



The Goldman Professor

Named in May as the first Goldman professor of human relations, Dr. George Henderson is one of Norman's few black homeowners, one of the University's few black faculty members and also one of its most distinguished. Since he came to the campus in September 1967, his classes in sociology and education have been packed. He has done yeoman's service on a multitude of committees, and he was a vital link in human relations matters long before he acquired the Goldman title, which was established in October 1968 through gifts from S. N. Goldman of Oklahoma City and the Chapman Foundation of Tulsa. During the next year he will develop an academic program in human relations from the resources of social and behavioral sciences, the humanities and life sciences.

SM: Tell us about your background.

Henderson: I guess my background is not unlike many Negroes today who find themselves in some profession or semiprofessional position. I grew up in East Chicago, Indiana, perhaps the largest middle-sized slum in the United States. The only city plan they have is to tear the whole thing down and rebuild it. As a child, I remember playing out back, and you've never seen rats as big as the rats in our alleys. In some of our baseball games, we never realized that the guy playing first base wasn't a kid—that's how big the rats were.

We were very good delinquents. I spent as much time in trouble as out, and I certainly wasn't any great shakes academically. I was a very successful failure, being a good delinquent. I had been acculturated into a delinquent subculture, and the norm of behavior was failure. It wasn't until I realized that one or two teachers really cared that I made any attempt at learning. I remember one English teacher who, after trying so hard to convince me to study

and adjust to an academic environment, was crying after one of these sessions. I realized that if she cared enough to cry, I should at least care enough to try. This started a transition aimed at going to college.

I must say that my mother was important. You know, you hear an awful lot about the black matriarchy. A strong mother can be just as effective, I feel, as a family where you have a mother and a father. Granted a boy needs a male to learn male roles. But because of my mother's brainwashing—that's the only way I can describe it—I got the idea that I was going to college. Her idea of college was Tuskegee Institute in Alabama.

After a while I was walking around saying that when I grew up I was going to Tuskegee. But my track coach was a Michigan State graduate, and I was able to run a little faster than the other kids, part of my lower-class survival, by the way. I wasn't big as the others, and I would always say things that would get the rest of my body in trouble. So I had to run to survive. I got a track scholarship to Michigan State, the beginning of my academic career. I don't think my mother has ever quite forgiven me for going there; Tuskegee should have been my institution.

SM: What was your father's occupation?

Henderson: He worked at a variety of semiskilled jobs. His last job was molder in a brickyard. It was a back-breaking kind of a thing. Inhaling the dust affected his health adversely.

SM: You were an exception in your environment. What does this mean to the black people who couldn't make it out of the ghetto?

Henderson: We have a tendency to look around, see a few successful black people and say that America is truly a place of equal opportunity. We can point to a Ralph Bunche, a Jackie Robinson, a George Henderson at OU and say, "Look, here's an illustration of the fact that times have changed, and things are better." My comment to this has always been that a George Henderson is not there because of an expanding opportunity structure, but in spite of a very constricting opportunity structure. Most of the youngsters with whom I grew up are in jail somewhere, unemployed somewhere, or in some kind of semiskilled or unskilled occupation. I would guess that out of 120 kids who graduated with me, only five went to college, and three graduated.

SM: If your parents had only a grade school education, where did your mother get the idea that you were going to college?

Henderson: She didn't live far from Tuskegee and had seen the college kids. Though she could not go, she said that if she had any children, they would go on to college. She had no idea what was involved—none whatsoever—except she did realize that college was probably the best way out, for Negroes in particular.

SM: How has a college education changed your attitudes, as compared to your friends still in the ghetto?

Henderson: My education has done a lot for my attitudes about a majority group people. I grew up in a black community. We were very bigoted. This is bigotry in reverse so that when I see black nationalism today, it doesn't shock me. I grew up in that kind of environment. I remember identifying vicariously with Joe Louis when he would beat the white hopes. After the fights, we'd all rush out in the streets and talk about how Joe Louis really wiped out this white fighter. My favorite pastime was to go across the tracks and beat up white kids when I had nothing else to do—nothing to steal, no windows to break. I grew up feeling that there was nothing wrong with having outward manifestations of aggression toward white people. I also had a superiority complex, believe it or not, in this environment. I believed that black people were good, and, in fact, were better, because we proved it on the athletic field. When I got to high school, I proved it in the classroom, because I graduated a member of the National Honor Society and the whole bit, and there was a certain amount of pride. But I was a very prejudiced person.

