

BLACK LIVES MATTER

Carolyn Alston recounts challenges as Masters' first black student

"An all-white society"

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Masters prides itself on fostering an inclusive environment, where diversity in opinions is encouraged and emphasis is placed on implementing progressive change. Administrators in particular have articulated a school-wide vision reflecting core values; affinity groups have flourished into being, offering settings for students with similar identities to meet; and students from a variety of backgrounds from all around the globe are represented in the community.

Yet it was only 50 years ago that Masters' first black student, Carolyn Alston, graduated from Masters in 1968. Upon first stepping foot on Masters campus in 1965, Alston was aware of how her very appearance made her an outsider, separate from her peers - the majority of whom were privileged - and her teachers, who were solely white. Alston opened up to *Tower* about how her three years at Masters impacted her life, reflecting on the opportunities presented to her and the growth that came from them, as well as the difficulties of learning to rely on herself for support and being a representative of an entire race.

"Distinct academic risks"

Beginning in 1963, independent schools like Masters witnessed the birth of a novel experiment in secondary education. A Better Chance (ABC), a program inaugurated by Dartmouth University, aimed to "increase substantially the number of well-educated young people of color who are capable of assuming positions of responsibility and leadership in American society" by providing them with a world-class high school education. At the time of the ABC's founding, a majority of candidates identified as black. The program involved an eight-week crash course in English and mathematics for fifty minority students at Dartmouth (for boys) or Mount Holyoke College (for girls). Certain independent schools promised to reserve places for students who successfully completed the program, and in late 1964, former Headmaster Cameron Mann proposed Masters as a school to accept ABC students.

The Board of Trustees agreed to accept two girls from the program, and a majority of the student body assented to the decision during a Morning Meeting in the chapel, which now houses the Art Studio. The recommendation marked a historical moment in Masters history: the School had been nearly all-white since its founding, with Asian students sporadically joining. Never before had a black person studied at Masters.

Despite the preparation ABC students were given at Mount Holyoke, concerns were still circulating as to whether or not the new students would be able to keep up with the rigorous academics of a private school curriculum. In an article on the decision from the December 1964 issue of *Tower* (then called *The Tower*), senior Carol Kennedy suggested that, "though possessing the mental capacity and leadership potential," the ABC students were "distinct academic risks to Dobbs and every other school taking part." Kennedy also raised the possibility that the ABC students "will put an additional financial burden on the schools. They will present problems which the schools cannot foresee." However, the article ultimately recognized that the accepted ABC students would "make lasting contributions to the schools and eventually to society and that Masters 'should be proud that it is willing to take one of the first steps, in spite of the risks, toward better education for all people.'"

In September 1965, Masters' ABC students arrived. Though the records of their coming to Masters is unclear, it appears that not two, but three students arrived: Alston, an African-American from New Haven, Connecticut; Maria Viera, a Latina from New York City; and Josephine Youpee, a Sioux Indian girl from Poplar, Montana.

Alston had come to Masters from Basset Junior High School, a school in a working-class part of New Haven. "I came from an environment where things were segregated," she said. "Going to Masters was totally different, as it was an all-white society, it was an all-girls school. So it was a big cultural change."

The difficulty of coming to Masters was compounded by leaving her family. In New Haven, she had been close to her brothers, sisters and cousins. "My life before Masters totally revolved around my family," Alston said. "You were separated from your family, as I was a boarding student."

Though Masters had tried its best to welcome her, as legacy students entered the school, Alston still felt alone, and noticed how much she stood out when she first walked onto campus. She could see how familiar everyone else was with the school and its traditions, as mothers who attended the school embraced each other, and daughters seemed to have groups of people to converse with.

"It was a totally happy occasion, and it was completely foreign to me in my own personal feeling," Alston said.

"Even though everyone did what they could to be inclusive, they didn't really know me and I didn't really know them, so I did feel kind of isolated," she said.

As more minority students were accepted, Alston found their shared backgrounds became a great source of support during her time at Masters, though she often felt she needed to "turn mostly intrinsically" for a sense of assurance, noting that she felt like "they couldn't really understand what it was like" in her shoes.

