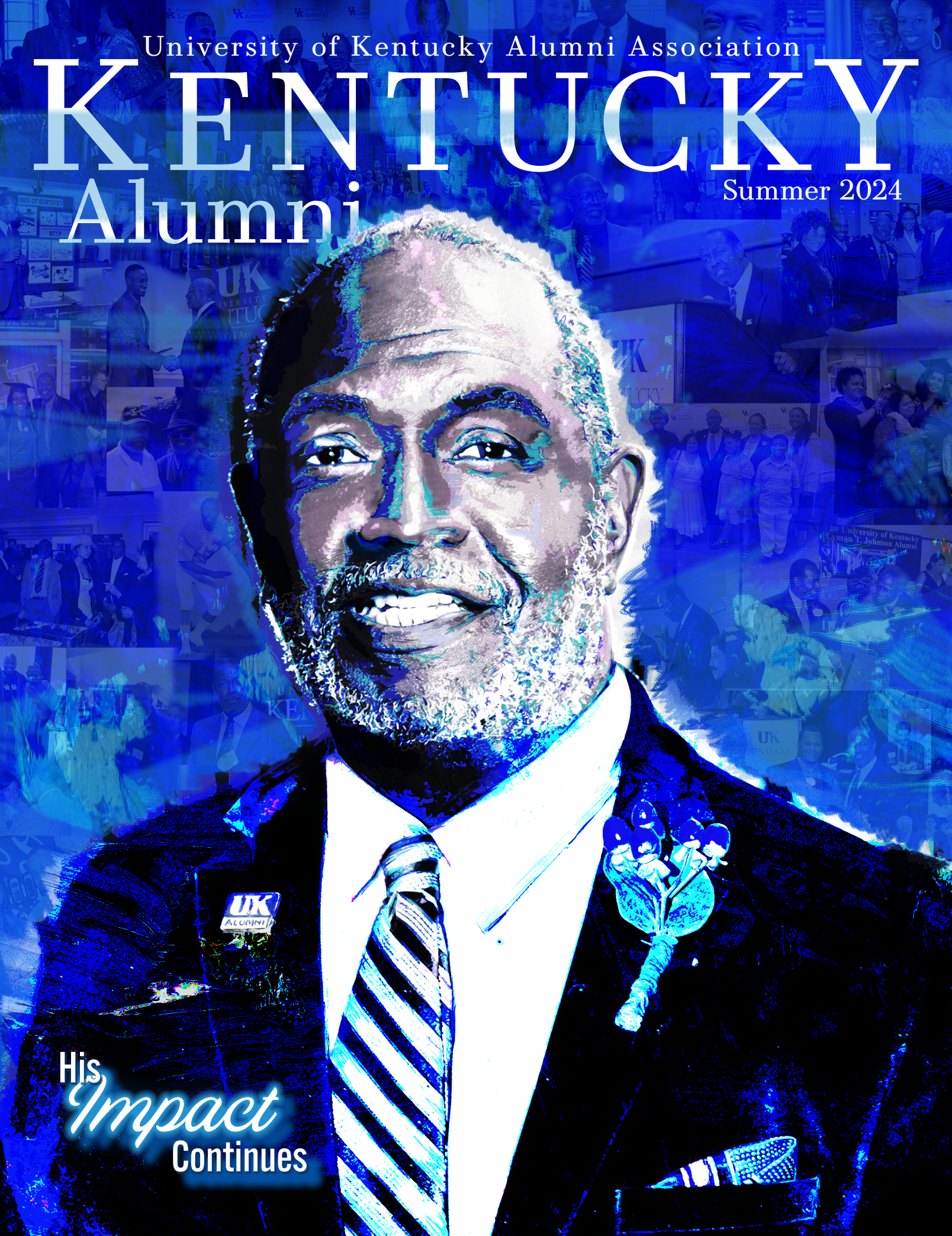
University of Kentucky Alumni Association

KENTUCKY Alumni

Summer 2024



His *Impact* Continues

A Visionary, an Encourager, a man with a Noble Legacy



Photo by Pete Comparoni

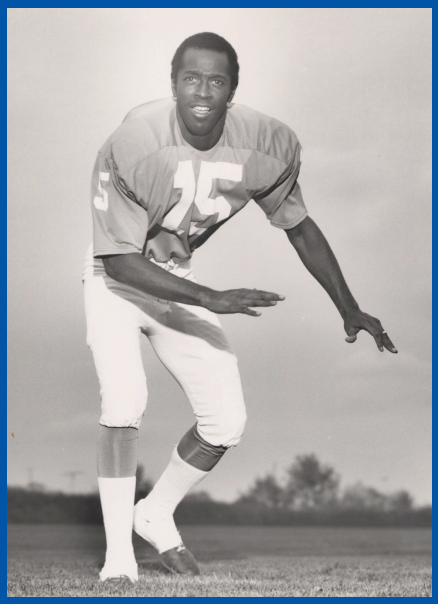
Buzz Burnam speaking at a Black History Month social media series.

