



Arthur Fletcher, president of the National Black Chamber of Commerce in Washington, D.C., spoke Friday at the Washburn University convocation in White Concert Hall.
— Scott D. Weaver/The Capital-Journal

Washburn faculty 'respect you'

By BILL BLANKENSHIP
The Capital-Journal

Look at an aerial photograph of Topeka, and Washburn University stands out as an island of limestone buildings and open green space surrounded by an ocean of houses.

When Arthur A. Fletcher arrived on campus in 1946, he found Washburn to be a different kind of island.

"When I went to Washburn during the late '40s, I found Washburn to be an island of democracy in a sea of racism," Fletcher said Friday afternoon in White Concert Hall as the speaker at the fall semester convocation.

Fletcher, who grew up in Junction City, knew well the constraints of segregation. He was the son of a Buffalo Soldier, the term for one of the all-black Army units stationed at Fort Riley.

In 1943, he led his first civil rights protest, encouraging his fellow black students at Junction City High School not to allow their senior photographs

to appear in the back of the yearbook.

During World War II, Fletcher served in one of Gen. George Patton's elite black tank units, but was denied a Purple Heart after a bullet tore through his spleen. The Army brass said it couldn't determine whether the bullet came from a German or American gun.

Fletcher arrived at Washburn armed with the GI Bill of Rights and a prowess on the football field that had earned him All-State honors in high school. Back then, such credentials didn't assure a black man anything.

Noted graduate and civil rights leader Arthur Fletcher addresses WU's fall convocation.

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— ARTHUR FLETCHER

students found a faculty who "not only respected us but expected us — expected us to develop ourselves."

"They, for whatever reason on their own, didn't see color," Fletcher said of his professors. "They saw confidence, capability and a mind to develop to make contributions to themselves and to this country."

Naming some of his instructors, Fletcher dwelled a moment on a Miss Applegate, who tutored him on the fine points of writing.

"When I got here, I didn't know a sentence from a paragraph," he said.

With Miss Applegate's help, Fletcher squeaked by his first year only to earn As and Bs as a junior and senior before graduating in 1950 with a bachelor's degree in sociology.

Fletcher went on to earn a law degree and a doctorate in education at other universities, but credited Washburn with helping him discover his gift.

"My gift was a political mind," said Fletcher, who has served in highly visible positions in the administrations of four U.S. presidents

"In the '50s and the '40s, Topeka was anything but a welcome mat beyond Washburn's campus," Fletcher said.

But on campus, Fletcher said he and other black

earning him the reputation as "The Father of Affirmative Action."

He chaired the Committee of Urban Affairs for President Ford, and he headed the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights during the Reagan-Bush years.

When he thought the conservative wing of his party was turning its back on race issues, Fletcher ran in 1996 for the GOP presidential nomination, a spot that went to another Kansan, Bob Dole.

Fletcher remains active as a Washburn, D.C.-based consultant and the chairman of the National Black Chamber of Commerce.

And at age 75, Fletcher has new plans for himself and for his alma mater.

Fletcher said over the next five years he will raise \$1 billion — that's right "billion" with a B — for small universities, including Washburn, so they can foster leadership skills.

"I'd like to see Washburn as a human capital development center," he said.

"I think the real learning is at the small universities," he said. "They get the chance to know the teachers. They get a chance to know you. They know your strong points. They know your weak points."

"How do I know? That's what happened to me at Washburn," Fletcher said.

Fletcher called attending Washburn "the greatest decision I ever made."

He also said he constantly recommends young people attend Washburn, saying the faculty remains constant in its dedication and deter-

