

## **DR. RICHARD HARRIS**

Education and community service have been important throughout Harris' life. Harris' mother founded the South Madison Neighborhood Center in 1947 where he eventually became Executive Director in 1966. Since the 1970's Harris has been active as Chair of the South Madison Education Committee, Past Chair of the South Madison Educational Advocacy Committee, Chair of the Social Concerns Committee of Mt. Zion Baptist Church, and Founder of Black History Week, Inc. Harris is currently the Disabled Student Services Manager and Affirmative Action Officer at Madison Area Technical College.

Born and raised on Madison's South side, Harris never experienced discrimination until he reached high school. Harris realized that, "All the blacks I knew in Madison were working at Oscar Mayer, the UW Hospital as either orderlies or nurses' aides, or as janitors somewhere. No one was involved as a professional person." In high school, Harris recalls an incident where his white friends received jobs through a friend's uncle at the recreation department as referees or umpires. When Harris went to get a job, they told him that they were full. However, two weeks later, another white friend was able to get a job there.

After graduating from high school, Harris went on to receive a Bachelor of Science from the UW while volunteering at the South Madison Neighborhood Center. Shortly afterwards, Harris went to Chicago to work as a social worker at the Hyde Park Neighborhood Center and the Illinois Youth Commission while working toward his Master of Social Work at the University of Illinois at Chicago. It was in Chicago where Harris first saw a black police officer, black doctor, and had a black supervisor. Then, Harris "became cognizant of the fact that Madison is rough." Racism in employment continues to be an issue for Harris who states that "black people rarely get that position of employment in Madison where they have a large measure of responsibility, especially in the private sector. Entry level positions, no problem."

In 1966, Harris was called back to work as Director of the South Madison Neighborhood Center and soon afterwards was pursued by MATC. Harris started at MATC teaching sociology and establishing MATC's first program for disadvantaged students. During this time, Harris went through

a transition in not only his career path but in his education path as well. He decided to switch from social work to education and to pursue on a part-time basis a Ph.D. in Educational Administration.

Since the 1970's, Harris' interest in education has carried over into his work in various South Madison efforts. In the 1970's, Harris was part of a group that "initiated the first complaint against public schools based on gerrymandering of districts, closing schools, and in effect providing unequal educational opportunities for South Madison youngsters." The school closings were an attempt by the School Board to integrate the Madison Metropolitan School District by bussing African American youth into predominately white areas. In 1996, due to Harris' efforts, the Equal Opportunities Commission, and others' efforts were rewarded with a new middle school in South Madison to be named in honor of the late Reverend James C. Wright.

Issues such as instruction are also crucial to Harris. He is especially concerned with the stereotyping of children. He states that "Once a child is flagged, he or she is flagged into a nonacademic type of classroom environment. It used to be that children were categorized by the birds. There were Wrens, Robins, Cardinals, and Bluebirds. But, if you happened to be a Cardinal, the Cardinals were all nonachieving youngsters. Once you were flagged as a Cardinal in Kindergarten, you stayed there through 12th Grade." In discussing the issues facing minorities in the classroom, Harris states that, "we don't believe that children cannot learn because of social problems. It may have a factor but, some of the most outstanding and successful men and women who have come through any public school system have had some of the most disastrous backgrounds and yet, they blossomed in the school room."

Throughout his life in Madison, Harris has been a major contributor to the social and educational well-being of the entire community of Madison. Although African Americans have been making some gains, Harris believes there is a lot that remains undone. He states that, "Madison was ranked #1 by *Money* magazine last month. It is obvious to me and many blacks that the one barometer that they did not measure was racism. In the area of employment, economic expansion, and housing, Madison is an extremely rough situation for black people." Harris states that he will continue to address all of the "enormous aspects of racism in this community" as Chair of the Social Concerns Committee at Mt. Zion Baptist Church and as a member of the South Madison Education Committee.