

**Recollections from Dr. Plummer,
A former student of Dr. Poussaint**

The year was 1968. America was experiencing social and political turmoil. The country seemed to be having a nervous break down, with one traumatic event followed by another:

- 1) In April, Martin Luther King was assassinated, 130 cities burned in protest;
- 2) In June, Robert Kennedy, the political hope for change, was assassinated;
- 3) Violent protests against the unpopular Vietnam War became a nightly TV event;
- 4) The rise of the angry and combative Black Power movement began to manifest itself in communities of color, across the U.S.; and
- 5) Two Black sprinters gave the Black Power salute at the Mexico City Olympics.

Some believed that these cultural and political upheavals had reached a critical mass and would surely undermine America's social order. It was during these uncertain and tumultuous times that I entered Harvard, as one of the first Black students, who was an unknowing participant in Harvard's first attempt at meaningful diversity. For Harvard, it was a bold and courageous undertaking.

Of my countless interactions with Dr. Poussaint during my tenure at Harvard medical and dental schools, there were two instances where my relationship with him was instrumental in me completing my academic career. The first occurred during the second week on campus. It was lunch time and I was at my locker, changing books in preparation for afternoon classes. I was approached by several first-year black medical students. Their facial expressions telegraphed emotional stress and fear. They said that they had heard from others that two of our chemistry professors were overheard referring to the 16 black freshman students as "black panthers". For those of you who are younger, I am not referring to the movie. The Black Panther Party was a militant political organization founded in the late 60's. The party's original purpose was to patrol Black neighborhoods to protect them from acts of police brutality. As we stood in front of my locker, we were all having painful flashbacks of our southern experiences- segregation, discrimination, racism, political and economic retaliation. We thought Harvard would be different. I was ready to pack up and go home. After a quick huddle with this mild mannered,

soft spoken man, Dr. Pouissant assured us that everything would be fine and that we would be treated fairly and with respect. We desperately needed that reassurance.

The second incidence occurred during my second year. My family and I had experienced a family tragedy. Dr. Pouissant's counseling was fundamental to my emotional and psychological recovery and healing.

Dr. Pouissant was also with us in our lobbying efforts with HMS/HSDM to increase the number of Hispanic students.

Thank you, Dr. Pouissant. I don't know how you did it. I don't know how you managed your own life, family, academic responsibilities and simultaneously was always there for us – always providing excellent counseling, love, encouragement, hope, support and a receptive heart. You, and only you, carried the weight of all of us on your two shoulders. That was miraculous.

HMS's diversity is Dr. Pouissant's baby, and your baby is now 50 years old. It is now our duty and responsibility to ensure that your legacy – an unrelenting push to foster diversity at HMS/HSDM - continues as you transition to the next chapter of your life. Thank you, Harvard Medical School, for sharing Dr. Pouissant with us.

Finally, while the medical school had Dr. Pouissant, the dental school had Dean Paul Goldhaber and Dr. James Mulvihill. While Dean Goldhaber ensured that appropriate resources were available, Dr. Mulvihill was our diversity champion and his contributions to the Dental School's 50 years of diversity must be acknowledged. He cultivated an atmosphere at the Dental School that made us feel welcomed and part of the school community. I would like to thank Dr. Mulvihill, for his commitment and contributions to diversity.