

Clark Atlanta Alumnus Pens New Novel

Contributed by Alexis J. Alexander - Black College Wire
Monday, 08 October 2007

Author says "First Semester" is 50-50 fact and fiction

Midterm exams, political rallies, sporting events and parties are a few of the many events college students will encounter. For Cecil Cross, an entrepreneur, journalist, lecturer and budding author, his college experiences have been developed into his first novel.

The 24- year-old mass communications graduate of Clark Atlanta University released his "First Semester" (Kimani TRU) in August.

A combination of fiction and Cross's own academic and personal experiences were the inspiration for James "J.D." Dawson, the main character in the novel. The book chronicles Dawson, an 18 year-old freshman student from Oakland, Calif. who attends fictitious University of Atlanta, a historically black university in Georgia.

"The book is fifty-fifty; it is fiction based on nonfiction," Cross said in a recent interview. "We [he and Dawson] had some of the same experiences."

Dawson grew up meagerly and decided to leave a life of violence to attend college 3,000 miles from his home, in order to better himself. Because of mistakes he made early in his first semester of college such as extensive partying, arriving late to class, women and a lack of study habits, Dawson has to learn to grow up -- especially if he wants to date his new tutor, Katrina Turner.

"I chose to focus on the first semester because the world says students will never get a second first semester," Cross said. The experiences of college life -- studying, partying, lack of parental guidance and newfound freedom -- are crucial to the rest of one's college career.

Cross said the idea behind "First Semester" began after watching the 1988 Spike Lee film, School Daze. Shortly thereafter, Cross said he was in the cafe at school and began writing the story on his laptop.

"I realized that there has not been a real depiction of college life since then. The lifestyle of college has since changed and things are different now," he said. "I've stood in lines, had a late refund check, experienced late nights, lived in the dorm, had drama," he said. "This provided me with enough material to write."

It took Cross a year and a half to complete the work itself.

"It's a long process," he said. "And I feared rejection."

Cross said he completed the work in 2004, met an agent that same year, the book went through editing in 2005, a book deal was given in 2006 and then was released in 2007.

"'First Semester' is a very good read and it flows well. It shows [Dawson] making adjustments during his matriculation in college," said Kevin Cottrell, reader of the work and employee of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. "I think junior and senior high school students should read it also because of what their perceptions of college may be. Some students choose colleges for the wrong reasons and they need to know things can arise."

To promote the book, Cross has had signings in Atlanta, Seattle and Las Vegas. He has also begun an HBCU Campus Tour with stops at Spelman, Morehouse and Stillman Colleges, Clark Atlanta, Florida A&M, Hampton and Howard Universities.

"The book has been well received by the readers who have purchased it," said Tareia Williams, publicist for Cross. People are intrigued that they can go back to their first semester and envision the scenarios.

Cross admits that his journalism career began before his college tenure. He said that his grandmother, a former professor at Southern, encouraged him, his sister and cousins to write in journals.

"In 1993 we went on a college tour where we visited over 25 HBCUs and over 20 Ivy League and mainstream schools," he said. "She made us keep a journal, which I still have today. I love to write and I knew then I wanted to be a journalist."

The Seattle native and former sports editor of the Panther newspaper at Clark Atlanta is also is editor-in-chief and co-owner of LOOK, Love Of Our Kind magazine, which he started his junior year in college. LOOK is distributed to more than 160 college campuses nationwide, including 118 historically black colleges and universities.

Cross has written for publications such as XXL, Vibe, Slam, Complex and Upscale, The Seattle Times, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, journalism institutes with the New York Times and Los Angeles Times and has appeared on CNN as a guest panelist at the National Association of Black Journalist National Convention, in which the topic was "Entrepreneurship in Journalism."

Due to his accomplishments, Cross was invited last year to speak at the freshman orientation at Clark Atlanta University, Spelman and Morehouse Colleges, speaking to over 1,200 students about how to maximize their experiences and utilize available resources.

His advice to students and aspiring authors: "Use your resources. Things won't always be perfect, but don't let that keep you from getting started," Cross said. "Get a mentor --find someone who is doing exactly what you want to do and network. Things will eventually come together."

A sequel and screenplay to First Semester, in addition to other book and script ideas are Cross's further aspirations.

"I am extremely blessed," he said. "I hope to forge a relationship with readers for a long time."

Alexis J. Alexander, a student at Southern University, writes for the Southern Digest. To comment, e-mail Black College

Wire.

Posted October 08, 2007