

Dr. Malou Harrison: Forging Opportunities in Education

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Like most children, Malou C. Harrison wanted to be many things when she grew up: flight attendant, hair dresser, broadcast journalist. But, it seems she was destined to be in education.



Today, Jamaican American Harrison heads Miami Dade College's (MDC) North and Padron campuses. As president of the two MDC locations, Harrison not only helps shape lives through educational leadership, she oversees the enrollment of some 60,000 students representing more than 100 nations, including many from the Caribbean.

Harrison was born in Jamaica. Her father is the late Dr. Mervyn Alleyne, noted University of the West Indies professor of linguistics. Her Guyanese mother was a high school teacher. They passed on their love of teaching and learning to her. Harrison also credited her formative years in Jamaica for grounding and molding her values.

"My years at St. Hugh's (high school), the phenomenal teachers and staff, not to mention my peers, were what molded me into the servant leader I am today," she explained.

"For anyone who knows what a Caribbean upbringing entails, it is grounded in a sensibility that apart from one's faith, education is the most important tenet of life. And I was a Girl Guide throughout high school. So discipline, decorum and an active dedication to serving the underserved ordered my life."

Harrison called herself "a proud Caribbean American woman tried and true... Can't leave out the escoveitched fish and

bammy, 'buss up shut' and curry, and my mother's delicious shrimp vegetable chow mein."

FIRST JOB

Harrison brought those memories and values with her when she migrated to the United States in 1979 at age 17. She recalled her first job in the U.S. fondly.

"I was responsible for stocking and restocking the Hallmark Cards in the store," she said of her part time gig at Woolworth in Buffalo, New York. "I felt so important, and I took pride in making sure the cards were in the right place and arranged well... Work ethic is so important in one's professional and personal development."

Harrison's rise in education administration began after she graduated from the University of Buffalo with a bachelor's degree and assumed a full time position in the school's Personnel Department, where she previously worked as a student assistant. She was later given more responsibility as an administrator. She earned master's and doctoral degrees from Florida International University and Walden University and taught English as a second language and served as dean of student sat MDC.

As MDC dean, Harrison made it her mission to connect with students personally, helping them to reach their own educational goals and making sure they were economically and emotionally stable.

“Almost 45 percent of our students are living in poverty,” Harrison explained. “Many are the head of their households.

“Therefore, knowing the affordable housing, transportation, food insecurity, and overall poverty issues of our local community, we at MDC understand that our students are facing many life challenges as they work toward attaining a college degree and moving beyond.”

SINGLE STOP

That realization motivated Harrison to create a social program to address those needs. She was a founding dean for MDC’s Single Stop program, which provides students direct support and referrals to address life issues, including help with cash assistance, food stamps and other support dealing with housing and child services.

As president of MDC’s North and Padron campuses, Harrison continues to affect students directly.

“My goal for both campuses is that our ‘Students First’ motto will continue to prevail in the hearts and minds of all faculty and staff as we endeavor to heighten our mindfulness and action around student success,” she said.

“...We meet our students where they are, and together we develop a pathway of courses, support services, and experiential opportunities to propel them to the finish line, with degree in hand plus a tool box of competencies in communication, critical thinking, social responsibility, environmental and aesthetic appreciation.”

Dr. Harrison views her accomplishments as shared successes, noting they came with the support of staff, students, community and family that has propelled the university to where it is today. She said she has instilled values in her four children to be thankful, humble and willing to be guided. Harrison is grateful for her background.

“My Caribbean upbringing has everything to do with how I carry myself as a woman in leadership, the high standards to which I hold myself so that I ensure I am an example of fairness and integrity to others,” she said.