

# 'Try Harder' Withers Race Tensions

By MIKE NIEMANN

About a year ago, Ron Snead was in a Big Rapids jail, his car turned over and destroyed by an angry mob of white students, his future as a college student in doubt.

Vicious racial fighting had rocked the campus of Ferris State College and Snead, as president of the local NAACP, was a special target of militant whites. He was one of only 300 blacks at Ferris, which then had a 7,000-plus enrollment. Nearly all-white Big Rapids, a conservative community located many miles from urban concentrations of Negroes, seemed to offer no more security than the campus.

**SNEAD AND OTHER** blacks talked seriously of leaving Ferris to seek their college education in a safer clime. Disorderly conduct charges against Snead were dropped, his insurance company paid for his car and he was ready to go.

Last week, after almost winning election as president of the Ferris student government, Snead was appointed administrative vice president of that body, a very important position. He has a desk, a secretary and "the university president's ear."

The turnabout could hardly have been more dramatic, but Snead says it came only after a year of effort by both black and white students, the school administration and faculty members and the townspeople of Big Rapids.

Instead of walking out on Ferris last May, Snead and most other blacks agreed to "give it one more try."

Student leaders, including Snead, hastily organized a "racial peace" campaign

tions Committee, composed of eight faculty members and four students, was formed. Each dormitory formed a Human Relations Committee. So did Big Rapids. When the students returned to school last fall, the committees were ready.

"THE DORM committees dealt strictly with black and white problems and met once a week," Snead said. "Any time

any flareups came up, I or other student leaders would go and talk to the committees."

Each month, the All-College Committee reviewed the actions of the dormitory groups.

By this spring, things had improved so remarkably that Snead felt a black could become president of the student body and he campaigned for that office. He came in third, only 45 votes out of the top spot, and

the second place winner lost by only 19 votes.

The new president, Robert Geha, realizing he had much less than a mandate from the voters, brought all factions into student government. Snead's newly created position is designed as a direct liaison between students and administration.

Snead, who makes his home in Grand Rapids, is extremely

proud of what was accomplished at Ferris in the last year, although he realizes much more needs to be done before the roots of racial harmony are deep enough to be unshakable.

His explanation of the turnabout at Ferris is simple, to the point, and, he feels, the key to success in the future: "People up here are trying harder this year; they're more open minded."

especially those from unions traditionally closed to Negroes, usually have been less liberal in their racial views than some other segments of the population.

Ferris is also a "second-chance" school where many who couldn't or wouldn't keep up elsewhere have transferred, and this perhaps increases the number of troublemakers.

For these two reasons, Ferris may not have an outstanding academic image. But like most images, this one is not what it seems. Scannel points out that, since there is no graduate program diverting teacher interest, good teaching techniques receive more emphasis than some other schools. And, because the administration is aware that many of the students don't have a solid background for college, good counseling and psychological testing are provided.

But for a black student, the good teaching and counseling have one disadvantage—they are virtually lily-white. For someone as bright as Snead, who carries a B average, this might not matter too much. But for the black student who may be the first in his family ever to go beyond high school and whose total previous academic experience has been in nearly all-black ghetto schools, the stark whiteness of Ferris and Big Rapids can be frightening.

"They come up here and there's no one to identify with," Snead points out.

other black militants here but he feels he has little in common with them. And he estimates that only about 25 of the 300 Negroes at Ferris could be labeled militant. Though much less an authority on the nearly 7,000 whites at the school, he estimates that only 100 are white militants.

Snead came to Ferris in January of 1968, after batting around in a variety of jobs and picking up some college credits at Junior College.

Until last winter, he shrugged off the occasional racial slurs because, "My dad taught me never to lean back on this business of 'They did it to me because I'm black'."

Some incidents rankled though: like being refused service in restaurants because his wife—he has been married eight years and has two children—is so light-skinned she was mistaken for a white woman.

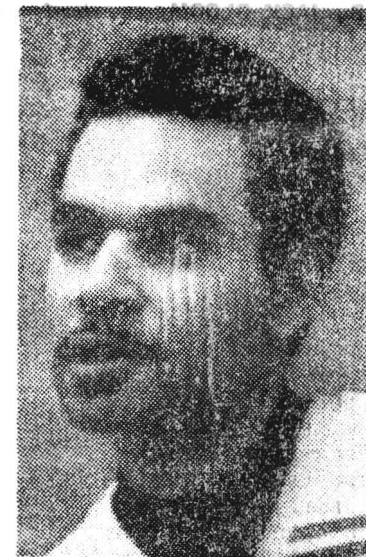
But the state police handling of the last racial disturbance May 20 has him thoroughly disgusted. When police came on campus to break up bottle throwing between blacks and whites, they formed a line and marched toward the blacks.

"And on top of that," he said, "the white students followed behind, lobbing bottles at us over the line of cops."

When Snead was arrested, he gave his car keys to a state trooper and asked that the auto be moved out of harm's



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way. The troopers neither moved the car nor tried to protect it, Snead says, and stood by as white students rolled it over.

But these complaints aren't playing a large part in Snead's thinking this week. He's too busy making one last go at racial harmony.