



OU Western History Collections

Dr. Henderson explains “Black unrest” to students in his OU sociology class in 1968.

The Humans *Behind* Human Relations

*Fifty years ago, OU launched
one of the first programs in the nation to combat
racial discrimination and promote social justice.*

BY ANNE BARAJAS HARP

As tens of thousands marched the streets in solidarity against centuries of racism and cities across the nation grappled with both peaceful demonstrations and violent, fiery outbursts, the University of Oklahoma saw the promise of change and inclusiveness.

The year was 1969. And the promise became the OU Department of Human Relations, whose efforts to forge a better future are still as timely and important as when they started a half century ago.

“It’s about trying to ensure that social justice and equity are in the world and in everything we do,” says Wesley Long, department chair and associate professor. “Our work with students is understanding that ‘I am my brother’s keeper,’ and making sure that his needs are met and everyone has the kind of life they want.”

That work began with a professorship established through gifts from grocery pioneer Sylvan N. Goldman and the Mary K. Chapman Foundation of Tulsa. The holder of the professorship was charged with starting a new program in human relations.

Among those nominated for the post was George Henderson, an OU professor of education and sociology who had spent the previous two years guiding students through the turbulent process of full integration and racial conciliation. Henderson was adviser to OU’s Afro-American Student Union and an all-white ally organization called the Student Action Committee. He previously had weathered the civil rights movement in Detroit and worked closely with Martin Luther King Jr. to desegregate that city’s workplaces and previously all-white neighborhoods. But the OU integration experience had been so draining and dispiriting that Henderson planned to resign and give the university an opportunity to hire what he describes as “a more successful professor.”

OU President Herbert J. Hollomon prodded him to consider the professorship, and Henderson became intrigued when he read that the new endowed professor’s job description was “creating and implementing a graduate-level program to train students to combat racial discrimination and other acts of bigotry and

assist organizations and communities throughout Oklahoma in the public school desegregation process.”

“There were only a handful of programs focusing on human relations nationwide,” Henderson says, explaining that the discipline examines personal interactions, group relationships and implementing change. “There are still relatively few universities that go beyond talking about theories of change. I wanted to create a program that would prepare individuals to do something I really didn’t fully realize I had: the passion for and ability to train humane activists or change agents.”

Professor Vera Gatch became the second Human Relations faculty member when she transferred from the OU Department of Psychology. She helped Henderson secure three adjunct professors – local judge J. David Rambo and two social workers. Together, they launched the program’s first master’s degree courses in August 1970. “I beamed with pride like a new parent,” Henderson wrote in *Race and the University*, one of 35 books he has written.

“From the very beginning, we were OU’s most racially diverse master’s degree program,” he says. “We also had a reputation of being innovators.” Students were drawn to Human Relations’ unique blend of traditional and experiential instruction and a curriculum designed to prepare them to work in organizations aimed at ending discrimination in employment, housing and education.

