

Law professor's appointment more than symbolic act

By LINDA MacCOLL

Sometimes, people look at a figure like Alex Johnson simply as a symbol; in his case, as the only black professor currently teaching at the Law School.

They see a man recruited last semester largely because of loud calls for more black educators from such groups as the Black Law Students Association.

But to call Alex Johnson a mere symbol would be doing him and the Law School an injustice.

"With respect to myself," Johnson said, "the University came across as the top school in terms of their sincerity, in terms of making me feel wanted, making me feel comfortable, making me feel like a faculty member.

"The fact never entered my mind that I was being hired as a black faculty member. I'm just a faculty member."

"We picked him because he would be a superb instructor," Law School Dean Richard Merrill said.

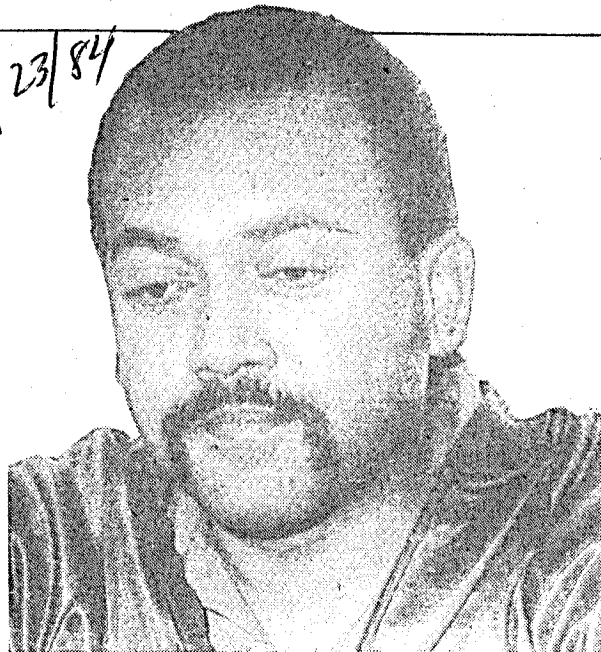
Merrill described Johnson as "skillful verbally, having a good record academically and intelligent — the same sort of credentials that anybody we would recruit has."

As an educator, Johnson has a personal approach to his craft. He refuses to view students as mere names or numbers on a seating chart. Instead, he sees his pupils as vital and informative individuals.

"Frequently I learn from students," he said. "I think you can be remiss to ignore students as people."

While at law school at the University of California at Los Angeles, Johnson found "some of the professors intimidated you. They were aloof and you didn't really get an opportunity to know them.

"There were some people there I really would have enjoyed getting to know on a personal level because they were quite interesting," Johnson continued,



CD/Nancy Andrews

New Law Prof. Alex Johnson

"but they weren't quite personable enough or approachable.

"Hopefully I'm not that type of person," he said.

And it was the student body at the Law School that in part drew him away from a two-year long stint at a Los Angeles law firm, he said.

"I like dealing with students," he said. "Law practice, like anything else, can become boring, stale. Teaching is a little different. Every year you get a different class."

For Johnson, the students at the University are "ideal," he said, adding he is "impressed by both the interest and the intelligence of the student body."

He said that at his first teaching job at the University of Minnesota, "frequently I thought the students were a little apathetic. They viewed it as a job — a means to an end. Three years of law school, pass the bar, make money.

"I didn't sense that here."

He also applauds the students' versatility and personality.

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"I didn't want to go to a school where the students were one-dimensional," he said. "I think a well-rounded person will make a better attorney than a one-dimensional person who spends 14 hours [a day] in the law library."

Besides being a source of variety and challenge, students keep Johnson in touch with an ever-changing world.

"Students tend to keep you in touch with what's happening," he said. "They keep you young."

At 30, Johnson is not exactly over-the-hill himself. And although he said he doesn't "aspire to growing old," he also respects the maturity he has gained through growing older.

"When I taught at the University of Minnesota, I was 26 and very young and to some degree immature," he said.

Johnson said that in his first week at the Law School, he discovered personal "growth and development through that [experience] and also some distance which I think comes naturally from being older than the majority of the students.

"That was not a bad experience."

Although Johnson said "growing old can be done gracefully and I hope I'll do it that way," he does not feel age will be a determining factor in the way he deals with students.

"I don't think that because I'm a teacher at this institution that I'm removed from the student body or different from the student body in terms of interests of lifestyles," he said.

One of his interests — sports — will certainly bring him closer to students. Since he especially enjoys softball, he is looking forward to the annual Law School softball tournament.

Johnson said he also enjoys reading, especially mystery novels. Sometimes he puts his law training

to use and solves the mystery before the end of the novel, "if I'm familiar with the author."

Being the only black professor at the Law School, Johnson also might get involved in Black Law Students of America. "It would be something I'm interested in exploring," he said.

At this point, however, no one from the group has asked Johnson to join BLSA's efforts and Johnson said he would not make any definite decisions before investigating the organization's goals.

Johnson said being the only black professor in the Law School does not make him feel uncomfortable. At both the University of Minnesota and at the law firm, Johnson was faced with being the only black.

Through these experiences, Johnson said he has realized that recruiting blacks is difficult because the qualified blacks are few and opportunities are many.

"You can't say we want four black professors and go out and get four black professors. The system just doesn't work that way," he said.

Instead, recruiters at any university must seek professors with talent and personality. And it is his unique and "forceful" personality, Johnson said, that makes him a qualified teacher.

In reaching into his past to discover what helped him formulate and reach his high school dream of becoming a lawyer, Johnson said he was not absorbed by the image of the Perry Mason courtroom lawyer.

"I guess I remember watching him when I was young, but I never wanted to be like him. It's all too dramatic," he said.

Instead, he attributes his success to his parents, especially his father.

"He inculcated in me the value of an education and what it means in society. He worked very hard to make sure I got that experience," Johnson said. "I owe primarily who I am to that sacrifice."

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