When I went to Michigan State, I was randomly assigned a roommate. He was a fellow named George Beach, from Dearborn, Michigan. Dearborn was a place where there were no black people. George was an excellent counterpart because he wanted nothing to do with blacks, and I wanted nothing to do with whites. We both spent the first two weeks sleeping in the lounge or the john trying to avoid the other guy. This was ridiculous, paying for room and board and not sleeping in the room, so we decided to have a go at it. It's at this point, when we started rooming together and talking, that I learned more about human relations, more about race relations, than in any course I've ever taken. We had bull sessions that lasted from eleven at night until three or four in the morning. Other guys would come in throwing questions which sound very, very stupid to people taking college sociology. For example, "Do you like the same kinds of food we like? Is it true that you people are sexually more potent than other guys?" You can think of the many questions—myths—and we had myths also. We found out that the other guy was human, that he didn't have a tail, and that he really put his pants on the same way we did. As a result of these bull sessions, my attitude did change, and I guess that I can state parenthetically that George Beach became my son's godfather.

He never told his parents that he was rooming with a black. He couldn't; he didn't know how to tell them. One day they surprised him and came to visit him. His father walked into our room, and I was just sitting there. "Say, boy," I guess he thought I was cleaning up the room or something, "is this George Beach's room?" and I said, "Yes, sir, it is." "Would you tell him that his father's here," and he flipped me a quarter. When I came back with George, and he introduced me as his roommate, his father stood there, petrified. That was beautiful. After that his parents did not change their attitude toward blacks but they re-fenced their prejudice to exclude me, because I was a good black. Obviously I was good; their son had adjusted to me.

SM: What does black nationalism mean to you?

Henderson: Basically, to understand black nationalism one has to understand thwarted aspirations. The black child is confronted with some very inconsistent life situations. He is told that this is the land of the free where there's equal opportunity for all citizens, but all about him he sees cases of chronic unemployment and underemployment. So democracy—at least the American dream—appears to be a big lie for most people, something not really meant for black people. There was a saying that we can only go as far as "the man" would let us. And there was a kind of hostility that was generated about "the man." So with this kind of limited opportunity structure, there were people who decided there was no reason to compete for the same kinds of success symbols the dominant white society has. Let's set up a new opportunity structure where we'll only have black role models to emulate, they said in effect. And it seems to make sense, for this reason: if I take out the white role models, the probability of my success is much greater.

I understand this kind of feeling, because I can understand the years of frustration. I can understand how emasculated males feel when they're not allowed to role-play as truly masculine beings in front of females. Embarrassed by police officers, let's say, and white social workers and others, these kids become very bitter. I saw in Detroit emasculated males for the first time participating in an activity in which they could feel good about doing something. And this was rioting. They were men among men for the first time. They were able to show women watching them that they could break a window as well as any other guy.

Black nationalism does indeed offer a way out. But there are positive aspects of black nationalism that don't border upon aggression with the dominant white society. It has the same effect that psychotherapy has for some people. It changes the individual's conception of himself: Black is good. And it goes beyond that; it changes an individual's perception of himself in relation to other people who are not like him; Black is better. This is doing things they felt that they had to do to conform to the role the dominant

society had subscribed them to. Black Muslims, for example, have been able to stop black drug addicts from taking drugs. They've been able to stop alcoholics from taking the next drink. They've been able to stop men known to brutalize their families from beating their kids, because you should be proud of the fact that you're a man, that you're a family man, that you're a human being.

And I see some very negative aspects. The reason I personally reject it is because it is a separatist philosophy. The black nationalist movement is saying that we want our own community apart from the white community. When you talk about black power within a black community—competing with the black man—the white man becomes insignificant. I reject this because I feel that an integrated society is the best type of society to live in. I have to feel this way, at least to psychologically justify my move to Norman. Besides, I don't think the black state would survive very long in this country. There's just something deplorable about going back to outhouses and unemployment.

SM: The war in Vietnam is consuming a great deal of our budget now. If this money were spent domestically, would it be possible to offer a concentrated program of black education, black opportunity, expanded employment that might solve our race problems, or is there a more basic white and black problem that would hinder such an effort?

