

First black student earns honorary doctorate from UA

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Moments before she was to receive her latest recognition at the University of Alabama on Friday, Autherine Lucy Foster reflected on how her story and the Capstone's have intertwined for the past 60 years.

"I sat down last night, and when I thought about it, I was crying. The tears were just rolling down my eyes because it is so different and so unique for me to be able to come to such a university as this. That is a wonderful campus out there," Foster said.

Foster received an honorary doctorate of humane letters on Friday during the first of UA's five spring 2019 commencement ceremonies this weekend. It was the latest recognition for the 89-year-old, who was the first black student to attend the university.

She enrolled in 1956 after a federal court order allowed her into the then all-white school. She attended classes for three days before the UA board of trustees and administration chose to suspend her enrollment following violent protests and threats against her. She was rushed away from campus and the mobs who hounded her brief time there.

“The (experiences) are so different. And the difference is that the crowds here, I see laughing faces instead of frowning and displeased at my being here,” Foster said. “That is much better than seeing someone frowning as if they don’t want you here. That is quite a difference.”

Nearly a decade later, UA was successfully integrated when Vivian Malone and James Hood were admitted on June 11, 1963, despite Gov. George Wallace’s “Stand in the Schoolhouse Door” at Foster Auditorium. Malone later became the first black graduate of the university in 1965.

Foster finally got her first degree from UA 27 years ago. In the late 1980s, Foster’s dismissal was reversed and she re-enrolled, completing her graduate work for a master’s degree in elementary education in 1991. She waited until 1992 to graduate to share the moment with her daughter, who is also a UA alumna, according to UA.

“I’m just happy because all of them have had a taste of being at this university and studying something,” Foster said of her family, some of whom joined her Friday.

The honorary doctorate was the latest honor bestowed on Foster for her part in the historic desegregating of UA. UA recognized Foster in 2017 with a historic marker in front of Graves Hall which houses the college of education. The university also named the clock tower at Malone Hood Plaza after Foster.

As Foster was pushed in a wheelchair through the tunnel to the floor of Coleman Coliseum for the commencement ceremony on Friday, the leadership of the university and the UA System greeted her as they waited to proceed to the stage. The current generation of university leaders stopped to take photos and exchange greetings in the moments before the ceremony.

“I’m excited to be here again with you,” Trustee John England Jr. said.

Reflecting on the moment ahead of the ceremony, Foster said she struggled to put the feeling into words.

“I wish I could tell you ...” Foster said. “But anything that the university does, I glory in its mercy, so I feel elated — somewhat embarrassed — because I don’t feel exactly worthy for what I am getting, but I will thank them and act as if I am.”