

Life

133 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln's African American community keeps moving forward.

Lessons

By Matthew Waite
Editor

Lincoln was not like home for Monique Strickland.

The 17-year-old high school student came to Lincoln, a predominantly white community, from Atlanta, which boasts one of the nation's largest African-American communities.

"I've never seen this many white people in my life," she said, sitting with a group of five friends at the Malone Center.

Of the friends sitting in a semi-circle, only one — 18-year-old LaCresha Lee — has called only Lincoln home. Of those that came from other cities, all came here to go to "good" schools.

The group of friends came from cities not like Lincoln. They came from cities like St. Louis, which have large minority populations. They say their parents brought them here to get an education, a chance.

The friends sat talking about that chance as the Juneteenth festival went on around them

Friday evening. Lincoln's African American community was celebrating the day the Emancipation Proclamation freed the slaves.

The document became law Jan. 1, 1863, but it is believed that it was not until June 19, 1863, that all slaves knew they were free.

The Emancipation Proclamation was delivered 133 years ago. It has been nearly half a century since the Supreme Court ended the "separate but equal" practice of segregation and decades since the civil rights movement of the sixties.

The history of African Americans is a story of struggle and triumph. But times change, and struggles continue.

Black churches in the South are burning. Many are pointing fingers at hate groups. The government has launched an investigation.

Hate is making a comeback. Militant groups — from the return of the Black Panthers to the resurgence of the Aryan Nations — are again making news.

Ever since Abraham Lincoln's proclamation, African Americans have been struggling for a chance. Racism, poverty, crime, drugs — all have stood in the way.

Far removed from the charred churches of the South, some in Lincoln say it's different here — somewhat. Some, especially the young, say at least here they have a chance.

For Brian Thompson, a 25-year old originally from Terre Haute, Ind., Lincoln has made him want to succeed.

"I wish we could be that way all over the world," he said. "Some blacks don't have that. I believe a black person can make it here."

Got it made

Many would say John Harris has made it. As special assistant to the vice chancellor for student affairs at UNL, Harris comes across many students. His favorite stories to tell are where he opens a student's mind to diversity and understanding.

Harris has a young family of his own. His wife is a Lincoln native, himself a Missourian. Active in his church, Harris often talks about community involvement and personal responsibility.

He too says an African-American can make it in Lincoln — if they try.

"There are more struggles for many who

choose to be affected by the environment than effect it," he said from his office Monday.

Some blacks new to the community come in with a defensive attitude because they are so outnumbered, Harris said. According to the 1990 census, Lincoln was more than 70 percent white.

Harris said African-Americans in Lincoln had to get used to walking into a restaurant and being the only minority in the room. Blacks have to get used to the stares, he said. "This isn't the most friendly place for people of color," Harris said. "They aren't rolling out the red carpet."

Harris has many stories about things he had to get used to living in Lincoln. Police officers following him, white people uncomfortable around him and people locking their car doors when he pulls up to get gas.

"You have to ask yourself if she would have done that anyway," he said of the woman at the gas station. "But then you say 'Nah, I know why she did it.'"

"You sometimes try to talk yourself out of racism."

But Harris now shrugs off the actions — direct and indirect — of others.

"You can't ever really separate yourself from everybody else," he said. "Given the right situation or the wrong one, we're all the same."

Perspective

Leola Bullock has watched the times change in Lincoln.

She moved here in 1950, before the civil rights movement. She moved into a house in the Malone neighborhood, the "black" neighborhood of Lincoln.

Back then, African Americans couldn't live anywhere else, except for parts of the Clinton neighborhoods and a small area in south Lincoln. Red-lining from banks, real estate agents and loan associations prevented them from buying homes anywhere else.

Times have changed. Progress — from the Fair Housing Act to the civil rights movement of the sixties — has eliminated barriers for buying a house.

"There are few areas in town (African Americans) can't live in if they have the funds," she said.

And now, Lincoln's multicultural education programs are better than many places in Nebraska and across the state, Bullock said.

But one barrier still remains, despite progress.

"We still have a lot of racism in this city and this state," she said.

But the progress she has seen has been substantial. Lincoln's African Americans have a better chance now to succeed.

"I've seen it go from people who could not get jobs except menial jobs to professional people," she said.

School ties

Terrance Kimbrough's mother wanted him to have the right situation.

She brought her son, now 18, to Lincoln to go to school. She took him out of the St. Louis neighborhood they were living in and set off for the Nebraska capital.

The move was not an easy thing to adjust to.

"It was so quiet," he said, laughing. "I couldn't fall asleep — there were no gunshots."

Kimbrough and Strickland share similar stories of their former home. The five friends at the Juneteenth celebration all share the same feelings about Lincoln.

They say there are good kids and bad ones. They say there are things to do, but the bad kids ruin them and that's when bad publicity comes in.

"Some people just be zooming," Strickland said. "People come here and act like the fool."

"There are people that want to be hard and they think with all the white people, they can just come in and take over. It ain't that way."

Good kids are here to get an education — a chance, Strickland said.

"I never took advantage of academics (before)," she said. "Last year, I was the only African-American with a 3.5 GPA."

"I have white people asking me 'Monique, can I copy off you?'"

Looking towards downtown Lincoln, Strickland said she has a chance here.

"I made it this far," she said.

"You're going to have barriers in your life. You've got to fight through them."

