Our History Lives! The African American engineering students who came to Purdue University were small in number in the early 1970s, but they came with big dreams. It was a time of tangible progress for Blacks in politics, educational attainment and, to a lesser extent, business in the U.S., but it was also a time of frustration, especially among Black youth, about the injustice and socioeconomic inequity that continued to afflict African American communities after the gains made by the Civil Rights Movement.

The Black scholar-activists in Purdue’s engineering department wanted to see more of their people and their communities empowered by STEM proficiency, and they found a willing partner in their faculty adviser, Arthur Bond, Ph.D., who was already a leader in a national movement, supported by progressive corporate executives and higher education administrators, to diversify the field of engineering.

Purdue undergraduates led by Ed Barnette and Fred Cooper took action in 1971, forming a campus organization, the Black Society of Engineers (BSE), which played a major role in significantly increasing the recruitment and retention of Black engineering undergraduates at the university. In 1973, under the leadership of six close-knit Purdue engineering students from
Lindblom Technical High School in Chicago — Edward A. Coleman, Anthony Harris, Brian Harris, Stanley L. Kirtley, John W. Logan Jr. and George A. Smith — the BSE changed its name to the Society of Black Engineers and a year later launched an effort to create a national organization to increase the number of Blacks in the profession across the U.S. Letters of invitation mailed nationwide by the SBE drew 134 students from 28 schools to a gathering at Purdue in April 1975, where NSBE, the National Society of Black Engineers, was formed.

Today, NSBE’s 650 chapters and nearly 18,000 members in the U.S., Africa, the Caribbean, Canada and other places around the globe pursue the mission launched by our founders’ and charter members’ desire for social justice and Black community empowerment 49 years ago: “to increase the number of culturally responsible Black Engineers who excel academically, succeed professionally and positively impact the community.”

Learn more about NSBE’s great journey from members who were there at the beginning, as we kick off our Society’s yearlong golden anniversary celebration at #NSBE50 in Atlanta, March 20–24, 2024!