Henderson: Granted there are problems of attitudes, but when I view the war in Vietnam, I see something more than dollars being drained to fight the war; I see the lives. I see the disproportionate number of black lives being lost. To me, this is a far greater tragedy than the money being spent. It seems a paradox that black Americans are considered equal in times of national emergency, especially in the opportunity to die, but not equal on the domestic scene. If the war ended, you ask, could the money be diverted to provide more opportunities for equal rights? Yes. I also say this: I firmly believe that we don't have to wait until the war ends to do something about the plight of the black American. I don't want to gamble on war funds, because after each war we simply have not diverted the same amount of funds into solving domestic problems. I would rather take a look at the money we're spending on foreign countries. The black man in America has needs not unlike the foreign countries we're giving aid to. Let's divert some of these funds to solve our domestic problems.

SM: If we had that money, what would be the best way to spend it? Education would probably top the list, but what about such situations as housing?

Henderson: Yes, education would be tops on my list of priorities. You prevent people from becoming ignorant, you prevent people from becoming unskilled. Certainly you can do something about expanding the job market and retraining people. During World War II we took hundreds of thousands of illiterates and taught them to read and write to be better soldiers. We were able to train hundreds of thousands of Americans to learn to kill, to make machines that would kill, and won the war, and I just believe that a nation with that kind of ingenuity and initiative can also have a crash campaign to wipe out the illiteracy we have in times of peace.

As far as open occupancy in housing, some people say that you're taking rights away from the majority group and giving them to the minority. I only have one response to this, and that is that the black American has been denied an opportunity to live where he wants ever since he's been in this country. There's another side of the coin, too. By not having open occupancy, we're keeping a substantial number of whites from having the opportunity to live among blacks. We're denying them the opportunity George Beach had, to live with someone like me. Open occupancy doesn't mean you're going to eradicate prejudice and bias against minority group people. Some people will be more sure they don't like minorities after contact with them. Perhaps a larger number of them will find that minority group people, blacks in particular, have a wide range of abilities and human characteristics. And they might accept them. I feel that we need open occupancy; we need it nationally,

not because it will change the attitudes of the people who don't want black people living next to them, but because it will give many individuals an opportunity to do what they feel is socially correct.

Robert Merton, in the forties, pointed out that there are basically four kinds of people, and he broke them down into two general categories: the liberals and the illiberals. He said that roughly ten percent of the people in this nation are all-weather liberals. Give them a cause and they're ready to go. Ten percent are all-weather illiberals. They're going to be against you no matter what you do. So we're talking about the mass—forty percent fair-weather liberals and forty percent illiberals. Now the fair-weather liberals need legislation to assure them they're doing the right thing, that others are with them. The fair-weather illiberals don't want open housing, but if it's the law of the land, they'll go along with it. Take the Southern businessmen. They swore they didn't want blacks in their stores; they'd kill the first one to walk in for a drink of water. A law was passed, and they went along with it. Now they realize that this is good business: gross profits went up significantly in most stores. The law gives the fair-weather illiberals a face-saving device for cooperating. We can't legislate morality, but we can legislate an opportunity to do what is considered the democratic, correct thing to do. Oklahoma City and Norman need fair housing ordinances just to reassure minority group people that they can, with the sanction of the law, move into a community. We've been conditioned for too many years to believe that we're not wanted.

SM: You were the first black homeowner in Norman. Can you give us your thoughts on this sort of uniqueness?

Henderson: For years and probably historically Norman has had no black problem in terms of black homeowners because it's had no black homeowners. This is an indication of the extent of Norman's problem. Norman was not and still is not an open community. My moving to Norman was not because of the openness but in spite of the closedness. When I accepted the offer to come to the University of Oklahoma, the final clause in my contract read, "on the condition that the University find suitable housing for me and my family." I set conditions which are markedly different from those most black people would have in coming to Norman. I had the resources of the University—two academic departments plus the President's office helping me to find a house. Even so, my family was limited in terms of what we were shown. We were shown houses in only two areas. We could afford houses in a large number of areas we should have at least been looking at. I'm sure many people felt they wanted to protect us from the prejudice and discrimination, to shield us from the name-calling and potential white flight. That, however, should have been our decision—whether we wanted to face these kinds of things.

