Students examine issues among black community

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UL student Sheranya Bernard remembers the impact on family and friends when Martin Mills closed in St. Martinville. "It was a big economic thing, all around the area," said Bernard. "My mom, aunts and an uncle all worked there. So my mom went to a technical college to pursue her education. All of a sudden, we had to rearrange our lives.

"It was a major depression for parents, and it affected children. Our test scores in high school were not up to par. It's still not the same." Bernard said many displaced by the mill's closing eventually found work. But it wasn't the same work, and the pay has not been as good. That experience is one reason she became first in her family to attend college.

"I was encouraged to do better in school," she said. "If I'm better off financially, I can provide for my family."

Classmate Chavell Joseph of New Iberia is another who is the first in her family to attend college. She said the Upward Bound program changed an indifferent student into one who saw the possibilities offered through education.

"I'm more awesome in high school," Joseph said. "But then she managed a Wal-Mart Supercenter before retiring at 41. I'm trying to talk her into going to college. I have a younger brother who still goes to high school, and she just did enough to get by. But now she's talking about college. And my younger brother may get an athletic scholarship."

Bernard and Joseph see education as one crucial element to improving their lives as blacks. As students in Dr. Toni Sims' African Americans and African American Studies course at UL, they have examined many facets of that experience in pursuit of how to make that experience better.

The class, which will conduct a wide-ranging symposium on Tuesday, sees the need to challenge perceptions and raise consciousness if change is going to be achieved.

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

"I'm starting to realize what's really happening," Lafayettes' Madison Barras said. "I see the Eurocentric point of view that has been presented. I never realized that has been the case in my education before.

"People are so assimilated," said Enjkee Wilson, who decried the demise of black culture. "American culture has encouraged that."

Addressing such issues in the black experience is a complicated task.

"The poor don't see a great amount of change promised by the civil rights movement," Sims said. "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."

"(Analyzing) crime rates is so complex. There's no one area that provides the answer. Family, education, economic problems all contribute. You can't make changes if you're behind bars."

Pratt noted the declining number of black males in college as an alarming signal for black progress.

In light of so many hurdles, both real and perceived, the students were asked to assess the significance of Sen. Barack Obama's candidacy for president. Will his campaign make a difference for blacks?

"Absolutely not," Bartley said. "It serves no purpose."

"Getting there is half the battle," Pratt countered. "Can it be a catalyst to breaking black apathy? I think so."

Barras, meanwhile, is worried whether Tuesday's symposium will have the desired effect.

"It goes back to apathy for a whole generation," she said. "I don't see my generation making a difference. I tell other students about our symposium, and ask them what they're doing at 5 on Tuesday, and they say, 'I don't know.' They're not excited. They're not interested. I find that offensive, because it's important."

Want to go?

The Status of African Americans in Louisiana symposium will be presented by the UL Sociological Society at 5 p.m. Tuesday in the Basille Room of the UL Student Union. Topics to be discussed include health, crime, law, education, quality of life, entertainment, politics, family, religion and sports. The symposium is presented by students in African American Studies.