Alumni

On Profits and Prophets

For a young man from South L.A., the B-School was a path to a higher calling.

By
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Statistics and economics professor Samuel B. Richmond (right) with B-School dean Boris Yavitz '48SEAS, '64BUS, '64GSAS in 1976 (Columbia University Archives).

I grew up near Watts in Los Angeles in the early 1950s and experienced poverty, racism, and low self-esteem as life's norms. I was there when the Watts riots broke out on August 11, 1965. We lived in an apartment on Pacific Coast Highway, and I was shocked to look out the window and see an empty street and U.S. marshals on each corner, rifles poised. My neighborhood had become a war zone.

These were troubled beginnings, but my guardian angel was watching. During my undergraduate days at California State University, the angel appeared as a professor named Richard Hoffman. My performance on a midterm exam caught Professor Hoffman's eye. He took me aside and asked me what my postbaccalaureate plans were. When I told him that I wanted to get a master's degree in business administration and that I planned to stay at Cal State, he revealed something that a kid from the ghetto couldn't have known. "It's important to have a degree," he said. "But it's also important to have it come from the right school. We need to get you into one of the top business schools in the country."

With Hoffman's guidance, I applied to Columbia and was accepted.

My father reacted badly to the news. As I was about to leave for New York, he said, "Son, they won't let you graduate from that school. Schools like that are for rich white folk, not poor black folk like us."

I knew he wasn't wishing me bad luck. He was just trying to prepare me for what he saw as the inevitable.

I arrived at Columbia in August 1969. My dorm was in Harmony Hall at 110th Street and Broadway.

What immediately impressed me about Columbia was the caliber of its faculty. I took statistics with Samuel B. Richmond '48BUS, '51GSAS, who wrote the book from which he taught. This text was used by MBA students across the country, but we were actually being taught by the author.

Another professor was Eli Ginzberg '31CC, '34GSAS, who was an economic adviser to eight U.S. presidents. Thanks to some papers I wrote in his classes, Ginzberg raised the possibility of my working for him. But I was a naïve kid and, not appreciating the magnitude of the opportunity, I didn't pursue it — something I've often regretted.

Then there was Walter Werner, who taught Conceptual Foundations of Business. He was extremely demanding. After grading our final papers, he berated the class for its abysmal writing skills. As he spoke, I heard my father's prophecies in my head — and saw my one-way bus ticket home. Surely, I thought, this poor kid from Watts could not know how to engage in Ivy League discourse.

But as it happened, that same father who feared I wouldn't be permitted to graduate from Columbia had helped develop my writing skills by having me proofread documents he wrote as I was growing up. He was a Baptist minister, and wrote copiously to political leaders and clerics. I hated the ordeal of proofreading.

Now, though, when Professor Werner handed my paper back — an A, to a bunch of others' Fs! — I loved my father. I was stunned, thankful to Daddy, and less afraid of the Columbia experience.

The professor who had the biggest impact on me was David L. Rados, who taught Introduction to Marketing. After I handed in my first case study, Rados returned it to me along with a full-page letter. Among other unflattering words it said, "A general innocence runs throughout your analysis." Grade: "F." I was steaming! I thought, I didn't come all the way across the country to be humiliated like this. I've never gotten an F in my life! I was ready to roll up my ghetto sleeves and fight. But I calmed myself and went to his office. I said, "If this is what you think of my work perhaps I'm in the wrong class." He looked up at me, and said in a dispassionate tone, "Oh, don't worry, Mr. Ealy, over half the class flunked."

I went ahead and turned in the next paper and got a D plus. Call me crazy, but I have never been so happy to get a D in my life! We were on a pass/fail system, and I ended up passing with honors. Although Rados regularly had students in tears in class, when he lectured I imagined that I was sitting under a tree listening to Socrates.

Studying with such professors was life-altering. My worldview was changed, and the scarred, self-doubting ghetto kid gave way to a polished young gentleman ready to make positive changes in the world.

I received my MBA from Columbia in 1971 and eventually returned to California, where I worked in finance and enjoyed some success. But the yearnings in my soul would not allow me to continue to work just to make money.

And so I decided to become a Baptist preacher.

I went to pastor a small nondenominational community church, and taught grade school to supplement my meager salary. Teaching in tough inner-city schools was a rich experience. I was able to bring my results-oriented business background into the classroom. This paradigm quickly distinguished me from my colleagues, who followed a more conventional teaching model.

In the fall of 2000, as I stood over my father's casket searching for the crux of his life's meaning, the words came: paradigm buster. He was a paradigm buster! He was a minister, but a very unusual one. Instead of preaching in a church, he walked barefoot in the wilderness and preached in local barbershops.

In those moments of celebrating his homegoing I knew that his lasting lesson was one of courage and innovation — of not being afraid to break the mold. And so, like him, I chose to forgo the traditional brick-and-mortar church for something different: a computer-based ministry that can reach people anywhere, anytime.

Nearly 40 years after my graduation from Columbia, I see a society in deep trouble. The schisms — among the races, the haves and have-nots, the young and the old — have widened. And I wonder: *What will make the wounded whole*?

The forces of decay are all around us: The business model that focuses on profits at any cost; the Hollywood machinery that scoffs at protecting the innocence of children; the political ethos that believes violence will overcome sociopathic behaviors; and the religious fabric that sacrifices compassion for demagogy and power. Unless we embrace the mission to "comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable," we will continue to nurture our own destruction.

I believe we must reclaim our spiritual center and build a society that reflects a culture of inquiry and equity — values that were stressed in the teachings of my professors.

Yes, Daddy, poor black folk like us can go to Columbia. And we take the Columbia experience not just to make money, but to make a difference in the world.

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