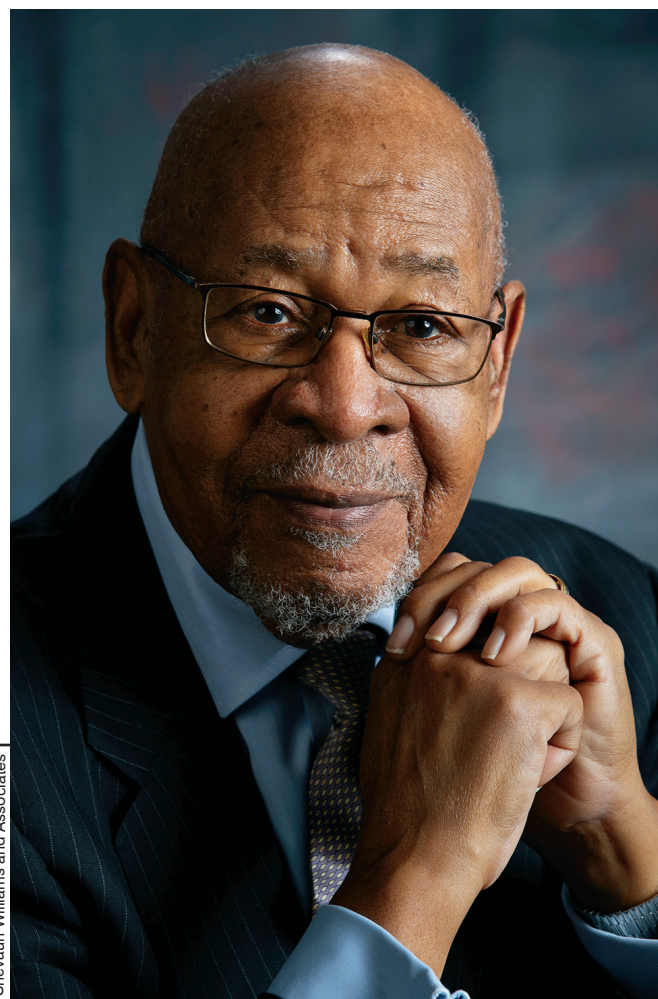
“Everything we discussed in our classrooms was put into practice as a demonstration of our commitment to racial harmony, desegregation and integration,” says Henderson, who was just the third Black faculty member in OU’s history. He and his wife, Barbara, who is also a prominent social-justice advocate, were Norman’s first Black homeowners. “We were living our cultural beliefs.” Racial integration at OU was a microcosm of human relations theories and practices, he says, and students applied the work of peace advocates like Gandhi and King and such philosophers as Thoreau in their studies and activism.

Henderson adds that the OU Human Relations Program also practiced diversity by recruiting and graduating students with such disabilities as cerebral palsy, starting with Gail B. Dunskey. Her classmates organized teams to get her to and

from classes and special events. Students carried the ebullient Dunskey up and down stairs in buildings that weren’t wheelchair accessible and didn’t have elevators long before accommodations were built into OU facilities.

Other Human Relations innovations included creating and offering OU’s first Women’s Studies course in 1975. “Our graduate program also accepted a student’s last 60 hours of undergraduate coursework rather than their four-year GPA, and we didn’t require the GRE because I did not believe those to be adequate indicators of an applicant’s activist or change-agent ability,” Henderson says. “We taught them to become humane practitioners. And we practiced team teaching when it was frowned upon in almost all social and behavioral-science departments.”

Community service was a requirement of the program from its inception, both for students and professors. The



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One of OU’s most honored and beloved professors, Dr. George Henderson founded what is now the Department of Human Relations a half century ago. He recently donated a 40-year collection of papers to OU’s Western History Collections that documents the department’s impact.



Amid a sea of white faces, Henderson addresses an OU 1968 “teach-in.” Henderson founded the university’s Human Relations program to prepare students for futures ending discrimination in employment, housing and education.

first community initiatives ranged from internships with the Oklahoma Civil Rights Commission to tutoring low-income students in Oklahoma City and facilitating discussion groups with inmates in the El Reno Correctional Facility (“In fact, my mother attended one of those sessions,” Henderson laughs). A group of Human Relations students also designed and taught a summer Black History course for Norman High School students.

“We were all over the place,” he recalls. “I don’t know when we slept.”

As word about the program spread, Henderson was approached for training by numerous human services professionals outside the university. OU’s Master of Counseling degree stemmed from the need for more culturally sensitive and diverse counselors to serve people of color in Oklahoma communities. At the request of U.S. Army officials, Henderson developed OU’s first weekend intensive-study courses at Ft. Sill in the 1970s to help promote diversity and integration among its military and civilian personnel. The success of those intensive-study courses resulted in the Human Relations master’s degree curriculum being offered at military bases around the globe as OU Extended Campus in North America, Europe and Asia.

But the true hallmark of OU’s Human Relations program is the teaching environment that Henderson created and cultivated. A special page of the 1969 *Sooner Yearbook* was devoted to the subject. It is among 40 years of Henderson’s papers focusing on the impact of the Department of Human Relations that he recently donated to OU’s Western History Collections.

“I believe that education must be relevant to current social issues,” he wrote. “I believe that students must be free to question all concepts, including mine ... I believe that I am hooked

on students. If I kick the habit, I will stop teaching.”

Though he officially retired in 2006 and recently celebrated his 88th birthday, this fall will be the first time that Henderson has not continually taught both an undergraduate and graduate weekend course per semester in “retirement.”

