

NARRATIVE TEXTS

Almetris Marsh Duren, Mentor and Adviser, 1910-2001

For 25 years Almetris Marsh Duren was housemother, mentor, and adviser to black students at The University of Texas at Austin. She guided and advocated for them during the troubled early years of integration on campus.

Originally from Oklahoma, Almetris enrolled in Huston-Tillotson College on Austin's East Side after her husband's death. She earned a bachelor's degree in 1950, then stayed on as a teacher of home economics. Meanwhile The University was experiencing a tidal change. The Supreme Court ruled in 1950 that the school must admit qualified black students. In 1956 the first black undergraduate freshmen arrived. Almetris Duren changed jobs to become housemother to the women of this group.¹

Because The University would not allow them to reside on campus, they settled into co-operative housing ten blocks away. Two years later their house was torn down to make way for the construction of I-35. The university moved them to a unit on campus where the communication building now stands. It did not take the students long to propose naming their co-op after Almetris. She provided inspiration and encouragement to stay in school. Black men as well as women took meals and attended events at the co-op, one of the few places where they could socialize comfortably.²

In 1968 "Mama Duren" was promoted to student development specialist for minority affairs. The revered Almetris Co-op was torn down, but its housemother took up residence in Jester Center, where she could influence a wider circle of students. In 1974 a group of Jester residents habitually gathered in the lounge to sing around a piano. They approached Mama Duren about starting a gospel choir, and with her guidance the Innervations of Blackness Choir was launched. Almetris also organized Project Info, The University's first minority recruitment program. In 1979 she published her book about the history of black integration at The University of Texas at Austin—a slender, factual volume that is required reading for all orientation advisers. After she retired in 1981, four decades of UT Austin students continued to write to her and thank her for their success.



Quotations

The co-op was also a dormitory, boarding house, social center, and even Sunday school for black students.—Almetris Duren³

[She knew] how lonely and isolated young black students could be. They needed to find solace and reinforcement with other African Americans, and she certainly supplied that.—June Brewer, one of the first five black students to attend The University of Texas at Austin⁴

[She] helped crystallize in my mind that I was really capable, that I could compete, that my work was really as good as the white students.—Rodney Witcher, '75⁵

[I] wouldn't have stayed at UT without Innervations. We're all from the same background, trying to do the same thing. We're in this together. . . . We don't let you flunk out.—Canditha Selders⁶

She made me develop an awareness of what my real job was at UT: to go to class every day, to do well at UT, and to graduate. This, she told me, would be one of the biggest contributions I could make to breaking down barriers for myself and others.—Rodney Witcher, '75⁷

Photo

To come from Center for American History, UT Austin.

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Endnotes

¹ Biographical information in this article is from Peter Partheymuller, "Almetris Duren: This Remarkable Woman," *The Alcalde*, July/August 2001, online at *Utopia—History & Culture*, The University of Texas at Austin, <http://utopia.utexas.edu/articles/alcalde/duren.html?sec=history&sub=race> (April 27, 2005); from "A Gift of Love: A Celebration of the Life of Almetris Marsh Duren, 1910-2000," exhibit of the Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin, <http://www.cah.utexas.edu/exhibits/DurenExhibit> (April 27, 2005); from "UT mourns loss of women influential during UT integration," *The Daily Texan*, October 23, 2000, http://tspweb02.tsp.utexas.edu/webarchive/10-23-00/2000102306_s01_UT.html (April 27, 2005); from "UT Black Alumni celebrate life and contributions of Almetris Duren," Office of Public Affairs, The University of Texas at Austin, news release April 4, 2001, http://www.utexas.edu/opa/news/01newsreleases/nr_200104/nr_duren010404.html (April 27, 2005); and from "UT honors 'legacy to the African-American community': Alumni, students and faculty remember Almetris Duren during memorial," *The Daily Texan*, April 9, 2001, http://tspweb02.tsp.utexas.edu/webarchive/04-09-01/2001040901_s01_Alumni.html (April 27, 2005).

² Partheymuller, "Almetris Duren: This Remarkable Woman," online.

³ Quoted in Ibid.

⁴ Quoted in "UT Black Alumni celebrate life and contributions of Almetris Duren," OPA news release, online.

⁵ Quoted in Partheymuller, "Almetris Duren: This Remarkable Woman," online.

⁶ Quoted in Ibid.

⁷ Quoted in Ibid.