

Black alumni recall combating racial prejudice with humor

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Three of the first black students to enroll at Tulane University in 1963 shared anecdotes about their days on campus during Wednesday evening's (Feb. 27) forum commemorating the 50th anniversary of the university's desegregation.



From left, Deidre Dumas Labat, Barbara Guillory Thompson and Judge Edwin Lombard participate in a [forum](#) held on Wednesday (Feb. 27) on the uptown campus. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

The evening's [panelists](#) were Barbara Guillory Thompson, a plaintiff in the original lawsuit challenging the university's policy of denying admission to African Americans; Edwin Lombard, one of the university's first black undergraduates; and Deidre Dumas Labat, the first black woman enrolled at Newcomb College.

While questions from a full audience in the Kendall Cram Lecture Hall of the Lavin-Bernick Center probed for tales of adverse experiences during their matriculation, all three agreed that their negative memories were few.

"You might have a snub or a bad word tossed your way, but that was something you could live with, right?" asked Thompson, a retired university professor. "I think so."

The individuals who most welcomed the first black students to campus were those who looked like them.

"They were as proud of me being here as my parents were," said Labat about the encouraging words she received from the black women working the lunch counter.

Lombard, who is now a judge in the 4th Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans, spoke of the friendship forged with the janitor who worked in his residence hall. Lombard also quipped that he had chosen the right major to protect him from racism.

"Let me preface my story by saying that I went into the best discipline you could get into in this situation ? sociology and cultural anthropology," said Lombard. "The liberals of the campus were all in sociology and cultural anthropology."

Near the end of the evening, Labat, also a retired university professor, diverted the discussion's jovial tone to one of teaching as she shared her thoughts about the state of the university today.

"As I look at this crowd and see the diversity, I like to think we had a little part in coming here and being the first because a hell of a lot was on our shoulders," said Labat. "We could not fail."