Sitting in an easy chair in his cedar home in the country 12 miles west of Forest Grove, Norm Monroe laughs at the thought of his role as an integration pioneer at OSU.

Forty-six years ago, during the 1960-61 season, he laced up his black Chuck Taylor high-top shoes and took to the Gill Coliseum hardcourt as the first black player in Oregon State basketball history. Many trivia experts maintain that Charlie White – leader of the 1965-66 Pac-10 championship team and the only African-American scholarship player recruited by the legendary Slats Gill over his 36-year coaching career – broke the color line in OSU basketball. Not so. It was Monroe, a 6-foot guard who had come to Corvallis as a sprinter on the track team.

“I feel kind of counterfeit about it,” says Monroe, 66. “It’s true I was the first black player, but I didn’t play basketball long enough to merit that distinction.”

Monroe played in six games for the ‘60-61 Beavers, all as a reserve. He made 1 of 8 shots from the field and 4 of 6 from the foul line. He career stats: 6 points, 7 rebounds, 9 personal fouls.

At midseason, by mutual consent, Monroe left Gill’s team.

“Slats took me into his office and told me I was more of a track man than a basketball player,” Monroe recalls. “I said, ‘I don’t think I want to play basketball anymore.’ And he said, ‘That would probably be in our best interests, too.’ ”

Monroe’s barrier-breaking status is only a footnote in the life of a man who accomplished much after humble beginnings. Growing up as the oldest of seven children in a single-parent home in Washington, D.C., Monroe was among the first group of black children to be bused into white neighborhoods as part of an integration effort in the 1950s.

Despite bouts with alcohol, drugs and depression, the All-America sprinter earned his OSU degree, became a productive member of the Portland community and, in 1993, was honored with a distinguished alumni award from the OSU Alumni Association. He also served as a member of the OSUAA board of directors.

“I was blown away by (the distinguished alumni award),” says Monroe,
who is vice president of cultural and community development for Cascadia Behavioral Health Services. in Multnomah, Washington and Marion counties. “It was such an honor. I told people (when accepting the award) I almost didn’t make it because of some of my earlier antics. Oregon State saved my life, frankly. Someone has to reach out to help you, and you have to reach back.”

Monroe long ago came to grips with the rough spots in his life, including those that happened at Oregon State. “I used to hate that place, but if I had to tell anyone where I had an epiphany, it happened at Oregon State,” he says. “I made so many good friends there. I look back at Oregon State as the place that really helped me, which would blow some people’s minds who knew me back then. I just thought all white people were devils.”

He has owned football season tickets for years and rarely misses a game. His favorite fan moment came at the 2001 Fiesta Bowl, when the Beavers routed Notre Dame. “At the hotel the night before the game, their fans were making fun of Corvallis and Oregon State,” he says. “Afterward, I made sure to go by their room and ask them where South Bend, Ind., is.”

Monroe’s life has been about much more than his brief time on the basketball court at OSU, but it’s a part that not many people know about, which tickles him into laughter.

“For years, I could win beer bets by asking people who was the first black basketball player there,” he says. “Everybody thought it was Charlie White. They were wrong.”

Monroe leads a serene life with his wife of 25 years, Nancy, in a bucolic setting alongside Highway 6 near the Coast Range. The Monroes own 60 acres of unincorporated land surrounding their log cabin-style home that sits alongside a swimming pool, with a guesthouse in back.

“Ghetto kid makes good,” jokes Monroe, who keeps in shape by cutting firewood for his wood stove and clearing brush from the house area with his tractor.

Monroe has become an accom-
I only saw him twice more after that.

“There were still places a black person couldn’t go. My first realization was when I was 13 and my mother took me to buy shoes at a department store. We went to the basement cafeteria, got a hot dog and a Coke and all the seats were empty. I said, ‘Mom, why are we standing up? Let’s sit down.’ She said, ‘Hush, boy.’”

He attended Washington’s McKinley High, one of four schools chosen as test sites for integration in 1955. Monroe was one of 19 black freshmen who were the first to go to an integrated high school in D.C.

“I was scared to death,” he says. “I had never been around white people. Although our streets were mixed with racial groups, we didn’t socialize with one another.”

His father, Augustus Norman Monroe, disappeared when Norm was 11, leaving Annabelle Monroe to raise seven children by herself.

“A few years later, I found out he was in a mental institution,” Norm says. “I only saw him twice more after that.”

Annabelle worked as a beautician, and later as a records clerk at the National Institute of Mental Health.

“She told us kids, ‘If you don’t want to go on welfare, you need to toe the line,’” Norm says. “I was supposed to keep my brothers and sisters in order while she worked.”

Monroe was a star runner at McKinley, a natural on the track.