By Sally Scherer

The University of Kentucky is commemorating the 75th anniversary of its desegregation this year with programming and events.
As part of that commemoration, we're sharing our story about Emmett P. "Buzz" Burnam who, for nearly 40 years, helped recruit minority students to UK. Burnam impacted the lives of thousands of students in Kentucky and beyond by encouraging them to attend the University of Kentucky and then by helping them achieve their goals once they got here.



One of the bright spots for UK's defense Saturday was sophomore halfback Buzz Burnham. The Clark County product started his first game as a Wildcat and intercepted one pass in Kentucky's loss to North Carolina.



Photos from ExploreUK

A defensive back, Buzz Burnam came to UK in 1969 as one of its first Black football players. He decided to attend UK because he knew some of the coaches and some of the other Black players. His team was the last team to play at Stoll Field.

The tribute was so touching it brought tears to his eyes.

The young woman spoke at the 2023 Black Alumni Reunion recognition dinner honoring Emmett P. "Buzz" Burnam '74 '75 ED for his commitment to the University of Kentucky, including all the years he worked as an academic recruiter for the university. She popped up from the audience, went to the microphone and told her story.

And of the thousands of students he helped recruit over the years, he remembered her.

"She had the desire, and I could work with a student with a desire," he recalled of the Lexington high school student.

"She wanted to come to UK. She didn't have the best test scores, but we wrote letters of support and appealed to the people we could because I knew she was a keeper. She was teachable. She wanted to go to UK. She hounded me about it," he said with a laugh.

And, thanks to the hard work of Burnam and others, she did. And she graduated with two degrees in 2002 from the College of Arts & Sciences.

"I remember she had a child and she wanted to get in school because it was the only way she could help her child. She was admitted and she made the most of it. She was a winner. You never know how it impacts kids when you go to bat for them, but she told us about it at the dinner. It just brought tears to my eyes."

Dr. Christopher Chance '10 AFE, '14 DEN was a student at Lexington's Paul Laurence Dunbar High School when he met Burnam. They talked about the possibility of Chance, now the owner of a pediatric dentist practice in Houston, Texas, attending UK. Chance remembers how Burnam made him feel.

"I felt like he'd be an advocate for me," said Chance, a 2023 winner of UK's Lyman T. Johnson Torch of Excellence Award. "He was just so easy to talk with and to connect to. From a young, Black male perspective, it was a no brainer that I'd go to UK. I felt comfortable with him."

Chance and the young woman are just two of thousands of students Burnam brought to UK to help reach their educational dreams. Burnam served 42 years at UK with 35 years as the director for diversity undergraduate student recruitment.

UK's Black enrollment grew exponentially in 2009-2010 with a record enrollment of 404 first-year Black freshmen. By 2016, 626 Black freshmen enrolled making up 12% of the freshmen class.

But there were less than 50 minority students on campus when Burnam started his freshman year.

In 1969, Burnam was one of six Black football players recruited to play for UK. The news of the number of Black athletes – the largest recruited at UK – made national magazines "Jet" and "Ebony," Burnam said.

The six weren't the first, though. Nate Northington and Greg Page were the university's first two Black scholarship athletes in 1966 and Wilbur Hackett and Houston Hogg were recruited in 1967. The UK football pioneers are honored in a statue at Kroger Field.

Tragically, during Page's sophomore season in 1967, he suffered a neck injury at football practice. He died six weeks later. In 1968, no Black football athletes came to UK. Burnam attributes that to the rumor that some of the Black community believed UK killed Page.

"And people said, 'And they'll kill you, too.' That was real talk. Most people said, 'boy, you're crazy.'"

But Burnam wasn't swayed. His parents said the decision was up to him. He talked with some of the other Black UK football players and recruits – Darryl Bishop, Carey Eaves, Bill Denny and Cecil "Bad News" Bowens and Arvel Carroll – and decided to attend UK.

"You know when you're 17 and 18 you think you're invincible. We (the other Black players recruited in 1969) got together and decided to come to UK. It was up to us to make a difference at UK," Burnam said.

The deck was stacked against them, Burnam said. The Black athletes didn't get many breaks, he said. Some people on campus weren't friendly. Some students in his dormitory weren't exactly welcoming. Insults were hurled, names were called.

