

# Celebrating Black History Month

*Whatley shares perspectives on role as first African-American female graduate*

**By Joshua Cuneo** *Senior Staff Writer*

When Clemmie Whatley walked into Tech in the fall of 1971, the Institute had been integrated for 10 years.

Despite this fact, Whatley - who graduated two years later with a Master ' s degree in Applied Mathematics - said she was still surprised by the lack of diversity in the student body.

As a graduate student, Whatley said that in many of the classes she taught, she would have no black students.

" I never forget some of the classes when the students would come in, [and] they would say, ' Are you the teacher? ' " she said. " It could have been a couple of things. First, I was a female. Second, I was African-American. And, of course, third, I wasn ' t much older than they were. "

In fact, Whatley made history by becoming the first African-American women to graduate from Tech, along with her close friend, Grace Hammond.

In an interesting twist, Whatley said she was unaware of her pivotal role in Tech history until she was informed of it in an interview a few years ago.

" I knew . that we would be the only [African-American women] we would see sometimes, but it never crossed my mind, because I think I was so narrowly focused on trying to finish and everything, " she said. " I just came through that era where there was a transition related to the whole civil rights movement. "

Whatley grew up in the Atlanta area in an era when public schools were still segregated. She graduated first in her high school class and went on to pursue her bachelor ' s in mathematics at Clarke Atlanta University, then called Clarke College.

In 1971, she applied to the graduate programs at both Tech and Emory and, upon receiving her acceptance to Tech with the offer of a teaching assistantship, decided to enroll at the recommendation of the head of the mathematics department at Clarke.

Aside from integration issues, Whatley remembers a number of transition pains in moving from the small close-knit community of Clarke College to a larger research university.

" It wasn ' t a very welcoming atmosphere...[but] I think that ' s part of the Tech way, " Whatley said. " The relationships that you would have in a small environment are not there in a large environment. "

For instance, she did not hear about the death of the professor who oversaw the teaching assistants until the day of his funeral.

" I was in class, and the other female teaching assistant...leaned over to me . and she said, ' Are you going to the funeral? ' And I said, ' Whose funeral? ' " Whatley recalled. " And she told me that [the professor] had passed. And that was my first knowing...but everybody else knew about it. "

Whatley said she did form a close-knit relationship with two other women aside from Hammond, although her involvement with campus life was mainly limited to academics.

Whatley was also already married at the time and was in the process of starting her own family.

" As far as extracurricular activities and that type of thing, I really didn ' t participate in any of those, " she said. " Our main focus was to finish the Master ' s program and then to move on. "

After graduation, Whatley moved on to work for BellSouth (then called Southern Bell) in various capacities for 22 years before getting her certification to teach high school mathematics.

Four years later, she took a leave of absence to pursue her Ph.D. in education studies and then started her own consulting business in education, which she operates to this day.

Whatley has revisited the campus on numerous occasions over the years, and she has nothing but praise for an increase in ethnic diversity that the Institute has witnessed over the last 30 years.

" There ' s everybody, " she said. " People from all different ethnic background that can add to the culture of the university, so I think that ' s good, " she said.

Whatley is pleased with most of the changes that Tech has undergone since she graduated - not just diversity-related ones.

Both of her children are Tech alumni, so she has been present to observe many of the improvements to campus life.

" I thought [campus] was huge when I was there, " she laughed. " I think the school has really expanded in a lot of excellent ways. "

She also commended the Institute for continuing to pursue excellence. Already well-known when she attended, " [Tech] kept that status and continually pushed forth improvements. "

Overall, Whatley remembers her experience at Tech with a certain fondness.

" All of the experiences...from Clarke, from Tech to BellSouth, all of them build up to help in the business environment I have, " she said.

Looking back, Whatley is thrilled that her career at Tech paved the way for all the African-American women who came after her, and she wishes them well their future endeavors.

" Make sure you have that spiritual connection that ' s always going to be there to help you, " Whatley said. " Keep on the right path...and if that one doesn ' t work, you have the confidence to know you can move to something else. "



Clemmie Whatley, First black woman to graduate from Tech