surprisingly well (many of whom didn’t even know of their attendance), there will always be dissenting opinions on any side of history.

“The people of this city have witnessed the end of Baltimore's most finest institution. The Baltimore Polytechnic Institute ceased to exist as of September 8,

1952... The Negroes of Baltimore have proven, by this move and others in the past, that they do not want equality- the only claim the Negroes have for admittance to Poly was its reputation." That was a message by Vernon B. May, a member of the Poly class of 1951, reacting to the events. He thought it likely that the school would fall to such a fate, and questioned the motives behind the desires for integration- suggesting that it was based solely on reputation, rather than a genuine pursuit of equal educational opportunity. Carl Clark, one of the first black students to enter, would note that they were nervous heading into the new chapter, but he said that it seemed like the white students at Poly were practically conditioned to treat them just like everyone else, running into no hostility or harm. However, this wouldn't be the case forever. On May 17, 1954, classes were notified of the victorious Brown v. Board of Education decision while in class. In the coming days, Clark would note some unusual tension blooming at Poly. The court decision gave way for protest and demonstration, with a number of Poly's boys joining in on unsanctioned mob action. Dehuff, then director of the school, would bring threat of expulsion to every boy not in their seats by first period, and by now the atmosphere had been charged with unease. In the middle of this, a member of the original 13, Alvin Giles, would have some trouble adjusting to life at Poly. A sports star at school, he was known for his abilities in football and basketball (he would be noted as having a more "rhythmic" and "upbeat" style than his white counterparts. Dehuff would state that he "would be concerned about what black students at Poly would mean for sports". He found himself unable to handle the academic rigor of the school, and failing algebra would prove to be his undoing, leading him to be transferred back to Dunbar. Giles' experiences highlights the challenges faced by Black students navigating white and unknown institutions at this point. He spoke of how this hurt him, saying that he was embarrassed by the situation, and it took over a month for his friends to accept him once again. Unfortunately, there isn't much information on the other 12 brave black students that integrated Poly, though Carl Clark would stay in touch. He would be the first of the group to graduate from Poly in 1955. For Clark, this wouldn't be the last time he would make history. He earned a bachelor's degree from Morgan State University in 1958, and he would go on to be the first black person to receive a PhD in physics from the University of South Carolina. He was inducted into the Poly hall of fame in 2004, and named the Poly distinguished award winner in 2005. On August 8, 2017, Clark would pass away at 81. History would revisit Poly on March 2nd, 2002 (all information received from the Poly Foundation). For the 50th anniversary of the victorious integration of the school. Milton Cornish, Bucky Hawkins, Carl Clark, Gene Giles, and a class of 1963 student, Everett Sherman (all photographed below), flew in from around the country, from as far as Arizona to see the legacy they fostered. In the auditorium, the men faced a crowd of students. "Fifty years ago was a very different time," Hawkins, 62, told the students. "Black folks were pretty much subjugated in a way that is very hard to imagine today." The other men would go on to share their stories. "The biggest obstacle I had to overcome was that I was No. 1 in my class. I had skipped [grades] twice," Everette Sherman, 63, said of his experiences in Baltimore's black schools. "I came here and was last in my class."



Hawkins similarly faced something, "That was my experience, to be a leader in the black school and to come here and be totally lost," said Hawkins, who also hated gym class because the students had to pair off. "I was always left standing in the middle of the class. It used to drive me crazy." Carl Clark would recall the day that he had first heard of the Brown v. Board decision, and his attempts to defend himself to his class and teacher. "Wait a minute, now. Mr. Clark hasn't said anything," said Clark, 65. "I said, 'I really don't see why you're making a big deal of it because it has already happened.'" For Hawkins, walking to school through mobs became a daily routine. "All of these people were screaming, 'Kill the niggers,'" said Hawkins, who remembered one particular woman. "It went to the back of my brain, 'That lady doesn't even know me. Why does she want to kill me?'" . After the assembly, students had crowded the stage with questions, seeking autographs and a few short moments with these men who had made history. Their return to Poly was a stark reminder of all the progress we've made, and how the pages of history sent for these 13 children, allowing them to carry a torch forward for us. They succeeded. It took just over 20 years for Poly to become a co-ed school, with Cindy White, a Black woman, become the first to enroll and graduate from the A course. It would take another 20 years for Poly to have its first female director, Barbara Strickland in 1990, and another 21 after that for Jacqueline Williams to become the first Black woman to head the school. Progress, for all that it's done for Poly, has rolled on through the years, unyielding and unbreakable . The theatre of contemporary leaders at the school is a face unlike any other. When Wilmer Dehuff first founded the student government at Poly in 1953, it's unlikely he would have thought that it would be composed entirely of Black women 71 years later. When schools refused to play Poly in 1952 because of Alvin Giles, a black basketball player; who would've believed then that today, the Lady Engineers would take over state championships, year after year. "I think seeing how Ms. Williams lead the best school in the city as a director was a factor in bringing the confidence for me to run for student government" says SGA Vice President, Marvelous Alinwumiju, "Seeing people who look like me in leadership positions inspired me to be a leader and I think it's amazing we even have two Black women as vice principals. It makes me feel comfortable in my own skin". An institution with over 80% of its students being

people of color, is a testament to the wonder of globalization and diversity. The range of student organizations would tell this story perfectly, housing the African Student Association, Black Student Union, Filipino Cultural Association, Los Ingenieros, the Asian Student Union, and the Muslim Student Union. And while the ink has already dried over some pages of Poly's history, it's evident that the most recent, unfinished chapters are already a story worth reading. The legacy of those who rewrote the status quo, less than a



Director Jacqueline Williams
(2011-2023)



Director Barbara Stricklin
1990-1991

century before today, is unerasable, and it continues to lead the many engineers who will come to do the same.