

Black History Month

Evangel's history reveals legacy of inclusion

Graphic by Zoe McIntyre

In 1954, Thomas Zimmerman, assistant general superintendant of Evangel College, announced that the university would accept students of all ethnicities when it opened to students in fall 1955.

Article, above, by Springfield Daily News, 1954.

Below: Forkkio and Geyer were part of the Maranatha Association of Prayer. Photo by The Lancer, 1959.

In 1957, Evangel accepted its first black student: John Forkkio, an English student from Ghana in West Africa. One year later, a freshman from Connecticut named Betty Geyer enrolled and became Evangel's first African American student.

Right: Esther Kinyanjui, a Kenyan exchange student, shared her "culture shock" experience with the yearbook. Photo by Excalibur, 1982.

People of color from America and abroad found a home at Evangel during the following decades. The Association of International Students, founded in 1971, celebrated the student body's diverse cultural, language and ethnic backgrounds.

Above: members of the Association of International Students taught other students how to sing a hymn in their native languages. Photo by Excalibur, 1978.

Below: an organization called the Black Fellowship was active during 2003-04. Photo by Excalibur, 2003.

In the past 30 years, three black student organizations have existed at Evangel. The first, called the African American Student Association, ran from 1994 to 2000. It was founded by Alice Curtis, a faculty member.

Right: For the Culture was the most recent student organization whose mission was to celebrate students of color. It was active until 2022. Photo courtesy of Melayne Bruce.

by **Zoe McIntyre**, In December 1954, the Springfield Daily News printed the headline: "No Racial Bars at New College." Earlier that year, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled racial segregation in public schools to be unconstitutional in the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education*. At the time, private educational institutions independently decided whether they would offer equal opportunities to black and non-white students.

Thomas Zimmerman, Evangel College's first assistant general superintendant, clarified the school's position months before it opened for students. "[Evangel] will especially fit the needs of our own and kindred denominations, yet there will be an open door to other young people as well, regardless of race, color or political affiliation," he told the *Daily News*.

Springfield, Missouri has not always been a safe place for black Americans to live. In 1906, a mob of over 2,000 people lynched three black men in the city's square, an event that was covered nationally in newspapers including *The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*. As a result of this violence, the Ozarks Afro-American History Museum states that many black families fled from Springfield.

Evangel's early acceptance and inclusion of non-white students was significant. Internal communications with the university president indicated that the nearby Central Bible Institute was only open to white students in 1957, when Evangel ac-

cepted their first black student. Old copies of *The Lancer* (now *The Lance*) student newspaper and Excalibur yearbooks show that black students have been present and active in student organizations at Evangel since the late 1950s. The records indicate that Evangel made an intentional effort to include students from diverse racial backgrounds in a city that had been scarred by racial violence, and where other Christian colleges were not accepting black students.

Today, Evangel's records and registration department reports that black students represent around 4% of the student body. Alum MyAun Boyd, who served as editor in chief for *The Lance* before graduating last year, said a club called *For the Culture* helped make Evangel feel more like home during her first year of college. "My freshman year, I was able to join *For the Culture*, which was a club that encouraged diversity on campus," Boyd said. "However, after my freshman year, that club ended. I miss the club, and [I] appreciated its presence and mission on campus to encourage diversity and provide a space on campus for students of color."

Nevertheless, Boyd said she felt welcome at Evangel from the very beginning. "When I first stepped on campus for a visit day, I immediately felt welcome, and it started with the name — more specifically, the sound of my name being pronounced correctly by the greeter at the door," she said. "Throughout my life, I've been used to hearing different variations of my name. It was refreshing to hear it right on the first try. That intentionality is something Evangel does right to help every student feel welcome, and [it] is a practice I hope continues."

—with reporting from Carson Twigg

Professor's passion for students crosses hundreds of miles

by **Nadia Fletcher**, There are many paths available to students as they go through college and ultimately into the workplace post graduation. Although students often imagine that their future will look a certain way, one professor's story reminds us that sometimes God will lead people to places they never expected to end up.

Shelley Groves, associate professor of English, said, "I always knew I was called to ministry, but I knew it wasn't going to be in a pulpit, and I was very confused by what that meant."

Groves obtained her associate's degree in her home-

town of Oklahoma City; however, she went on to attend Evangel for her bachelor's degree.

Groves said that she encountered several people who fostered her growth at Evangel during her time as a student. Eventually, these experiences in the community played a significant role in her decision to return as a

professor.

Groves focused her career on English education, working in Christian education and pouring into several other universities for years. When the opportunity to work at Evangel opened in 2022, she knew she had to take it.

"The Lord has given me such a beautiful opportunity, and it is truly a gift to be able to pour into other students like people poured into me," Groves said.

The process of returning to Evangel happened quickly for Groves. She applied for the professor position in the middle of summer and was accepted for the job. Groves moved into an apartment in

Springfield the first week of August 2022 and began classes a week after that. She now travels between her home in Oklahoma City and her apartment, living in Springfield for most of the week and going home on the weekends.

"It was a crazy transition, but my husband [has] been a rock star. He's been amazing to support me and [says], 'Who am I to say no when the Lord [has] opened this door and this has been in your heart for years?'" Groves said.

Groves shares her apartment with her daughter, Jillian Groves, a current Evangel student. Jillian Groves is currently student teaching

and has found that being close to her mom encourages her to be a better teacher. "She [creates] lesson plans with me and is giddy with excitement because students care and they have an investment in the class," she said.

While many college students are eager to move away from home and live independently from their families, Jillian Groves said she loves living with her mom and learning from her.

Read more of Groves's impact on her students:



Shelley Groves