"But we just sucked it up," Burnam said. "Our salvation was playing on the football field. That's where we got our relief. We showed them what we could do on the football field."

A defensive back from Winchester, Kentucky, Burnam played football and was also involved with the Black Student Union, Kappa Alpha Psi and the Black Voices choir. Those experiences turned what could have been a difficult college experience into something Burnam is still grateful for.

"I had a good experience at UK," he said during a recent interview. "I put up with some stuff, but nothing that affected my success on campus."

After graduation, Burnam made a couple of career stops, including with the local Urban League office, before being hired into a federal program at UK that focused on recruiting minority and rural students into healthcare professions. He worked in the Health Careers Opportunity Program from 1978-1985. Then Jerry Stevens, the director of the office of minority student affairs, called Burnam and asked if he was interested in helping with a program to recruit minority students.

The job required a lot of travel, mostly in Kentucky and nearby states in areas with large Black populations, and Burnam loved it, he said. His friendly personality and encouraging attitude won over a lot of students, many of whom told him that no one had ever approached them about attending college before his visit to their school.

In the 2023 recognition dinner video about Burnam, Michael Eaves, '94 CI graduate, an ESPN "SportsCenter" anchor and Kentucky native, remembered Burnam saying that if not for Burnam, Eaves wouldn't be where he is today.

"He was the main reason so many of us went to UK, and stayed there," he said. "His impact is immeasurable."

Geoff Young '03 AS and his wife Shnieka Johnson '03 AFE met Burnam in 1999 and remember his influence on them, too. The couple reminisced in the 2023 award dinner tribute video. Young, an attorney at Reed Smith and Johnson, a teacher at New York City's Calhoun school, said Burnam was an "important and gracious" mentor and the



Left: Buzz Burnam was hired by UK to recruit students into health-related careers through the federally funded Health Careers Opportunity Program. Right: Buzz Burnam's commitment to UK continues today. He's an active member of the Lyman T. Johnson African American Alumni Group and is a regular attendee of UK Alumni Association events. And he's still talking with UK students, offering advice and help.

Photo submitted.

couple thanked Burnam for "rooting" for them during their college years.

Burnam said his job wasn't that different from other recruiters. He just had a specific focus.

"I'd ask them (minority high school students) what they wanted to do and then I tried to determine if UK had what they wanted. And UK did. We had a business school, a medical school. Then I'd invite them to come on campus and check it out," he said. He credits the on-campus recruitment event, "Come See for Yourself," as a major turning point in his recruitment work. The event was held yearly beginning in 1992.

"We'd set up an event and the high school student could meet other Black students, we had a college fair so they could talk with the colleges, we talked about scholarships. And I'd tell them, 'You can't get a scholarship if you don't apply'," he said.

"We'd have nice meals and we'd tour the campus. In the early years we had 400 students at 'Come See for Yourself.' Then, one year we had 5,000. The number of minority students enrolling just kept going up."

Also offered was a six-week summer program for freshmen where minority students could come to campus and take classes, giving them an early start on their college career.

"They stayed in college dorms with air conditioning and carpet and had three meals a day and earned college credits. It was a huge selling point to get students to UK. We were successful," Burnam remembered.

Though he retired several years ago, he's still informally recruiting. At his church, Greater New Hope Christian Center, Burnam still talks with the young people about what recruiters are looking for and encourages them to give UK a look.

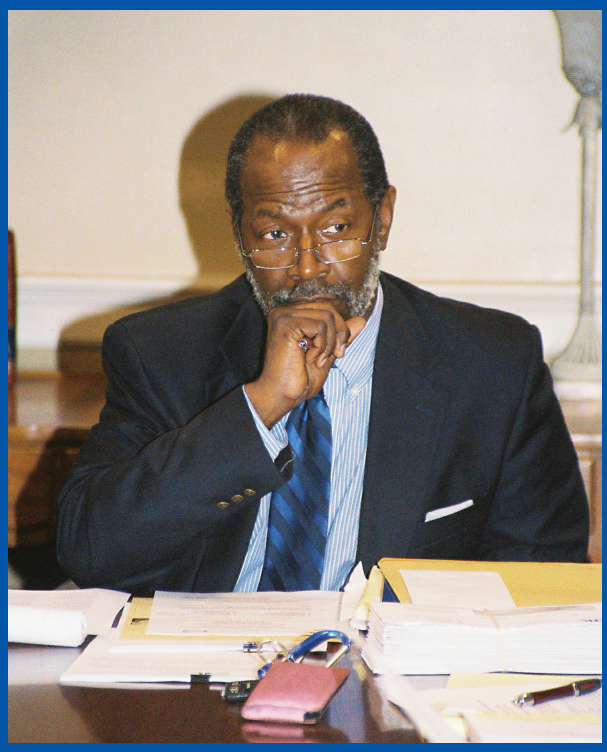
And he's still involved at his alma mater. He is the former president of the Lyman T. Johnson UK Alumni African American Constituent Group and former member of the UK Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society. He has received the UK Alumni Association Distinguished Service Award, the YMCA Adult Achiever of the Year Award and the Louisville LEEPS Program's Community Partner of the Year Award.

