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With gift to alma mater, producer takes step to heal old wounds

Posted September 29, 2010 05:38 PM

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(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

Sixteen-year-old Felicia Simmons, a Boston Latin School junior from South Boston, talks with Prince Charles Alexander at the school today.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

When Charles Alexander graduated from the prestigious Boston Latin School in 1975, he was a jaded, yet determined young man.

As president of the school's black student group during his senior year, Alexander was a lightning rod for racial tension. He said he was suspended three times for speaking out against discrimination during the height of the desegregation crisis in Boston.

In the final weeks of school, Alexander said, he opened his class yearbook to find a disparaging racial comment printed beneath his photo.

"I ran out of there scarred," Alexander recalled. "I was angry."

But today, the Berklee College of Music professor and acclaimed music producer took a step toward healing old wounds by donating 15 Apple computers with special music software to his alma mater's music department with the help of an outreach program at Berklee College where he now

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"I felt that by even doing something on this level, that I might affect even one child ... I feel like I'm come full circle and turned some dark energy of mine that propelled out of Boston Latin into some positive energy," Alexander said.

In the 35 years that followed his high school graduation, Alexander said he never set foot in the country's first public school. He went on to graduate from Brandeis University and record three albums of his own before producing music for such major artists as the Notorious B.I.G., Mary J. Blige, and P. Diddy, compiling a list of work that has earned three Grammys and more than 40 platinum and gold records.

But, Alexander found it difficult to shake the sour memories of his alma matter.

"I ran away for many years and pretended like the negative interactions didn't exist, when in fact it bothered me for many, many years," he said.

Through all the challenges he faced in high school, he remembers being a teenager and hoping for a successful African American to visit him at [Boston Latin](#) and provide some sage advice.

But, no such person ever came to visit his school that had a black student population of just 3 percent then.

"And, here I am now, an older gentleman, that has some wise words that I could possibly convey to some students at Boston Latin," the South End native said, reflecting on what prompted him to move toward reconnecting with his old high school

He said that what he went through at Boston Latin was a reflection of the times, and not of the school.

"Boston Latin really is a great place – a place of high thought, of high ideals, of high-reaching goals," said Alexander, 52. "And I feel connected to that. I feel like I am one of those people that has high-reaching goals because of my relationship with Boston Latin."

However, the discrimination he experienced always stuck with him and caused him to keep a distance between himself and the school.

"I didn't go to my 20th reunion, I didn't go to my 25th or my 30th, and primarily it was because I had quite a few strange encounters in my senior year at Boston Latin," said Alexander. "That just kept me in a very dark place concerning the school."

One of the strangest encounters he experienced at Boston Latin came from his class yearbook, he said.

Earlier in the school year, the president of the school's Student Union, who was white, attended a meeting of the black student association – it was unprecedented that a white student would attend, according to Alexander.

"In the spirit of openness and of being inclusive, I was like 'OK, sounds good to me,'" recalled Alexander, then president of the black student group.



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However, when Alexander attended the Student Union's next meeting, the same white student who had attended the meeting of black students did not reciprocate the welcome. In fact, Alexander said, he was kicked out of the meeting.

"All I saw was: this is unfair. There's something gross going on here and you just want me to accept it," Alexander said.

So when the school yearbook was distributed to students and Alexander opened it up and read the caption below his photo, he saw it wasn't the words he had chosen. Instead, it was a shot at him, a black student, for trying to attend the Student Union meeting.

The caption read, "To have enough color to be black," he said. "The context was, 'you shouldn't have come to the meeting where all of the white students were, you should be blacker and just go to your black meetings.' "

Now, Alexander said, addressing the old wounds has been a huge step for him.

"The more I opened up my mouth and said this happened and I don't like that it happened ... the more it starts to dissipate, it starts to go away, it starts to be not as palpable, and as powerful of an event in my life. It feels more manageable and more in my control now, and not something that was imposed on me," he said.

Being less than a mile away from his former high school which is celebrating its 375th anniversary – and Alexander's 35th class reunion – he decided to return to the place where his music career began and toured the school last October.

"I finished the tour I said my goodbyes, and I really felt like this is a different generation. These were not the people that were there," he said. "They had nothing to do with the incidents that occurred when I was at Boston Latin when I was younger and that we truly had turned the corner at this respected institution, and that my relationship with Boston Latin had turned a corner."

Alexander worked with Berklee to organize the recent donation, which has turned room 422 with its 10-year-old barely usable computers into a space where students said yesterday will likely have them visiting after the school day's final bell has rung.

"Whenever I looked through the [room's] front window, I always thought, 'how do those things even work?,' " said 16-year-old junior Yetunde Buraimon of Hyde Park referring to the room's former computers.

Tight funding had prevented the school from upgrading the devices previously.

"We have an alumni-support foundation, but every school is tight on funds right now," said the school's arts director Paul Pitts, who was not in the same grade as Alexander, but played alongside him in band during 1973.

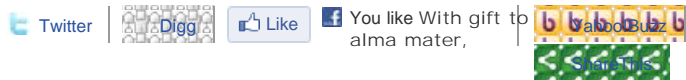
"There was a lot of anger and misinformation," Pitts recalled of going to school in Boston during busing. "It was a tumultuous time. I remember it being unfortunate because education wasn't always at the forefront."

Alexander said he had initially hoped for some sort of an apology or a retraction in the days after he saw the quote under his yearbook photo. But, that never came.

Instead, in the same way Alexander became the successful-but-generous person he had wanted to visit him as a high schooler, he corrected the mistake himself.

Alexander keeps his class of 1975 yearbook copy in a small, special bin with other memorable items, like his college diploma. In that yearbook, the printed caption below his portrait is crossed out with black marker and written there instead is the phrase he had originally wanted: "To have enough money to not worry."

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