

Student attention goal of president of Prairie View

United Press International
Prairie View - Gruffly, as if scolding his own recalcitrant child, Dr. Alvin I. Thomas admonished the sobbing, young woman to dry her eyes and act like an adult.

The young woman, a freshman from Houston, owed a \$64 fine for speeding and was afraid to face her parents. Thomas loaned her the cost of the fine, briefly lectured on the responsibilities of being an adult, and dismissed her.

She thanked him, and sniffing gently into a shredded tissue, left the office of the president of Prairie View A&M University.

Thomas, president of the predominantly black university since 1966 and before that dean of industrial education and technology, said he believes in giving personal attention to his 3,600 students.

"We strive to give our students personal attention at Prairie View - whether they're black, white, or brown," Thomas said. "And because we're a small university, we can do that."

Thomas sees nothing contradictory in providing his students personal, sometimes paternal, attention while telling them not to think they are elite because they are black and not to expect the same personal attention from society.

"We've created a lot of black pride, which should've been done a long time ago, but we also created a lot of things that weren't too helpful because we created the impression that just being black would do it," Thomas said.

Rather than teach black elitism, Prairie View teaches achievement of certain standards - the same standards required by predominantly white universities, he said.

"We can't tell them that just being black is 'it' because blackness is not 'it'. If you go to a doctor, you're not worried about how many black people work for him; you're worried about getting out of that hospital," Thomas said.

"We never did quite buy the idea of the black image or black power because we thought it was just something that was not going to fly," he said. "We realized we weren't going into a black situation - we were going into a majority situation."

Thomas said the institution's goals are defined very clearly as providing opportunities to whites, blacks and browns who are locked out of the majority system.

"We're taking them that are locked out of the system altogether and giving them portholes through which they have access to a quality of life, a quality of professional opportunity and seeing that they have a chance, acting on their own merit, to achieve it," he said.

Thomas concedes that blacks, which comprise approximately 12 percent of the nation's population, are under-represented in most professions, but the federal government's so-called "quota system" is not a solution to the problem.

The solution, he said, is to be the quintessential Horatio Alger hero and overcome all obstacles - financial, spiritual and physical - to become recognized for one's own achievements.

Most Prairie View graduates become first generation professionals who pursue careers, get married, buy homes in the suburbs and rear families, or, in Thomas' words, "because integrated into the American stream as middle class Americans."

As more blacks join the so-called middle class, fewer blacks become prison inmates and stand in welfare lines, he said. As more blacks join "middle America," he said, fewer blacks express anger as they did in the 1960s.

"I don't think this anger has changed much - it's always a fraction of an inch from the surface," Thomas said. "The black student still feels that while we have had integration and we have had changes, he still is bitter about the whole system."

"You see it in young black people coming from integrated high schools where they didn't have the opportunity, where they saw the prejudice, where they saw the block voting in terms of student councils, where they saw they didn't get the grades, where they saw themselves fudged out of offices and honors, where they saw the covert racism."

Because historically they have been victims of discrimination, many black students still believe the so-called "system" constantly oppresses them, Thomas said, and they cannot differentiate between competition and discrimination.

When blacks face this competition, they must realize it is not necessarily discrimination, he said. "It may look like discrimination when it is simply a highly competitive situation."

He warns students of the competitive nature of American society, explaining they must learn to be bi-cultural to survive.

"We're trying to get them to understand that hostility breeds frustration," he said. "This is a new culture for them because the old culture said you're a consumer culture and that's it."