“Somebody asked me where I learned to run,” he says. “I said, ‘From the police. We shot craps on the playground and the police would raid us.”

One of the fastest prep 440-yard runners in the nation, Monroe was talented enough to be recruited by Southern Cal’s powerhouse program. But he lacked his English credits, so the Trojans sent him to Compton (Calif.) Junior College to get academically qualified for college.

At Compton, he found mostly trouble.

“Anything I never did back home in Washington, I did in spades at Compton,” Monroe says. “Sometimes I didn’t even go to class from being stoned, or just stupidity. Marijuana – we called them ‘reefers’ in those days. I didn’t know anything about that growing up. I thought only the real criminals did that stuff. But I started drinking cheap wine and went sideways, and fell 41 grade points behind in school.”

When USC coach Jess Mortensen’s interest in Monroe waned, Oregon State coach Sam Bell contacted the runner.

“I didn’t even know where Corvalis was,” Monroe says. “I said, ‘What’s in it for me? A car? Clothes? Money?’ I wasn’t going to come cheap. Sam said, ‘All I can offer you is a good education.’ I blew him off and went back home to D.C. for the summer.”

Over the next few months, Monroe had second thoughts and called Bell, who arranged for him to attend Clark (Wash.) Community College to get academically eligible. Soon thereafter, Monroe was enrolled in school at OSU. It would be some time before he became a Beaver believer.

While Monroe struggled to adjust to small-town Corvallis, track went well at first. In his first season as a junior, he excelled in the long sprints, setting a school 440-yard record of 46.4, finishing fourth in the NCAA Championships at that distance and anchoring a mile-relay unit that had four runners who bettered 47 seconds in the 440.

He enjoyed running, but he loved playing basketball.

“I was a terror on the intramural courts,” he says. One day during fall term of Monroe’s senior season, assistant basketball coach Jimmy Anderson spotted him playing at the men’s gym. Anderson, in his mid-20s and in the early stages of a long coaching career at OSU, invited Monroe to Gill Coliseum to play a little one-on-one and came away impressed.

“I’d watched all the home track meets the previous spring and knew Norm was fast and a great athlete,” Anderson says. “He could move, he could run the court and he wasn’t that bad a player. I suggested he might like to come out and give basketball a try.”

After their one-on-one game, “I saw shadows on the floor,” Monroe recalls. “And suddenly out of the shadows come Slats Gill and (assistant coach) Red Ro-
I had never had to think about shooting American as a player at Oregon State in we were playing the University of Port was already named after him. An All- one day's standards, he would be prejudiced.

"People always ask, 'Was Slats a prejudiced person?' " Monroe says. "I never saw it that way. But I remember one time we were playing the University of Portland and Art Easterley — who later became my best friend — was killing us. At halftime, Slats went into the locker room and slammed the door and said, 'Can't any ya'll stop that colored boy?' I was sitting down at the end of the bench, laughing to myself.

"I don't know if Slats was prejudiced. He had his proclivities that were part of that era. He was an Adolph Rupp type of person. His values were different. By today's standards, he would be prejudiced. But in my old age I've learned to not go there with racism, because it's so subjective. I want to go through all the other reasons why people are the way they are before I turn to racism."

But Gill was old-fashioned, even for that era. He ran a controlled offense and, for most of his career, forced his players to shoot free throws underhanded.

"Everything was so scripted, it took all the fun out of it for me," Monroe says. "I had never had to think about shooting before, or what foot I shot off of. I wasn't a basketball player, really, and I just didn't fit Slats' style."

His brief basketball career over, Monroe embarked on his senior season in track, which turned out only so-so. Dealing with a hamstring injury, he mostly ran the 880 and didn't make it to the NCAA meet. But he earned the respect of his teammates as well as a bachelor of science degree in liberal arts.

"Corvallis was a real culture shock for him, and he had his ups and downs," says John Ball, a mile-relay teammate. "But Norm worked through it and handled it. When I look back, he did a fantastic job dealing with all of it."

Says Monroe: "Only eight black athletes had graduated from Oregon State to that point. I wanted to be the ninth."

Then, suddenly, he was on to the real world. He got married and moved back to D.C. for a short while, getting an often eerie job preparing bodies for autopsies in a hospital morgue. "I'd hear the bodies groaning sometimes," he said. He then worked four years as a museum technician at the Smithsonian Institution.

In 1966 he returned to Oregon for a job with the Wolf Creek Job Corps in Glide, working in its recreation department. The next year, he moved to Portland for a job at Washington High as a community agent, returning truant youngsters to school. He got his masters' degree at in social work at Portland State in 1970 and soon became the first black marriage and family counselor for the court of domestic relations in Multnomah County. For most of the next 32 years, he served the county in various capacities on the political side, working with juveniles and gang task forces. At one point, he served as staff assistant for Mayor Neil Goldschmidt.

