

'Mouth of the South' Accepts Role Model Rap

J.B. BLOSSER BITTNER

Published: Sun, May 2, 1999 12:00 AM

<https://newsok.com/article/2651958/mouth-of-the-south-accepts-role-model-rap>

ALVA - There's more to the Mouth of the South than meets the ear.

Willie Spears, 21, is a vocal Florida junior studying mass communications and playing football at Northwestern Oklahoma State University. Spears wise-cracked and rapped his way to local prominence on the college radio station his first two years here. This spring he wrote and produced his own rap compact disc, "Willie Spears is the Mouth of the South." He's now thinking about producing a video.

Spears is gregarious, outgoing, verbal and black. In multicultural Panama City where Spears grew up, ethnic background isn't particularly significant. When Spears gazes around homogenous northwest Oklahoma, he is well aware it is.

In Alva, Spears finds himself in a place where local contact with blacks virtually is limited to the college campus or the prison outside town.

"I look around my classes and I'm the only black face there," he said. Not entirely. Northwestern has a handful of black students, including athletes and some Africans.

Still, Spears allows the ethnic ratio to put him in a representative position.

"If you have one black person in speech class and he doesn't speak well, people think black people don't speak well," he said. "Black people here don't realize that what they do and what people see about drugs and guns on TV is all some people know. One person doesn't represent a whole culture, but in some ways you do."

Spears doesn't talk a lot about racism. He's been chastised at times for "being soft" on those whose subtle snubs raise bigotry's head but aren't blatant enough to bring the entire animal out of the water.

He mentions a woman at the local discount store. Her job is to greet customers at the front door. When Spears approaches, she turns away and avoids eye contact.

"It's her job to greet me, but I don't let it ruin my day," he said.

Ironically, as Spears espouses his upbeat take on inequity, a white man interrupts the conversation to ask directions - not from Spears, the college student at home on campus, but from the visiting older white woman who is his partner in conversation.

The stranger turns his back to Spears, yet it is Spears who ultimately not only volunteers the information but goes to a door and points the way.

Too, while Spears talks, a television overhead provides running commentary from reporters outside Denver, Colo., where early reports indicate the shootings of dozens of people may have been racially motivated.

In his reflective way, Spears later wonders whether the news coverage would have been so intense had the school been in the inner city where student populations are predominantly black. It's happened in Los Angeles and Chicago, his friends tell him, and the national news crews never came.

"You're supposed to say, 'Willie, become a journalist and change that,'" he said.

"I might not be a changer," Spears said.

What he will be, Spears has not decided. What he strives not to be is a clam in a bucket, an analogy once shared by a black teacher.

"She said black people are like clams in a bucket - when one tries to climb out of the bucket," Spears said, "The rest pull him back down instead of them all giving that guy a boost. With that boost he could get out and then toss in a string and pull the others out."

To Willie Spears, divine blessings and strong parental support widen the space between him and that bucket.

"I know guys who are better athletes than I am who are sitting at home on their couch," he said. "I could be the one at home with two kids instead of the one in college."

But he is not - because of choices he has made and because others before him made their way to Northwestern and counseled him to come along. In turn, Spears informally counsels others, among them an athletic younger cousin.

"His mother was so fast in school she fell down in a race, got up and brushed herself off and still came in second - it was in all the newspapers," Spears said. "Now she's 22 years old, she has four kids, and she's in jail."

"I tell him, 'You get the grades and can't nobody stop you,'" Spears said. "He believes he can do anything. I'm the only person he knows who went to college. Who else is he going to believe?"

It's not about being black, Spears said. It's about reaching out, what he calls "the unphysical hug." At Northwestern, where he is a black urban man among a sea of white rural faces, Spears said those hugs come from instructors eager to help him pass English. And friends who sang, designed, co-wrote and provided studio time to help him make his CD, which he sells through the local movie theater and the campus bookstore.

"If we don't help each other - black, white, football players, students, peers - who's going to help us?" Spears said. "We've got to help each other. You want somebody to be there. That's why there are gangs. Negative affection is better than none at all. That's a sad part of society."

"I'm saying don't be naive and get run over," he said. "But we've got to help each other out."

Willie Spears just might be a changer.