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Students and staff rally in support of Jason Vassell on Wednesday, March 12, 2008. Vassell, an African American UMass student who supporters say was excessively charged following a Feb. 3, 2008, on-campus fight, is still awaiting the outcome of a motion to dismiss the charges. (AP Photo/Nancy Palmieri)

## Justice for Jason?

On the second anniversary of UMass attack, Jason Vassell's fate is still unknown

Jeremy C. Fox

Two years ago, Jason Vassell was a normal senior at UMass Amherst. The youngest son of Jamaican immigrants who had settled in Mattapan, Vassell was a well-liked biology major dreaming of medical school and a career researching treatments for cancer and AIDS.

Today, his education is stalled; he spends his days working alongside his father, an electrician, to pay legal bills and is cautious about going out after dark or being around people he doesn't know well. The sound of sirens sends him into "panic mode."

Vassell's life changed around

5:00 a.m. on February 3, 2008, when two drunken white men appeared at the window to his dorm room and shouted threats and racial slurs. In the confrontation that ensued, one of the men broke Vassell's nose, and he stabbed them both with a pocketknife.

Vassell, his attorneys and a broad network of supporters say that he was the victim of a hate crime and acted in self-defense, but the Northwestern District Attorney's Office indicted Vassell on two counts of aggravated assault and battery with a dangerous weapon, charges that mean he could serve 30 years in prison if convicted.

In the two years since the incident, Vassell has become a cause and, for many, a symbol. Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, a Professor in the W.E.B. Du Bois Department Afro-American Studies at UMass, said Vassell is an example of the way a black man who's doing everything right can be brought down by racist stereotypes.

"How the case was handled, first by the [university], and then to a much larger extent by the prosecutor's office," Thelwell said, "is a classic case of mindless stereotypical ... racial profiling ... of the kind which is very common in law enforcement

Vassell, continued to page 15

## Do blacks truly want to transcend race?

Jesse Washington

Five little words — "I forgot he was black" — have caused a furor in the United States and exposed a contradiction in the idea that it has become a post-racial nation since electing its first black president last year.

The comment came from television host Chris Matthews after President Barack Obama's State of the Union speech last Wednesday.

"He is post-racial, by all appearances," the liberal host of MSNBC said on the air. "I forgot he was black tonight for an hour. You know, he's gone a long way to become a leader of this country, and past so much history, in just a year or two. I mean, it's something we don't even think about."

The staunch Obama supporter meant it as praise, but it caused a rapid furor, with many calling the quote a troubling sign that blackness is viewed — perhaps unconsciously — as a handicap that still needs to be overcome.

Apparently, Matthews forgot to ask black people if they WANT to be de-raced.

"As a black American I want people to remember who I am and where I come from without attaching assumptions about deficiency to it," said Dr. Imani Perry, a professor at Princeton's Center for African

American Studies.

Although she thought Matthews was well-intentioned, she found his statement troubling, because "it suggests that if he had remembered Obama's blackness, that awareness would be a barrier to seeing him as a competent or able leader."

"The ideal is to be able to see and acknowledge everything that person is, including the history that he or she comes from, as well as his or her competencies and qualities, and respect all of those things," Perry said.

That's a very different vision

*"I forgot he was black tonight for an hour ... I mean, it's something we don't even think about."*

— Chris Matthews

of "transcending race" — a consistent theme of Obama's political history — than one in which race has disappeared altogether.

"It's important for us to re-

Race, continued to page 6

## New GED program opens at Central Branch YMCA

Jeremy C. Fox

After four years of successful programming in the South End, the Pathway Technology Campus (PTC) inaugurated its new GED Readiness Program last week at the Central Branch YMCA with an open house.

The plan to expand to the YMCA came out of a series of meetings of the South End/Lower Roxbury cluster of

StreetSafe Boston, a youth development and safety initiative designed to reduce youth violence in Boston neighborhoods with high rates of violent crime.

Stakeholders from the area — including police, youth workers, representatives from different youth programs and youth themselves — developed a holistic plan for education and services to help support high-risk

youth.

Classes were planned to begin on Wednesday, Feb. 3, and will meet on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays from 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays are devoted to academic subjects, while on Wednesdays, guest speakers will talk about issues facing young people, including conflict resolution, diversity, trust and respect.

While the original Villa Victoria, GED, continued to page 12



Miss Virginia Caressa Cameron reacts as she is named a semi-finalist during the 2010 Miss America Pageant Saturday Jan. 30, 2010, at The Planet Hollywood Resort & Casino in Las Vegas. She went on to receive the Miss America crown. See story on page 3B. (AP Photo/Eric Jamison)

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