

Civil rights activism 'alive and well' among students

By Ernie Suggs
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Alisha Thomas had just walked off the steps of the Georgia Capitol, where she had stirred up a group of about 50 college students, when someone asked her how far she was willing to go for a cause.

"They asked me if I am willing to die for what I believe in and I said, yes," said Thomas, a 21-year-old senior at Spelman College. "Medgar Evers died for his beliefs. Martin Luther King died for his beliefs. Why shouldn't we be willing to sacrifice for what we believe in?"

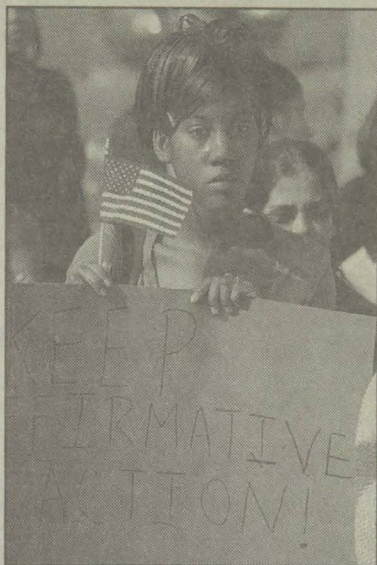
College students, particularly African-Americans, definitely have had opportunities to take a stand over the last few months. In Georgia, there have been challenges to affirmative action programs that could affect hiring, education and financial aid; a brewing battle over whether the state flag should bear symbols of the Confederacy; John Rocker's comments; and the shooting of Amadou Diallo in New York.

"At this moment, activism seems to be alive and well," said Tobe Johnson, chairman of the Morehouse College Department of Criminal Justice. "There are things that are stimulating them."

Khalid Salaam, a reporter for the Clark Atlanta University newspaper, *The Panther*, said some students have begun speaking out on issues that relate to the general student population. Salaam said when issues arise, students use several outlets for expressing views — including marches, rallies and student-controlled media. "I think we can, as students, do anything we want to do," said Salaam, 24. "We can actually have opinions that can make a difference. Why not here and now?"

But while students have been making noise recently, Thomas still senses apathy.

Thomas, a Miami native, is



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Taking a stand: Nicole Chisholm, a sophomore at Georgia State University, listens to a speaker while holding her sign during a recent student rally for affirmative action.

president of Georgia's youth and college divisions of the NAACP and the Spelman chapter of the NAACP. She said that while there are more than 500 paid members of the NAACP at Spelman, only about 15 attend meetings.

"I thought there was something wrong with what we were doing, but I think we are dealing with a lot of apathy. On the other hand, I choose not to be fooled by apathy," Thomas said. "When you look at the civil rights movement, I find it hard to believe that everyone was involved. Just like then, there are only a few people who are not afraid. I am one and not everybody can be in the Talented Tenth."

Johnson, who has taught at Morehouse since 1958, said it is hard to determine when or if a movement will happen. And when one does, it usually starts small and slow.

"The civil rights movement didn't start out big," Johnson said. "When a social movement gets under way, there is no way to

predict what is going to happen."

One of the main issues stirring students now appears to be the state flag. The NAACP has called for a boycott of South Carolina because the Confederate flag flies above the Statehouse.

In 1956, Georgia lawmakers changed the state flag to include symbols of the Confederacy. According to newspaper accounts at that time, as well as local historians, the move was made in response to efforts to integrate public schools.

Supporters of the Confederate flag say the flag was changed as a salute to the Confederate war dead.

"I think it needs to come down," said Stephanie Harrison, a sophomore at Georgia State University. "We are one nation now and we only need one flag. That flag represents a separate way of life, and separatism is not what [a flag] is supposed to stand for."

It would take legislative action to change the flag, and Gov. Roy Barnes said the flag isn't an issue at this time.

"I think the whole thing with the flag is outrageous," said Salaam, originally from Philadelphia. "Here in Georgia, our governor is saying it isn't an issue, but he is saying that because he doesn't feel the resentment that black people do."

Thomas had just left an anti-John Rocker rally on her way to a campaign speech by Vice President Al Gore, who is seeking the Democratic presidential nomination. She said it is going to be up to students to be more vigilant in demanding social change.

"Every person is born into the world to do something unique and something distinctive, and if he or she does not do it, it will never be done," said Thomas, quoting Benjamin Mays, the former president of Morehouse College and the first black president of Atlanta's school board. "It is my purpose in life to make a difference."