

Bethany salutes alumnus



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

A Bethany College student embraces Robert Harrison after the student union was named in his honor.

College rectifies past with special ceremony

Bethany College
By JONDI GUMZ

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SCOTTS VALLEY

When Robert Harrison became the first African-American to graduate from Bethany Bible College, he was denied a ministerial credential because of his race. That was in 1951.

It took 11 years before Assembly of God officials, who operate the college, changed their policy.

By then, Harrison, a gifted musician, was a member of the Billy Graham crusade. He went on to a distinguished missionary career in the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia. He recorded several albums of religious music. He wrote a book, "When God was Black."

And he never complained about what had happened.

On Tuesday, Bethany College announced the student union would be named in his honor.

"This is someone whose life we want you to examine," Bethany Vice President Steve Smallwood said at the dedication ceremony attended by 400 people. "Follow his example of service to the Lord."

In the chapel, a choir dressed in black and white sang "Freedom is Coming."

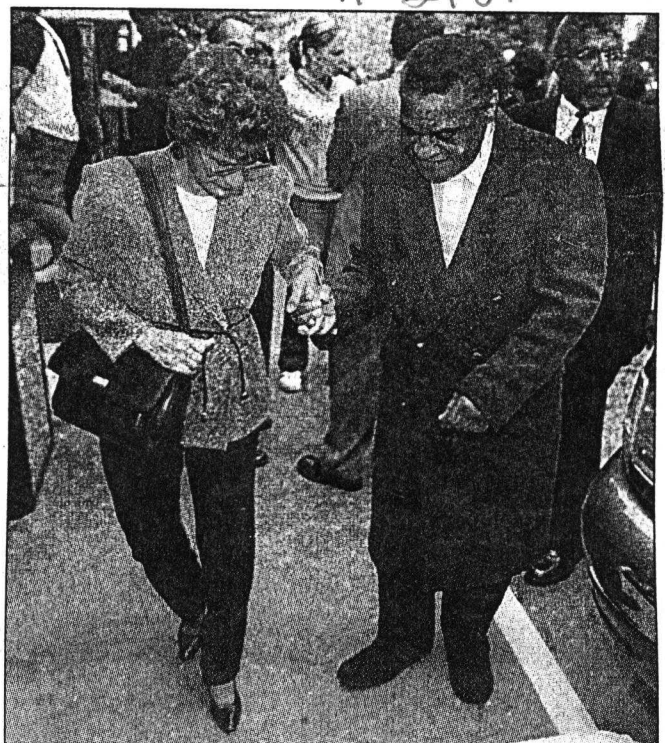
Five pastors announced contributions to an endowment to help African-American students attend Bethany, where tuition is \$10,820 a year.

"This is a great day," said Bishop Donald Green of the San Francisco Christian Center, recalling his first missionary trip with Harrison to Nigeria and Ghana in 1971. "I'm doing everything to keep from crying."