SM: Have you been encouraged by any hopeful signs?

Henderson: At times, I must delude myself into believing that I am encouraged. Otherwise, I couldn't go on. The more encouraging signs come from the students. Many of my students are beautiful people; that's the only way I can describe them. They have dared to champion causes. They have dared support me in issues where they have stood to lose more than I have stood to gain. Another way of saying it is that I champion the civil rights cause because I am black. They champion the civil rights cause because they dare be concerned about people like me. It's somewhat natural for me to be concerned about my rights. It's not natural for many of my students who've been conditioned to dislike me, who've been conditioned to believe that they're superior to me, to suddenly turn around and start championing my cause. It really is my cause, and this is probably why I am happy here with some of the students. It becomes our cause. I am able, in all of my classes, to see a small core of students who are not really concerned about statistics and about how many dollars they are going to earn when they graduate. They are concerned about the human condition. That's why I call them beautiful people. They are not tomorrow's leaders, they are today's leaders.

SM: How can the racial situation be improved at OU?

Henderson: I perceive that we have here at the University of Oklahoma, as elsewhere, a desegregated university. We do not have a racially integrated university. We have only taken the first step and that is to place black and white bodies in close proximity. They are not interacting in a lasting and meaningful way. I would suggest that our first order of business is to get our house in order with the students that we have here now. Meaning, in effect, let's take a good long look at what we're doing to bring about integration with the current student today. Are we doing all that we can, for example, to involve all students in the university community? I suspect that there is much more that we can do.

The second step would be to make our curriculum more relevant. To have a viable curriculum, not the kind of curriculum that relates simply to white suburbia; it must also relate to the world that some of the disadvantaged students are coming from. They must see some relationship between learning in their life basis. To put it another way, I probably would never have a sincere thirst for the kinds of information you have given me until I see that it has some payoff for my survival within my social arena. We do have an ample curriculum that will prepare a student to be white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, a carbon copy. We have a very poor curriculum to provide a low-income, disadvantaged black, brown, or what-have-you student to go back into his community and provide the kind of leadership and the kind of empathy that community will need.

To do this will require that the faculty members go into these communities. We can't make our course offerings relevant if we spend all of our time in the library. We will fail miserably in trying to inspire disadvantaged students to learn Plato, as an illustration, if we do not also understand a LeRoi Jones. This is part of what I mean in getting ourselves together. If we are only going to go out into disadvantaged communities and bring in large numbers of disadvantaged students to make them what Louis Lomax refers to as carbon copies of white America, then I too would question whether we should do this. We don't need a significant number of black Anglo-Saxons. We need black people who will be able to go back into black communities and provide the kind of leadership that the black communities have needed for far too many years. So the mere fact that we go out and recruit black students doesn't concern me as much as what we will do with them after we get them here.

There is a myth in terms of not involving minority group students. Most colleges today are ready to involve black athletes. They say, "No problem—if they can pass, catch, or dribble a ball or do some of the other things that we relate to athletics, we are willing to go out and recruit these individuals with vigor." We must be willing to recruit potential scholars with the same amount of vigor. But when we bring them here, let's bring them to a curriculum that is relevant.

SM: How can the University be made more attractive to black students?

Henderson: I would say that probably the University of Oklahoma, like many previously all-white universities, will never be a major attraction for a large number of black students until they believe that we want them. To open up the doors and to have an active recruitment program are only parts of the battle. Another part requires keeping them here after we get them. I would imagine that the dropout rate, at universities such as this, the nonwhite dropout rate, is fantastically high. There are reasons for this: If I were a black graduate in a previously all-black school and given an opportunity to go to an all-white college or to a white college that is now undergoing desegregation, I would ask, "What is in it for me? What about my social life? Where will I be living? Will I have a chance to live in the kind of setting that I would be comfortable in? What about food?" Such a small item—food. We don't hesitate, for example, to provide the kinds of food items that white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant kids like, but rarely do we have what

some black people refer to as "soul food." This is just a small item.

Greek life tends to be part of college activities, yet as I look around I see that most of our Greek organizations are white. Now I know that someone will say, "But not all white kids can get into these organizations." I will accept that as a fact. But the probability of a black kid getting in is infinitesimally small. Probably one of the foremost deterrents to more black kids coming to a place like OU is that we don't have very much to offer them.

