

# Dover was among first to break down barriers

By Carlos Holmes  
Senior editor

DOVER — As one of the first black students to attend an integrated Dover High School in 1954, Marshall Arnell learned cultural diversity had ramifications not only in the classroom, but on the football field as well.

In a game that starkly contrasted the differences in racial sensibilities between Dover — among the first few schools in the state to integrate in 1954 — and the segregated Sussex County schools, Mr. Arnell learned the sometimes comical irony of racism.

Mr. Arnell — who is part black, part Filipino — now a retired educator, chuckles as he talks about a 1955 football game between Dover and Millsboro high schools.

A sophomore at the time, Mr. Arnell was put in the game in the fourth quarter. "We had to be winning, because a bunch of us on the bench got to go into the game."

But the young linebacker didn't even get to play a down.

"I'll never forget how the Millsboro players were looking over at us," Mr. Arnell said. "Then a few players started drifting over to their sidelines, and then the rest of the their team left the field."

Bernard E. Briggs, a Milford football coach who also worked as an official, was a referee that night. At age 86, he still remembers the incident vividly.

"I went over to the coach and said, 'What gives?'" he said. "The coach said the school board has

a policy that the team will not play against colored players. He said, 'I gotta do what they say.'"

C. Terry Jackson II, a white teammate of Mr. Arnell, said it was a painful experience for the team.

"It wasn't a black or white thing," he said. "It was a slap in the face of the team, when they wouldn't play."

Although Mr. Arnell was hurt and angry over Millsboro's refusal to play because of his skin color, he said the episode turned from surreal to comical.

"Later, I was in the shower and some of the Millsboro players came in to also take a shower," he said with a laugh. "They were willing to shower with me, but not play against me."

Mr. Jackson, a Dover resident, said when Dover High School desegregated its football team in 1955, most Downstate teams refused to play them. "We ended up playing teams in New Jersey, Wilmington and Maryland."

Following the landmark 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling in which the U.S. Supreme Court found segregated schools unconstitutional, Dover and Milford were the only schools to integrate immediately.

Milford integrated 11 "Negro" students without any forewarning to white parents, prompting a tense controversy which resulted in the eviction of the students less than one month after they began the 10th grade.

However, about 19 miles north, the Dover Special School District, as it was known at that time, had a relatively calm begin-

ning to desegregation.

Dr. Ruth M. Laws, whose daughter Cherritta was in the first black group to enroll at Dover High School, recalls that the rumblings toward integration began before the U.S. Supreme Court ruling, when Dover School Board candidate J. Leon Tarburton came seeking her support and vote.

"I told him it depended on where he stood on integration," said Dr. Laws, who, due to her position as the first black administrator at the state Department of Public Instruction, also stood among the most prominent African-Americans in the community at the time.

Dr. Laws said the board held a meeting with members of the black community that summer concerning the possibility of limited desegregation at the high school. The board then held a public meeting so the community could weigh in on the proposal.

About 400 people showed up at the meeting where district officials laid out their plan to begin limited integration of the high school. Students who had just graduated from the all-black Booker T. Washington Elementary School would be allowed to apply for admission, and if they passed an exam and agreed to enter the academic track (college preparatory) they would be accepted as Dover High School students.

A precocious 11-year-old named Cherritta Laws was the first black student to be interviewed. Cherritta said her parents were told to sit in a wait-



Staff photo/Carlos Holmes

**Cherritta L. Matthews and Marshall Arnell were the first African-American graduates from Dover High School, now Central Middle School, in 1958.**

ing room while she took a test. "I sensed that they were nervous, and they were astounded at the caliber of black student applying, especially at my age," she said.

Now known as Cherritta L. Matthews, she said as a child it was always understood that when integration came, she would be among the first blacks to enroll.

Ironically, Mrs. Matthews said opposition was most deeply felt from blacks working in area seg-

regated schools, most notably William Henry High School.

"There was some resentment from administrators and other teachers that we would be going to the white school," Mrs. Matthews said. "Some were afraid what would happen to their position."

At the beginning of the 1954 school year, 17 black students — nine boys and eight girls — enrolled in the ninth grade. Mr. Arnell said he walked to school that day and met the group of

new black students near the back of the building.

"I will never forget the stares we got from some of the students, but they weren't quite hateful," Mr. Arnell said. "But to their credit, there were a few students who came over and welcomed us."

Mr. Jackson said it was not that big a deal for most students.

"What was most remarkable about it was that it was unre-