

New chapter formed of National Black Science Students Organization

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The national organization is barely two years old, and the chapter at the University of California, San Diego is brand new, but the National Black Science Students Organization has suddenly become a very important link to the future for its members and for a large segment of the community.

The NBSSO is just what the name implies: a nationwide organization of Black college and university science students who are drawn together to help themselves, and other minorities, toward a future in medicine and science. Its membership is growing and its programs are ambitious.

For the 1 in 10 Black Americans who are carriers of Sickle Cell Anemia, the programs are extremely critical.

NBSSO began as a collection of undergraduate students at the City College of New York who felt it was time to take their future into their own hands. Originally called Black Science, the group contacted medical and graduate schools around the nation and, despite pessimistic responses from advisors, held the first National Conference on Black Students in Medicine and Science in December, 1969. Over 500 students and professional schools' representatives participated.

At the conference the members not only looked at academic problems facing Black students, but also at medical and health problems affecting the Black community. A number of objectives were formulated including: recognition of the need for Black professionals in the sciences, increasing the number of high school students who enter college to study in the technological and medical fields, gaining increased enrollments of Black and other minority students in medical and graduate schools, helping to obtain financial aid for Black science students, and assistance in the development of special programs to keep Black students in school.

The immediate result of this program was the placement of all eleven Black students who applied from CCNY to some medical program. The following year, all 15 that applied to medical schools were accepted. Prior to this, acceptance rate of Blacks from CCNY to medical schools was very poor.

In addition, many of the NBSSO members from CCNY were hired as scrub nurses, emergency room technicians, and externs in the several municipal hospitals in the New York Metropolitan area.

The second National Conference was held in October, 1970, with over 750 students, faculty and professionals in attendance. At the third National Conference, held last December in New York City, the announcement of the first NBSSO chapters outside of New York City was made. Among the more than 800 attending were the first NBSSO students from the West Coast, including members of the newly formed chapter at UCSD.

The UCSD chapter, the second to be chartered, was organized by Paul B. Simms, a pre-med student from CCNY studying at the San Diego campus through an exchange program. Simms is a past national president of NBSSO and is currently a member of the national Board of Trustees.

Some 35 men and women students began the UCSD chapter last fall. The membership includes most of the Black students on campus who are involved in science studies but represents less than 10 per cent of all Black

students at UCSD. According to Simms, this percentage, which drops even lower after four years of study, is consistent with colleges and universities across the country.

"The number that succeed, that is, the number that graduate in science, is less than one half of those that start," Simms said. "This drop is reflected in enrollments in graduate and medical schools," he said. "There are medical schools in the United States that have not had a Black student in 100 years, and there are only two medical schools specifically aimed at Black students - Howard University In Washing1ton, D.C., and Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee."

The effectiveness of the NBSSO after two years is being felt in many areas across the country. Most important is the increased national recognition of the organization's efforts to overcome what it terms the lack of motivation from medical and graduate schools toward the prospective Black scientist.

At the most recent national conference in New York City, representatives of some 30 medical schools conducted interviews to inform students of the various opportunities available to them in medicine and the technological fields. A similar type program is scheduled for Saturday, February 19, at George Washington High School in Los Angeles where 500 to 600 students and faculty are expected to attend the first Western Region meeting of the NBSSO. Reese Watkins, National Chairman of NBSSO, and Al Simpkins, National Vice Chairman, will take part as will members from newly formed chapters at UCLA, UC Berkeley, San Diego State College, Stanford, California State at Hayward and Los Angeles, and California Polytechnic Institute.

Equally as important as the recognition is the work being done by members of the NBSSO in combating the ignorance and misunderstanding of Sickle Cell Anemia.

Sickle Cell Anemia has often been called "the neglected disease" because it has received little support for screening, education, and research in spite of its high incidence and mortality rates among the Black population. It is an incurable, inherited disease caused by an alteration of some of the red blood cells, allowing them to pass less freely through small blood vessels eventually causing blood clots. It is serious at any age and often fatal during childhood.

A child may inherit the sickle cell trait from one or both parents. Someone who has inherited the trait from only one parent is called a "carrier" and, although he will not have the disease, he may pass it on to his children. About 1 in 10 Black Americans is a carrier and about 1 in 100 couples are both carriers risking a 1 in 4 chance of having a child with Sickle Cell Anemia each time a pregnancy occurs.

For the most part, Black people have been unaware of Sickle Cell Anemia as a community health problem, and therefore have not taken any large-scale preventive action. Recently this situation has begun to change with national efforts being made to promote screening and education programs for the public.

The NBSSO has, in the past year, begun to play a major role in combating Sickle Cell Anemia through education and testing in the Black community. In New York City testing began with over 3,000 students at CCNY and Long Island University. The tests, a simple blood test designed to detect carriers, were carried out by student members of NBSSO. From the initial tests, over 300 students were found to be carriers.

In San Diego, testing began with Knox Elementary School where the local NBSSO chapter worked closely with the UCSD School of Medicine and the Black Action Committee. In addition, some 252 tests were recently conducted on Black students and faculty at UCSD and further tests are scheduled for San Diego State College on February 17 and later at several area high schools.

"Our objective is to reach every Black person in the community," Simms said. "We will consider it good if we reach 40 to 60 per cent of the local Black population. That would equal 40,000 to 60,000 people. If past experience holds true, you can be sure that we will find some 10 per cent of the people are carriers," he said.

"If we can find these people and guide them into genetic and psychological counseling, then our efforts and our programs will have been more than worthwhile," Sims said.

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