Burnam opened the doors of opportunity for Danny Murphy, senior assistant dean of community engagement and operations at the UK College of Law, and his wife Fayette District Court Judge Melissa Moore Murphy.

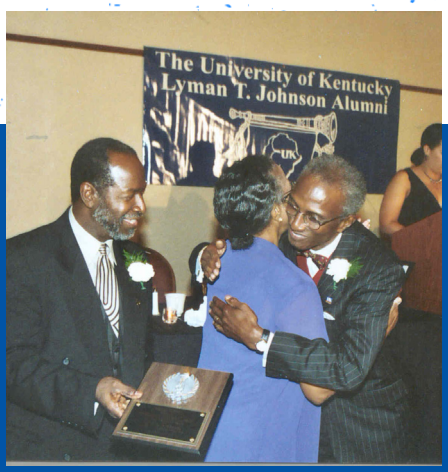
Danny Murphy '93 AS, '98 LAW said he owed his career and his college education to Burnam. As a student at Anderson County High School, Danny Murphy dreamed of attending UK. He was active and engaged in high school serving as class president.







Photos by UK Alumni Association









"It was my goal since I was 14," he said. "But I didn't know how to make that happen. My family situation didn't afford that opportunity to me. They didn't know how to get me there."

Fortunately, a family member encountered Burnam and mentioned Danny Murphy to him. Burnam reached out and told him that he'd help him get into UK.

"He opened the door for me, and I received scholarship money. Sending me to UK was not something that was ever possible for my parents," Danny remembers. He was the first person in his family to attend college. Melissa Moore Murphy '98 AS, '01 LAW was a student at Louisville's Atherton High School when Burnam helped her along a similar path. The couple's daughter is now a UK student.

"I remember feeling like I was part of something special at UK," recalls Danny. "Buzz encouraged all of us. He made us feel special. He is kind and caring and he made me believe I could achieve what I wanted to do.

"Because of Buzz, I'm doing the work I do. I want to give back, just like Buzz did." ■



Buzz Burnam served the University of Kentucky in a variety of leadership roles for more than 40 years. During his years of service, he was a champion for student success and many students and graduates say the impact Burnam had on them changed their lives.

Photos submitted and UK Alumni Association



AWARD RECIPIENT IN HIS IMAGE

The University of Kentucky Office for Institutional Diversity awarded Cassandra Jean Johnson '96 '97 SW with the Emmett P. "Buzz" Burnam Inclusive Excellence and Expansion Impact Award at the second annual Black Alumni Reunion in April.

This award is given to someone who emulates the spirit of Burnam. Johnson, a Lexington native, was influenced by Burnam's guidance during her high school years, which led her to choose UK over her initial preferences. This pivotal decision set the course for her successful academic and professional journey.

"I am so excited and so humbled," Johnson said the night of the awards ceremony. "There is no greater honor than to be in the ranks of Buzz Burnam who has made such an important contribution to my life as a student and an employee, and in such in impactful way."

Throughout her time at UK, she actively engaged in student organizations and support services, fostering her commitment to helping others succeed.

Johnson was a faculty member at Berea College, where she excelled in student recruitment and support initiatives. In 2001, she transitioned to her current role as program counselor/advisor at Student Support Services at UK, under the mentorship of Lydia Wims. She has dedicated herself to assisting first-generation, low-income, disabled, nontraditional and transfer students, providing guidance in academic, career and personal matters. She has also been instrumental in coordinating peer mentoring programs and educational enrichment initiatives.

Beyond her professional duties, Johnson is an active member of the Kentucky Association of Educational Opportunity and Program Personnel and the Southeastern Association of Educational Opportunity and Program Personnel, advocating for underrepresented college students. ■



The Emmett P. "Buzz" Burnam Inclusive Excellence and Expansion Impact Award recognizes individuals who create a community of belonging where they live and work. Buzz Burnam (above) received the inaugural award in 2023, and Cassandra Jean Johnson (below, center) is the 2024 recipient.



Photos by BWPhoto