"I worked in the community on policy issues," Monroe says.

"I developed programs the federal government would fund. I learned a lot. I developed skills on systems planning, how to rearrange organizations and analyze agencies that wanted to do business with the state. There were times when I took a lot of crap, because some folks didn't feel a black person was qualified to analyze an agency."

On the Web
To read "Anger, and reasons for it," a Web-only sidebar to this story, visit:
http://www.osualum.com/stater

In 2001, Monroe retired from his county position, but continued to serve voluntarily on regional and national boards for social justice issues. In 2004, he was asked to return to work with Cascadia, which has 60 residential facilities and 1,300 staff members, and serves more than 20,000 clients annually.

"I've always wanted to work at a place like this," says Monroe, who focuses on minorities and mental health. "We have so many people needing our services, it's frightening. The every-day pressures on people have shifted, and the lack of resources to address them means a lot of poor folks have no safety valves."

"We're doing a lot of good, and there aren't a lot of minorities to do the work. About four percent of clinicians nationwide are people of color, yet 17 percent of the folks we see are people of color. If you can provide an outlet, most people are resilient enough to handle their own affairs."

Monroe cherishes his work because of the rough times he endured in the 1960s and his own bouts with depression and loneliness, especially after a divorce.

"The strength I had growing up in the streets helped me overcome that, but there were professionals who helped, too," he says. "When you're down, it's important to know you can recover."

Kerry Eggers, 75, is a columnist and sportswriter for the Portland Tribune.
Norm Monroe: Anger, and reasons for it

By Kerry Eggers
(This is an online sidebar to “Black and orange and black,” in the winter 2007 Oregon Stater. Read it at www.osualum.com/stater.)

In 1960, there were 11 black athletes at Oregon State, all participating in either football or track and field. All 11 were housed on the second floor of a dormitory.

“We did a lot of everything but study,” says Norm Monroe, a track man who decided quickly he needed a new living arrangement and got Coach Sam Bell’s approval to find his own housing.

With only a handful of minorities in town, racial enlightenment hadn’t yet found Corvallis.

“I went out and looked for an apartment, but every one that was vacant when I got there all of a sudden got filled up,” Monroe says. “I got a (white) friend of mine to find us a place. He found us a place right away.”

The environment was vastly different from that of predominantly-black, big-city Washington, D.C., Monroe’s hometown, and from that of Compton, Calif., where he had gone to junior college. Monroe struggled.

“I was an angry young black dude,” he says, “and it was not an easy or a happy transition for me, at least at first.”

One day in Monroe’s first year in school, the campus police called track Coach Bell. Monroe had been in a movie theater the previous night and a youngster sitting in the row in front of him said to his father, “Dad, there’s a nigger back there.”

“Norm got a little upset and made a scene,” Bell recalls. “The police called the dean of students, and word got to me. There had been a few other things happen through the year, too. So I called Norm in and said, ‘I can understand how you feel, but there are things you don’t have control of. Your getting angry and upset is not going to change it. I don’t want to hear anymore from the dean of students or professors about what you are or aren’t doing. You need to get your act together.’ To Norm’s credit, he did.”

Monroe grew close to Bell.

Says Bell: “Norm told me one time, ‘My dad hated white people. There have only been two white men I have trusted in my life – (Compton Junior College coach) Herschel Smith and you.”

Track went well. In his first season as a junior, Monroe excelled in the long sprints, setting a school 440-yard record of 46.4, finishing fourth in the NCAA Championships at that distance and anchoring a mile-relay unit that had four runners who bettered 47 seconds in the 440. Gradually he became acclimated to Corvallis and made two relationships that changed his life.

One was with Demetrius Jameson, a professor in the OSU art department. The other was with Clifford Maser, the dean of the business school, whose daughter, Heather, had an art class with Monroe.

Jameson hosted parties in the loft of the art building.

“We would pretend to be beatniks, drinking wine and philosophizing,” Monroe says. “That was our place to get away. Jameson was a wonderful human being.”

The Masers had Monroe to their home for Sunday dinners.

“They helped me a lot,” he says. “I would often poormouth how bad it was to be a black man on the Oregon State campus. One day Cliff took me aside and said, ‘Norm, we like you, but we’re tired of hearing how bad it is here.’ ”

Maser’s wife, Kim, was Jewish, and they told stories about trying to get her out of occupied France during World War II.

“That was the beginning of me being very curious about how the other half lived,” Monroe says. “I got very interested in books and music, especially symphony and jazz, and the educational opportunities I had in school there.”

Kerry Eggers, ’75, is a columnist and sportswriter for the Portland Tribune.