

Rutherford Gaston, Sr.

President of CSUF's Black Alumni & Friends

Ever since Rutherford "Bud" Gaston was one of a handful of Black students at Fresno State, back in the 1950s, he has concentrated his energies on creating opportunities for minority students. He remembers encouraging other Black students to run for student body offices (he himself ran for student body vice president), and he sought to form the first Black fraternity on campus even though, in his words, "there weren't really enough Black students on campus to qualify [as an organization]."

Today, Gaston is principal of Fresno's Bethune Elementary School, where, for the last 14 years, he has been paving new paths of opportunity for his young students. Once the only Black principal in the Fresno Unified School District, Gaston has been a vital part of the integration of minorities into positions of importance in this community. He was founder of the Black Educators Association of Fresno and has served on such civic boards as the Parks and Recreation Commission and the Juvenile Justice Commission of Fresno County. He is currently a member of the Planning Commission for the City of Fresno.

Gaston, who received both his bachelor's degree (1953) and master's degree (1971) from Fresno State, continues to be involved with his alma mater. The president of CSU, Fresno's Black Alumni organization, he participates in a variety of projects affecting students and alumni. Last year he was the catalyst in the compilation of the Fresno Area Black Leadership Directory published by the CSU, Fresno Alumni Association. The publication contains biographical sketches and photographs of local Black leaders and personalities who can serve as role models and advisers for young Black students considering college and careers.

"The university has come a long way," Gaston says. "There are many, many role models now for students. I am encouraged by the active role that a lot of Black students are taking on campus."



What was this school like when you were a student?

It was called Fresno State College when I began in 1949, and the campus was in the original location [the current Fresno City College campus]. At that time the total enrollment was much smaller than it is today, and the number of Black students on campus must have totaled no more than 15. Of course, there weren't nearly as many course offerings as students have today. The whole thing has changed — everything for the better. Enrollment of Black students is up to 550 or so — a tremendous increase, though the figure is still lower than we would hope. When I was a student, the participation of Black students on campus was good, but it mostly involved clubs. There were no action-type programs of the sort students are involved in today. There was not one Black faculty member on the campus at that time, so our role models were just not there. Obviously, today there has been about a 1,000 percent increase!

How did you become an education major?

I started out as an accounting major who switched over to business, but the situation was discouraging. The head of the department at that time, who happened to be my adviser, called me into his office, questioned me about my plans after graduation and asked whether my family owned a business back in Pennsylvania [my home state]. He said that here in the Valley "they are not quite ready for you."

He meant that the community was not ready for Blacks in business. That was discouraging, but it wasn't discouraging enough for me to drop out of school. I changed my major to education, and I have not regretted it at all.

What kind of encouragement did you get along the way?

I think the person who influenced me most to continue in education, and to become a teacher, was one of my professors, Irma Grosse. At that time, the college operated a laboratory school, where education majors observed and taught young students. Irma was my master teacher. I was nervous as a kitten, but she just wrote little notes to me suggesting that "the kids aren't going to bite" and other humorous things. She gave me the incentive to go ahead in education. And I love it. I taught for ten years after I graduated.

How did you become a school principal?

Here again I had a lot of encouragement — this time from the principals at the schools where I taught [Lafayette Hyde at Lincoln School and Larry Riordan at Columbia School]. I had no idea of going into administration; I was really happy just to be teaching. I enjoyed the kids — just being around them. I felt that administration was something that set you apart from them, but I have found it to be different. For example, in a school of this size, we have a lot of children from