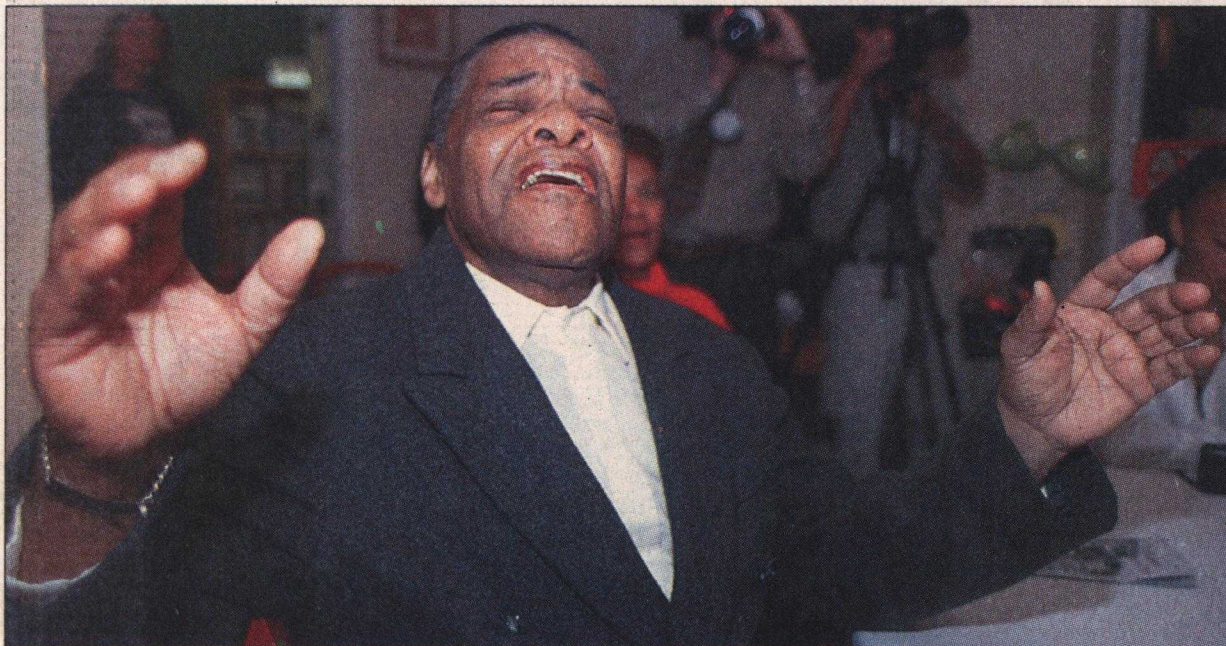
Harrison, 73, who attended the ceremony with his wife, Marilyn, and two of his children, seemed surprised by the attention.

"It amazed me," he said. "I was blessed beyond belief."

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Marilyn Harrison escorts her husband, the Rev. Robert Harrison, to the dedication ceremony of the Bethany College student union Tuesday.



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Robert Harrison, a minister, sings a verse from 'I'm a Child of the King' during the student union dedication ceremony Tuesday at Bethany College.

Salute

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Bethany President Everett Wilson said trustees sped up plans to recognize Harrison because of his ill health. He has been struggling with Alzheimer's disease and cancer.

Harrison's perseverance resulted in a more diverse student body at Bethany. While the majority of the college's 600 students are white, 16 percent are Latino, 7 percent African-American and 4 percent Asian Pacific

Islander.

Martha Mukangara, 46, came from Zimbabwe last year to study church leadership.

When church officials eventually offered to ordain Harrison, he first insisted ordination be open to all African-American ministerial graduates. Assembly of God officials agreed.

"Not only did he break the barrier, he recommends students come to Bethany all the time," said associate professor Marilyn Abplanalp, whose father was the college president instrumental in Harrison's ordination.

The Rev. Sam Huddleston said Har-

rison changed his life.

Huddleston was 20 years old and serving time in prison for being an accomplice in second-degree murder and robbery when he read Harrison's book.

"I got to go to Bethany because he paved the way," said Huddleston, who now serves on the college's board of trustees. "He left a legacy I couldn't mess up."

Harrison's niece, Sondra Miller, is a freshman at Bethany this year. She came at the urging of her pastor and her uncle, and plans to major in youth ministries.

"When I visited the campus, I felt very welcomed," she said.

The Rev. Robert Harrison

ACCOMPLISHMENTS: First African-American graduate of Bethany Bible College, 1951; first African American ordained by the Assemblies of God, 1962; wrote 'When God was Black.'

EDUCATION: Attended San Francisco Conservatory of Music; bachelor's degree, San Francisco State University; completed ministerial studies, Bethany Bible College.

CAREER: Performed in concert with Count Basie, Duke Ellington and Lionel Hampton while serving in the U.S. Army Special Forces; associate evangelist with the Rev. Billy Graham; overseas missionary in Japan, Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia and Ceylon.

FAMILY: Married in 1952; five grown children.

QUOTE: 'I will bless the Lord at all times.'

Students who attended the ceremony were in awe of Harrison.

"He has done some amazing things," said Joy Krajicek, 20, a transfer student from DeAnza College.

"I hadn't heard the story until last week," said Scott Olson, 23, a recent graduate who works part time as a youth pastor in Santa Cruz. "It kind of leaves you speechless."

Contributions to the Robert E. Harrison Endowment can be sent to Bethany College, 800 Bethany Drive, Scotts Valley CA 95066.

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