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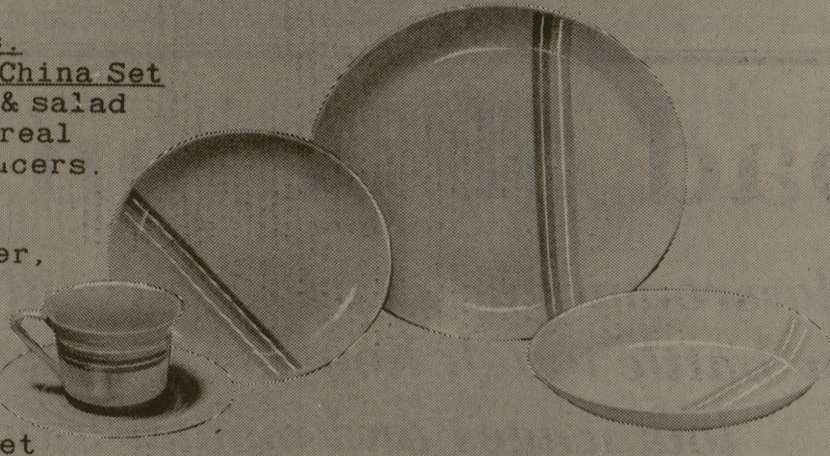
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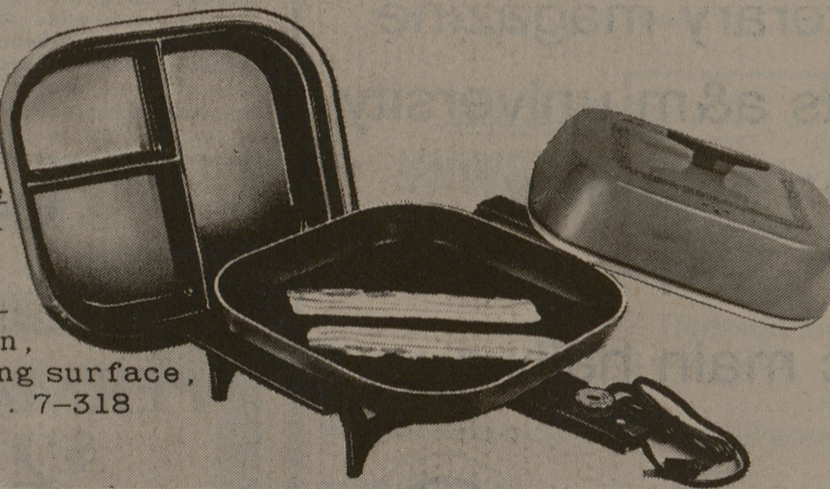
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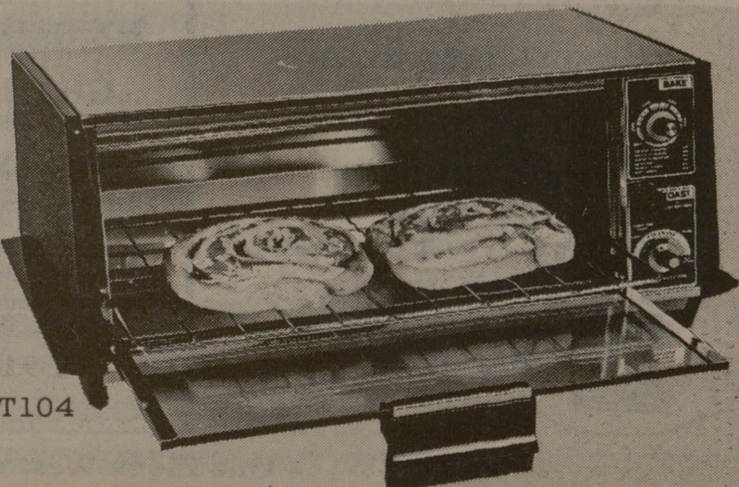


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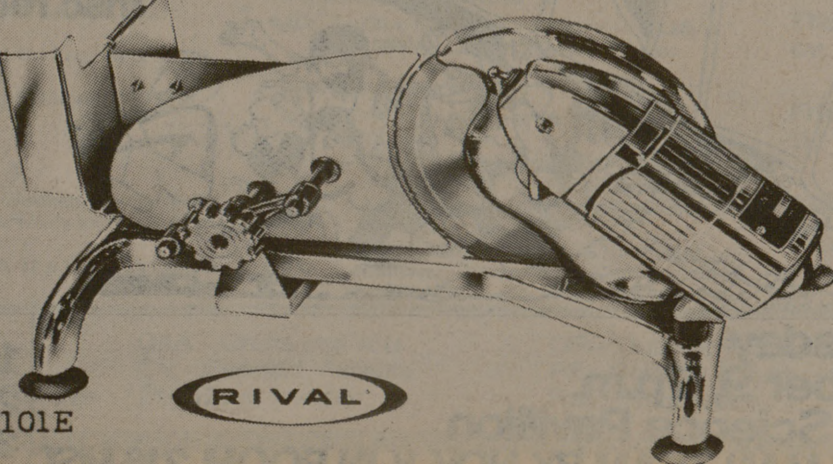
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