"I don't think they were even in the position to understand what I was doing because it was a new situation for everybody," Alston said.

However, Alston did not feel like she had to conform to a certain image while at Masters. "I think because I was so different, there was no need for me to conform. I think maybe some of the other girls felt more peer-pressure to fit in than I did," she said.

Despite her initial discomfort, Alston worked hard and succeeded at her new school. "I was very involved at Masters. I was always involved in clubs, I was in Gold Key," Alston said. Alston was active in student government, and was eventually elected to the position of treasurer.

She also excelled academically. After she had taken every science class Masters offered, she was expressed an interest in taking physics—so Masters hired a physics teacher and incorporated the course into its curriculum.

"I always studied harder. I always felt like I had to make the extra effort to succeed to not blow an opportunity," Alston said.

She was a strong student and found that being taught exclusively by white teachers did not have a "major impact on my learning," though it did have a "major impact in terms of adults that I could rely on." She had studied under Miss Eidlitz, an English teacher, who also taught the ABC crash course at Mount Holyoke, and grew close to her, often turning to her as a source of reliance and support.

"A representative for my race and family"

Her involvement in activities and academic success was not always an easy road to travel. Alston felt a lot of responsibility to perform to the best of her ability, which at times was challenging to cope with all on her own.

"I always felt like a representative for my race and family. You feel a lot of pressure when you're in that situation because you want to succeed



CAROLYN ALSTON, ABOVE, WAS the first black student at Masters. Pictured left in her senior yearbook photo, 50 years ago 1968. Right, Alston now, as the Executive Vice President and General Counsel to the Coalition of Government Procurement.

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- CAROLYN ALSTON

and not just for yourself. ABC sent me there, my family sent me there: you want to do this not only for yourself but for other people also. And that's kind of heavy for someone in high school."

Administration did try to welcome Alston as best as it could, and she does not remember "anybody intentionally doing anything overtly racist."

"I think everybody did what they thought was right. I always felt that the administration, at least the administration that I interacted with, were trying to act honorably," she said.

Nevertheless, Alston felt like somewhat of an outsider. "Even though everyone did what they could to be inclusive, they didn't really understand me and I didn't really understand them, so I did feel kind of isolated," she said. "In

housing, I think, I was treated differently. As a new student, I was assigned to a single room and later years I roomed with another ABC student."

In September 1966, *The Tower* ran an article on the progress of the ABC girls, titled "Carolyn, Maria, Josi: A Year Later." The article found that Alston had acclimated well to Masters: "Happily enough, they all enjoyed themselves for the most part, yet they admitted a few things did take a little getting-used-to," the article said. The ABC students "agreed that life at a boarding school was enjoyable for them." The article quoted Alston as calling other Masters students "amazing" and saying she "likes them immensely." By then, two other ABC students had arrived on campus, and she was no longer the only black student.

The number of black students had risen to five when Alston was a senior in 1968, the year Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. She recalled the event as one that struck her immensely, as a frightening

and awakening moment for African-Americans across the nation, one that also shocked everyone on campus. In mourning, the student body made the decision to remain at school together instead of going to a local church.

Life after Masters

Alston remembered graduation as her happiest memory of Masters, noting her pride at having achieved such an accomplishment in seeing how far she had come. After leaving the school, she went to Cornell University and then to Georgetown Law School.

"I think that Masters actually put me on a path for my teacher education I would not have done if I hadn't gone to ABC or The Masters School," Alston said.

She worked as a consultant to companies selling services and products to the federal government, eventually rising to the position of Executive Vice President and General Counsel for the Coalition for Government Procurement.

She retired in 2015 and now works part-time as consultant. Due to circumstance and a busy work schedule, she has not visited the school in years. However, she is still invested in diversity at Masters. "I hope Masters is reaching out to include students of different ethnic and racial backgrounds," she said.

Alston hopes that Masters will continue to strive for inclusion. "Faculty and staff need diversity, not only for minority students, but also for students who are not in the minority, so they can see them as people who are thoughtful and who have power," she said.

