"It's interesting how more aware we've become of civil rights, and of the lack of progress that's been made."
— Tyren Snyder of Destrehan

“We've seen a decline of family in our community, and that is a key in graduation rates. The disparity in health care for blacks is alarming.”
— Dr. Toni Sims, UL professor

“I've had a few jobs in my life, and in most interviews they view me as a black male with aggressive, anger management issues.”
— Stephen Bartley

Struggles still exist despite steps forward
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There's a difference in perspective over whether blacks in Lafayette are better off today than in past years. Some of them say yes, some of them say no, and some of them say nobody — black or white — is better off.

"I don't see a big difference at all over the last five years," said Vincent Derouen, head football coach and athletic director at Northside High School.

“We have had some gains. We also will continue to have struggles, but we will continue to be a success through those struggles,” in the view of student mentor Sherry Broussard.

said Pat Rickels, the longtime activist UL professor who is secretary of the state human rights commission. “A lot of the black people that I spend time with are not affluent, but they are not scared,” she said.

She said that the issues that the commission deals with today more often tend to be economic rather than political, as they were in the earlier days of the civil rights struggle.

And it's in this area where local blacks continue to lag their white counterparts. In Louisiana, according to the

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Gains

2000 census (numbers that will likely change drastically after the 2010 census because of Hurricane Katrina), the median income of black householders was $23,917 compared to the $45,765 median income of white-headed households.

A UL class planning a symposium on the status of black people in Louisiana has wide-reaching but definite opinions on the subject.

They generally agree with classmates Tyren Snyder of Destrehan — that the civil rights movement is far from over — and Stephen Bartley of Morgan City — that there are still unfavorable stereotypes of black males. But also with their teacher, Dr. Toni Sims, that while Lafayette is among the most progressive communities in Louisiana and UL a leader in the state, there is yet work to be done.

Those views from Lafayette Parish are slightly different than those found in a nationwide study by the Pew Institute on the questions of whether black Americans believed themselves to be better off today than they were five years ago and whether they are optimistic about where they will be five years from now.

Nationwide, the study found blacks less upbeat about the state of black progress than at any time since 1983 and fewer than half of those polled thought things will be better in the future.

Not surprisingly, most white people polled thought that black people were advancing nicely and will continue to do so.

The view from Lafayette Parish seemed a little brighter.

"In the past five years, we've come up a little more," in Derouen's view. "Things are mentioned a little more. It's good to make people aware of the issues and not keep sweeping them under the rug."

And there are issues, Broussard says.

"We have made political gains, with a lot of elected African-American officials who I believe will do a good job. When Barack Obama won Lafayette in the recent presidential primary, there was definitely some cohesion there. I was impressed that young voters took it seriously and went to the polls."

But Broussard is concerned with violence in the black community that "affects everyone from babies to the elderly," she says. "The change there has not been good, and I am concerned about violence toward women and children.

"As far as housing, my heart breaks that we were not able to do more for the victims of Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita," she says. "Health care for senior citizens is terrible. Housing, health care and crime are my three main concerns in the African-American community."

Business counselor Nate Thornton says the community has made "significant strides" in recent years, but "that doesn't necessarily equate to something five years ago that was 20 being 200 now."

"We have made strides in the small business community, moreso because of education. They know how to access the process now. Agencies like us help them through the process."

He agrees with Broussard that substandard housing is an issue, but says, "I don't really think race is the issue. It's an economic issue."

And all agree that disparities remain and vestiges of days that were supposed to be continuous to linger.

"Is there disparity? To what degree?" Thornton asks rhetorically. "It's where you start off. Others have been in the system. We're just getting in, and we have the opportunity to work our way up. Eventually, they'll be coming in at a higher level.

"You've got to be in the process. I know for some, the process is slow, but you've got to understand how far back we're coming from," he says.

Broussard says she wants to see diversity on certain issues of long standing.

"People say we don't, but we do have a divide in our community between the north side and the south side of Lafayette," she says. "I had some international students at UL, and they were told to stay away from the north side because it was a ghetto. A student from Venezuela said that's what he was told. He thought since I lived on the north side, I lived in a ghetto."

"How can we create a cohesive community if we tell people before they arrive to stay away from a certain part of town. Lafayette should be presented as a whole community. We should promote the entire Lafayette."