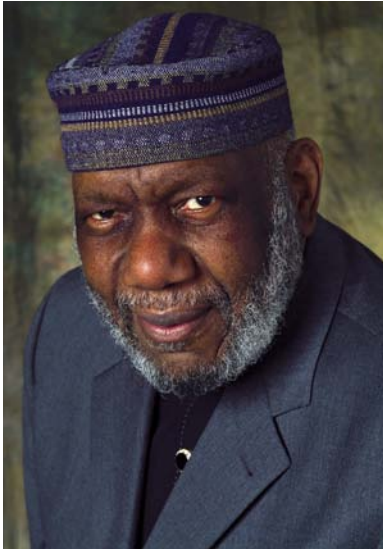


Spratlen Leaves Giant Legacy of Diversity



After *officially* retiring in 2002, Thaddeus Spratlen is *actually* retiring this year. Well, sort of. A professor of marketing at the Business School since 1972 and founding faculty director of the Business and Economic Development Program, his legacy is not one you walk away from easily.

Spratlen, the son of a Baptist minister, grew up in segregated small-town Tennessee. A promising student in the mid-1940s, he went to live with an older brother in Cleveland in search of the education that his hometown's under-funded all-black school could not provide. He graduated Central High School with honors. Kent State University proved too expensive, though, so Spratlen enlisted in the Army in 1948 and in 1952 earned his officer's commission. He served a year of combat duty in Korea, calling in artillery from dangerous forward positions.

“People seeing me coming 20 years later, by then wearing Dashikis and into the culture of the period, would have hardly believed that I was a military officer doing this kind of work,” Spratlen says. “It’s so out of character with what I’ve become associated with in my later years.”

His transformation may have begun the day he returned to civilian life. After serving in a racially integrated Army, he returned to a world still widely segregated. But Spratlen didn’t let it stand in his way. Newly married, he earned his undergraduate, masters (international economics) and doctoral (marketing) degrees at Ohio State University. In the early 1960s, the job market for an African American with a PhD was generally limited to traditionally black universities. But Spratlen became the second African American on the faculty of Western Washington University—the first in its department of business and economics.

“Very early on, I had a desire to work on, study and teach issues surrounding race and ethnicity,” he says. “I always taught mainstream business courses. But I was always moving toward a time when I could focus on social and economic issues dealing with race.”

Alongside the intros to marketing, Spratlen also taught a course called the Economics of Discrimination and helped create an ethnic studies program at Western Washington. He left his tenure, though, to take a position at UCLA’s Graduate School of Management in 1969. There he directed the Black Economists Development Project, providing mentoring to African American doctoral students. Soon after joining the UW Business School in 1972, he took on an advisory role to the newly formed Association of Black Business Students, and began working with his marketing classes to help minority owned businesses in Seattle’s Central Area.

“I had been trying for many years to extend the Business School resources and learning to these underserved communities of color, to try to help small, minority-owned businesses,” Spratlen says. “For 20 years it had to be done as class projects, independent study or through student organizations. And then came BEDP.”

The Business and Economic Development Program was founded in 1995, formalizing this work that Spratlen had been championing for decades. The original course he developed with David Gautschi has evolved into Multicultural Marketing and Urban Enterprise Development, the bedrock beneath the BEDP’s student consulting efforts that have created more than 500 jobs and spurred \$20 million in new revenues for Seattle’s minority owned small businesses.

Though Spratlen is finally handing over teaching duties, he is still planning to publish the consulting project text, and to write a history of the Business and Economic Development Center, as it was recently renamed. Appropriately, the Center’s future will forever be tied to Spratlen through the growing endowment fund that was named in his honor.

“We’ve come a long way as a society; there are a lot of things to take pride in,” he says. “But despite all this success, we still haven’t overcome biases based on race, color, gender and sexual orientation. That’s why championing diversity has to remain a conscious effort. It’s so easy to fall back into a pattern where individuals who are different are kept on the fringes.”

Spratlen was born into an imperfect world, but he’s spent a career doing something about it.

“What I would like to see is every business school having something like BEDC, because every community could benefit from what we are doing here,” he says. “I think we have a model that is workable in a lot of places.”

“And when that broad history is written, I’d like people to say, ‘Oh yeah, that was started at the University of Washington.’ That would give me great satisfaction.” □