

Gaston continued . . .

single-parent homes, often where there are no males in the homes. The youngsters look to a male teacher or administrator as a sort of substitute parent.

How did you come to Bethune Elementary?

I had been principal at Teilman, Emerson, and Jefferson schools, when the Black community made demands on the school district for a Black principal at Franklin School. I was reassigned to Franklin, but one of the requests I made before accepting the transfer was to be principal of Bethune [a new school under construction] after it was completed. I came to Bethune Elementary School when it opened in 1972, and I have stayed here ever since. I have had chances to move to other schools and districts, but I just have felt that my mission is right here. Some youngsters have so much instability in their lives. I believe that one of the things our schools need is consistent leadership.

Do you see much difference in students over the years?

Yes, I think that students have changed. Students are brighter now than they were. Look at the number of things they have to educate them! There's been so much progress in technology ... we've landed on the moon. Then there's progress in medicine ... and look at the progress in television. Students are surrounded by all kinds of educational opportunities. They can't help but be brighter than earlier students were. Where we [parents and educators] miss the boat is in not keeping up. The students' minds may be way ahead of ours. I hear parents say, "We didn't have any of this when we were in school." Well, they are right. And in the next 10 to 15 years, the change will be even greater. There is a big challenge for us in education.

How do you view the problems of the younger generation?

We get bogged down or confused in what we think today's youngsters are doing because of the negative impact that the media have in reporting this generation's involvement with drinking and drugs. I think that a very small number of youngsters are involved, yet our attention is focused on those few. If you look at the majority, they are going ahead and doing "their thing." Can you imagine what would happen to our country a hundred years from now without today's kids — our leaders tomorrow, our educators, our scientists, our doctors, our teachers? I think things are on the right track.

What are children's basic needs and what is your philosophy for teaching them?

Every student wants to be somebody and to be successful. I believe that we must give children a lot of positive reinforcement. Let them believe that they *can*. They will always live up to other people's expectations of them. I had a teacher in elementary school who, when you said "I can't do it," would always say, "There is no such word as *can't*." I believe in the philosophy, "Hold fast to dreams. Without dreams you are like a broken-winged bird that cannot fly." [Langston Hughes.] The saddest thing is to ask a youngster where he or she is going in life and to find that the youngster can't tell you. Anyone who doesn't have a goal needs to develop one.

How do you feel about the opportunities for minority college students today?

I think that the majors the students are pursuing are more diversified. We now have Black students encouraged to major in business, and we have them in agriculture, engineering, and so many fields in which they were not enrolled when I was a student.

On this 75th anniversary of CSU, Fresno, what do you think should be the university's goals for its 150th anniversary?

The university must take a hard look at the change in the ethnic makeup of the population. I believe that in our next 75 years the population of this state will become more than 50 percent minorities. All of the colleges and universities in the state — CSU, Fresno among them — must look at hiring more minority faculty members. It may be that the university will have to restructure its curriculum at different levels to achieve a program that will meet the special needs of many of these students, while still preparing them for the technological age they are entering.

Please talk about the Black Alumni organization and its role at the university.

The purpose of the organization is to help make Black community people and Black alumni an integral part of the university — not just onlookers from the outside. I believe that if you are going to effect change, you have to be a part of the structure. That's the first reason for the organization. The second reason is that we have to be role models for our Black youth. We have to let them know that we went to the university and we are successful — and that they can do the same thing. We want to work with the university, with its officials, to effect the changes we believe are necessary to benefit ethnic students. When there are issues raised or demands made, we want to do more than meet once with the administration and then forget about the issues discussed. The organization will enable us to follow up until those changes are carried out. We also want to raise money for scholarships for our Black students. Many of us came from backgrounds with limited opportunities and we want to remember that. We need to say, "Hey, look, we made it. Let's give this kid a chance!"