The most segregated period of time at the University is the weekend. This is when social action is in high gear. Some of the kids are pairing off and going to parties; they are engaging in other kinds of extracurricular activities. This is when you get to know other people—really get to know other people. Our black students have formed the Afro-American Student Union because many of them have found since being here that in order to combat this loneliness and this kind of forced segregation, they should band together and at least they'll have other black people to talk with and to share their concerns with. If we drive through Greek Row and take a look at the Greek houses, we see some very, very attractive structures. There is a parallel that can be drawn between black college students driving or walking through Greek Row and people from our slum communities driving or walking through suburban communities. As a poor child walks through the "other part of town," he realizes how disadvantaged he is. As a minority group college student walks through Greek Row and imagines what is going on behind those walls, no matter how erroneous this image may be, he gets the feeling that he is extremely disadvantaged or deprived.

Academically, I suspect we have no difficulties sitting next to a white person in class, but what happens after the class is dismissed? People are going to the Student Union to talk about things, or wherever students go to engage in social activity. This is the point where many students decide that maybe they should go to an all-black institution where things are swinging, where they can get with the social scene.

SM: Don't you see signs of progress at OU?

Henderson: Inevitably people will tell me, "I have been observing the University of Oklahoma for years. It has made such great progress. I can remember when you had no black people on the faculty and now you have three." Then I have to point out to them that the time when they remember when we had no black faculty members, we had a faculty of 100, 150, or 200. Today we have a faculty of over 500 and we have 3 black people. If that's progress, then it may take another thousand years or so before we have significant progress.

The other side of the argument I hear quite often is that we just don't have very many qualified black people to employ. But then when I look at some of my white colleagues I see that they are not all top-drawer either, which then causes me to wonder if we are only interested in black professors if they are "superblack." By that I mean that they are not only employable here, but they could go to almost any university and be employable.

I hear people say, for example, "Gee, we would have no hesitancy if you can send us a qualified person." Then I do a little probing. They want someone who has a publication record, they want someone who is an excellent teacher, and they want someone who probably has years of experience. They are asking for the kind of individual who could become a professional black professor, touring the country teaching a year here and a year there, so that all universities can say "We've had him."

I suspect that if we are going to solve the problem of the lack of minority professors on the campus, we'll recruit minority group people in the same ways we recruit non-minority group people. Many of my colleagues are not superstars.

SM: Do you become tired of being a symbol, a token, a representative of the black middle class?

Henderson: I would be less than honest if I would say that there are not times in which I feel very angry about having to talk primarily about race relations. I have some expertise in urban sociology; I am an educational sociologist. Yet I am called on primarily to talk about black-white issues. Yes, I am angry at times. But this doesn't last long because I realize that perhaps there are some things that only I or someone like me can say, some things that must be said. And when I look at my audiences and I get into the question-and-answer period, I realize how sincere many people are in trying to find out. Much of the prejudice that I have seen has not been conscious. People have just unconsciously gone on with the tradition of discriminating against, segregating certain people. When they are exposed to George Henderson, let's say, then they begin to rethink some of their prejudicial acts. I see some benefit then in my going on a speaking circuit. I've talked to probably close to 300 groups within the last year and a half.

SM: I've observed that in speaking to various groups, you use a different tone with different audiences. You are particularly gentle with high-school groups.

Henderson: My gentleness with the high-school groups is due to my feeling that at such an age many of their questions are prompted not because these are prejudiced individuals but because these are individuals acting prejudicially and not knowing it. In other words, I perceive a lot of socially naive young people, and I respect their right to ask me questions in areas in which they want further clarification. If I have principles in terms of how I approach groups, one of the principles that I always try to maintain is never to embarrass the individual asking the question. I respect his or her right to ask that question. So I am perhaps more gentle with high-school students, and I become less gentle as the age range goes up because other people have had more time to become conscious and to become very much aware of what they are doing.