“I fell in love with students here; and I found everything that I, as a teacher, could want,” reflects Henderson. He led the Human Relations program to full-fledged department status in 1977 and served as chair of the department for 20 years. He later became dean of the OU College of Liberal Studies. In addition to the Sylvan N. Goldman Professorship, his career has been recognized with three other distinguished titles: OU’s David Ross Boyd Professorship, Regents’ Professorship and Kerr-McGee Presidential Professorship.

Along the way, Henderson turned down four college presidencies, six vice-presidential posts and four deanships at other universities. “This is where I should be. This is where I would try to teach improving relationships, especially with individuals and cultures different from our own,” he says, adding that his own cultural values, beliefs and behavior are described in his most recent book, *Cultural Diversity, Inclusion and Justice: Being a Community Activist*.

“I tell my students, ‘We’re family. All of you have a voice, and I encourage you to use it. We can disagree with each other in terms of concepts, but we should not attack one another personally.’ I never grade students down for disagreeing with me. But I will probe to find out why they hold certain cultural, racial and ethnic views. It’s a whole process of individuals self-discovering and deciding for themselves what they stand for and why. For me, the classroom is not preparation for the real world – it is the real world.”

continued



Wesley Long, right, chair of the OU Department of Human Relations, poses with graduate DeAndre Martin at the university's 2017 Commencement ceremonies. "It's about trying to ensure that social justice and equity are in the world and in everything we do," Long says of the department's work.

Randi Brockhaus entered Henderson's world as an undergraduate Human Relations student taking an accelerated weekend course, "The History of Racism."

"I immediately fell in love with everything he is about, as does most everyone who encounters him," says Brockhaus, who holds a 2011 OU bachelor's and 2013 master's degree in Human Relations and went on to serve as a case manager and administrator for two local homeless shelters.

"He really made us step out of our comfort zone. He would speak on topics we weren't comfortable with or that felt out of our element and made it clear this was a non-judgmental course," she says. "We had a classmate who had never even seen a Black person until she came to OU. She was petrified of speaking out and said some things that made us all turn our heads. Yet, Dr. Henderson said, 'That's fine, it's more than understandable. You're here, and you're learning.'

"He taught me the true meaning of treating others with unconditional, positive regard," Brockhaus says. She has strived to imitate his example and that of other faculty members through her career and personal life.

"The Human Relations program made me very aware of the blinders we all wear on a daily basis," Brockhaus says. "In turn, I try to make myself more self-aware and continue working on myself, because otherwise you can't make the world a better place. It taught me to fight for what's right even when it isn't the popular opinion."


Wesley Long, who has headed the Department of Human Relations for eight years, says the same perspective and skills Brockhaus learned have carried alumni into an eclectic range of professions, from high-ranking military posts to medical practices, heading state agencies, political lobbying and vice presidencies in higher education. "Students find ways to make the

degree fit what they want to do and the purpose of their own lives."

Human Relations currently graduates the greatest number of students in OU's College of Arts and Sciences, he says. The department offers a Master of Human Relations that can be tailored to include courses from any OU degree program, as well as a Master of Human Resources and Master of Counseling.

A decade ago, Human Relations also began offering an undergraduate degree with core courses starting during a student's junior year. Long says it is common for undergrads to discover they have a passion for service after participating in one of the department's community projects, including a diversity and inclusion effort serving middle-schoolers, a collaboration with a local housing and education program for homeless teens, and a "buddy bench" project in elementary schools.

"As professors, we talk about when a student's 'light goes on' and they realize that coming to OU and getting an education is a privilege," says Long, who started his own career working with adolescent violent offenders. "We ask them to consider, 'Do you see how blessed you are and how you can make a change using your voice?'"

"What's happening in the world today is nothing new from when Dr. Henderson started the Department of Human Relations 50 years ago," Long says, as marchers are once again pouring into streets across the nation to protest racial discrimination. "We recognize that progress has been made, but not fast or consistent enough. We want to make sure that everyone is empowered, everyone is valued, and everyone's voice is being heard. We are proud of what Human Relations has done and what we have to continue to do." 

Anne Barajas Harp is associate editor of Sooner Magazine.