Civil Rights Veteran at EMU

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Contributing Writer

Who could bring a hundred people to Lehman Auditorium on a snowy Saturday afternoon? This past Saturday it was James Meredith, a respected but somewhat controversial civil rights activist.

He spoke to the crowd about his vision for what the United States should be: a place where everyone is a first-class citizen. He focused specifically on issues for black men.

Meredith outlined three things that he believes must happen in order for black men to become equal citizens.

First, he said that because black men are the ones who are affected directly by the discrimination he described, they should be the ones to take the responsibility to overcome it. He comparing this with the American Revolution, in which the colonists brought about their own independence from the British.

Secondly, Meredith strongly believes that blacks will not rise to equal status until they master proper English. Doing so will open up abundant opportunities for change, as well as avenues for more effective communication.

Meredith's third point was that the United States must rework its justice system. He believes that because there are so many blacks in prison today, it is difficult for them to attain equal status. The prison system must begin to train prisoners to become productive citizens again.

He also addressed what he calls "the most important thing for the black race," what to do next.

He said that many black parents today do not tell their children about the discrimination they experienced in their own lives because they don't want to remember it. Because of that, many young blacks are unaware of what happened.

"Anyone who doesn’t understand their history is doomed to repeat it," he said.

Meredith stated that black parents must take the responsibility to educate their children, rather than just leaving it to the school system. He believes that "for every right, there's an offset of responsibility."

When asked his opinion on affirmative action, Meredith said, "I'm almost a total product of affirmative action."

He was among the first to be in desegregated military squadrons and technical schools. While stationed in Japan, he found that the way the Japanese viewed blacks depended almost completely on whether they had been influenced first by whites or by blacks. It was then that he realized that "segregation is man-made."