Many high-school students, for example, come up after the meeting and say that they had never had an opportunity to talk to a black person who was performing in a role other than as a domestic, other than in some unskilled or semi-skilled capacity. They appreciated an opportunity to talk to me in this role. I do tend to become impatient with white adults who will stand up and say, "I am not prejudiced against black people. I had a nanny when I was growing up, and we loved her like a member of the family." I hear this in most of the small communities. This is their testimony to their racial tolerance. I know, also, that I am very threatening to white males, probably more threatening to white males who are in my audiences where I speak than to white females. I represent not only a social threat but an economic threat. I represent the paradox of the thing that they have been trying to protect white females against—the competent black male. The questions coming from them usually are not the kind of questions that will try to clarify a point I have made. They are questions that publicly try to embarrass me, to expose incompetence, to diminish what otherwise is an impressive set of credentials.

SM: Do you worry about the kind of city your children are growing up in?

Henderson: I worry about the kind of environment my children are growing up in for a variety of reasons, most of which are groundless. My children have been able to keep what I think to be a very sound perspective on life. Moving to Norman was very good for them because for the first time they have been able to reject out-and-out racism. They no longer will say, "I hate white people," because they have had some wonderful experiences with white children. They no longer will say that "I love all black people" either because they remember that they've had some negative experience with black people. What my children are doing as a result of this experience is that they are accepting and rejecting people on the basis of the merits that the individuals have. I'm glad that they are no longer susceptible to racist philosophy. They will no more accept the black racist philosophy than they will be able to stand idly by and listen to a white racist expound his or her philosophy. This has given

them another kind of commitment to the human condition.

When I say I'm concerned about my children, I'm concerned because they will never know what it's like to be poor, or rather it's unlikely they will know. As a result, they are less empathetic to poverty-stricken people than they are to individuals whom they consider to be their peers. In not really being completely empathetic with poverty-stricken people, they have lost a bit of their humanness. I can feel for the poor because I have been poor. I have noticed that in a community like this (and this is another reason why I agree with Louis Lomax), it's so very easy to produce carbon copies, and not just white middle class. My children have a tendency to forget that not all people have it as well, as affluently, as they. I make sure that they spend a certain amount of time going back into the low-income areas so they do not lose touch with that aspect of life.

Another thing that concerns me about their living in a place like Norman is that it's atypical. It's not what I would consider a prototype or a microcosm of life as most Americans happen to be living life. They go to school with young people who are for the most part college-oriented. They talk about subjects which for the most part are socially centered but at such a sophisticated level that I sometimes wonder if they are not merely mouthing academically cute clichés and missing the feeling, missing the people.

I hope that they will never forget where I came from. The thing of which I constantly remind my children is that after everything is said, we are still black people in America. After all the testimony that has been given as to how well I have been accepted in Norman and how well I may be liked or disliked, it all boils down to the fact that I am a black man in basically a white world. I want them to realize that they must never ever forget that they can never be free until all black people are free, that they cannot be free until all people are free.

The affluence we have managed to achieve is meaningless unless we use it to help other people. This is the point that we continually make at our house: Unless we are doing something to help other people, our being here has been a waste of time. It would be very easy for us to be quiet, docile neighbors, and we could be well accepted and therefore be the black people that would be on the party circuit. We would be very congenial guests, because we would say what people wanted us to say, we wouldn't ask embarrassing questions, we would not correct people when they would make erroneous statements about minority groups. We refuse to play that role.

If I'm a bigot, it's a kind of bigot who could not tolerate people who reject other people because of some kind of superficial characteristic such as color, race, religion, or what-have-you. Yes, I'm very intolerant to people like that. I firmly believe that we must teach our children to love. I'm so committed to this that I remind my students in my classes sometimes that it's one of the emotions we tend to be ruling out of our interactions. We feel almost guilty now when we look at other people and say, "I love you." It dawned on me in my interaction with my son that if I follow the socially prescribed way of interaction with my son it would be almost impossible for me publicly to tell him, "I love you." This is tragic. I look at my students, and many of them are white students, and they would feel guilty to admit to me, "I love you." And having this feeling and not being able to express it creates another set of guilt feelings. We suppress this which is so vital for our perpetuation as a nation and a people.

I am able to go to small communities and tell them very sincerely that it took a long time for me as a black person to be able to stand before white audiences and tell them that I am capable of loving them. Therefore, I can understand their inability, reluctance, and hesitance to look at me, a black person who was once defined as being property, and tell me, "I love you." Some of them may never be able to get over this hang-up, but at least they must come to grips with the fact that the black man is here, he's not going to go away because they don't like him, and he will continue to be that very, very bothersome presence.