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First black VSU grad made local history

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VALDOSTA — In 1963, Robert Pierce's education options were mostly limited to the historically black colleges.

A change of events found Pierce, along with Drewnell Thomas, being the first black students to attend Valdosta State College.

There have been many changes in the past 30 years.

The college is now a university. And instead of two black students stepping tentatively into the school's enrollment, VSU now has approximately 1,900 minority students attending classes.

On Wednesday, Pierce, VSU's first black graduate, returned to Valdosta State to discuss school segregation and integration.

Now a civil rights compliance director with the U.S. Department of Education's civil rights office in New Hampshire, Pierce also discussed some of his experiences at the school.

"There were minor incidents," Pierce

said, referring to student's acceptance to two black students in their ranks.

"But it was mostly a few statements or comments. I don't think that's changed. Many minority students still hear comments that offend them."

It was his first schooling experience with white students. Pierce received his public education in Valdosta's all-black school system.

"I never thought about attending Valdosta State when I was in high school," he said. "It wasn't an option."

"I considered the historically black colleges. But when the opportunity to attend VSC did present itself, I did."

In 1963, a group of concerned black citizens believed Valdosta State's doors should open to local black students.

They approached the school, and the doors were opened, Pierce said.

When asked why only two black students attended that first year, Pierce said the opportunity came late in the college-planning process.

"Some students did not want to attend
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Robert Pierce, the first black man to attend and graduate from Valdosta State University, talks with Pat Barrett and Pauline Tomblin after giving a lecture Wednesday afternoon at the university — Times Photo by Paul Leavy.

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school here or had already made plans to go to other schools," he said.

Pierce was interviewed by the college president before he was enrolled. In court, a group of white parents in Americus attempted to stop the black students' enrollment.

When school started that fall, Pierce and Ms. Thomas' names were on the rolls.

Pierce said he lived at home and worked while taking classes.

As for the white students' reaction to the black students, Pierce said it was neutral.

"We were just a curiosity to most of them. They wondered if we would persevere and make it through. It was the parents who were mostly opposed," Pierce said, adding that probably 99 percent of the white students had never attended classes with blacks before.

Pierce said he also learned that his segregated public education had been inadequate.

"I had done well throughout high school, graduating with honors, without really having to apply myself," he said.

"I wanted to go to college and finish it as quickly as I could, to get started on my career.

"... Once I started taking my college classes, I was really shocked at how I had to struggle to keep up with the course load," Pierce said.

"I came to the realization that I did not get as equal an education as my white peers. They were offered different courses in high school, such as advanced math, that weren't offered at my school."

It was these differences that Pierce made the focus of his two lectures at VSU Wednesday. He spoke of the 40th anniversary of the U.S. Supreme Court case of Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka. The landmark 1954 decision ruled that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional.

In time, this decision wiped away the "separate but equal" principle.

"Thirty years ago, I didn't feel like I had a whole lot of choices, but that has changed rapidly," he said.

"I now have a daughter who is a high school senior. She is trying to decide where to apply to college. And there are so many choices there today, just in applying for a school."