

# Blacks on white campuses: Penn State

by Hazel Trice Edney

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*(Last fall, white fraternity members at Auburn University in Alabama and the University of Mississippi demonstrated brazen racial insensitivity. Were these just isolated pranks that got out of hand or were the incidents indicative of deeper problems? NNPA Washington Correspondent Hazel Trice Edney embarked on a three-month investigation. This is the sixth in a series on her findings.)*

STATE COLLEGE, PA. (NNPA)—It's easy for Robin Hoecker to blend in on the campus of Penn State University with its white student population of 85.2 percent. A native of Monroeville, Pa., an upper-middle class white suburb of Pittsburgh, she describes herself as "an average suburban kid. We lived a pretty privileged lifestyle."

But Hoecker, a senior honor student majoring in international development, is anything but average. She demonstrated that last fall when she copyrighted a 219-page undergraduate thesis that includes a pictorial documentation of one of the most heated periods of Black protests in university history.

"The Black and White Be-

hind the Blue and White: The History of Black Protests at Penn State" captures this period of protests sparked by hate letters and death threats mailed to Black students two years ago. It also traces the cycle of Black protests on campus since 1948.

"I have always been really interested in social justice and not accepting things, the status quo, as being right," Hoecker explains of 45 of her photographs that were blown up to poster sizes and put on exhibit last spring. "I mean, you realize something is wrong."

Hoecker was taking a photojournalism class when the protests began with a silent march of more than 400 students around Beaver Stadium Oct. 21, 2000.

"I was interested anyway, but the reason I went with my camera was because I was kind of hoping to use it as a class assignment. But, then I just kept going."

During that same period, she said she noticed a photo of a Penn State protest from the 1960s on a poster in the Hetzel Union Building. "And then I started researching things on my own, and it just snowballed into this giant project."

As part of Penn State's honors college, 15 freshmen are chosen to participate in a program that

allows them to create their own major and requires them to write and defend a thesis by graduation. Hoecker created a major called international development, a combination of political science, economics, sociology and African studies. She decided to write her thesis on the history and pattern of Penn State protests.

It impressed Jeremy Cohen, chairman of the bachelor of philosophy degree program, who was her adviser for the project.

"I think Robin's work is groundbreaking. It's revolutionary," says Cohen. "The real value of any scholarly work is to have others benefit from it. It's no good if it's put in the closet," he says. "Robin's work makes available some important lessons. The importance is not to tell people what to think, but what to think about."

The thesis gives readers plenty to think about.

"In 1968, a Black student was called a 'nigger' and physically chased out of a nearby town. While many believe that such behavior is a thing of the past, Black students in 2001 continue to report similar occurrences. Some claim to have been called a nigger in broad daylight on campus," Hoecker writes.

Institutionalized racism can be just as bad, she writes.