

# 2010 Lifetime Achiever Zelema Harris Brings College to the Community

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When St. Louis Community College Chancellor Zelema Harris was a graduate student at the University of Kansas-Lawrence, she took a course titled "The Community College Movement."

"I got turned on," she said.

"I thought, 'Oh, my God. They are talking about people like me.' Equalizing, democratizing education for everyone."

Then she learned that the majority of African-American, Latino and American-Indian students take their first steps into higher education at community colleges. Yet getting a teaching position at the nearby community college did not come easy.

Possibly anyone else who received 14 rejection letters from the Metropolitan Community College in Kansas City would have taken that as a definitive answer. But not Harris.

After receiving her 14th rejection letter, she called the college's human resources director, who told her that her application did not show any community college experience, only university experience. They needed to know that she could relate to the college's students, she was told.

So the next time she applied, Harris made sure to mention that she had designed a supportive educational services program, which still exists at University of Kansas, to help less-advantaged students.

"I was involved in integrating the college and doing what I could to ensure that minority students were treated fairly and they had the support they needed," she said.

This work earned her a place in the University of Kansas Women's Hall of Fame 25 years later. And it earned her a position at the Metropolitan Community College, where – just four years later – she became president of one of the system's colleges.

Now Harris has spent more than 30 years creating opportunities in higher education for all students, with service as president of Parkland College in Champaign, Ill., and president of Penn Valley Community College in Kansas City, Mo.

She has spent the past three years at the helm of St. Louis Community College. As chancellor, Harris leads the college system of four campuses and three education centers, which serves more than 100,000 students annually.

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Harris will receive the Lifetime Achiever in Education award at the St. Louis American Foundation's 2010 Salute to Excellence in Education to be held Friday, Sept. 17 at America's Center.

### **Straight from the farm**

Harris grew up on a family-owned farm in East Texas with her four siblings, and occasionally some family members who were "down on their luck," as her mother would say.

As the youngest child, she was in charge of picking strawberries early in the morning, before the dew dried. Everyone woke up early to contribute to the farm by picking cotton or chopping cane. The farm was located in an all-black community that was founded after slavery.

When her father was unable to keep up with the farm, her family moved to Beaumont, Texas.

"Moving to the city brought a lot of challenges for me. I was just another poor kid," she said.

"It was that early training and background of feeling loved and cared about that allowed me to move into a new environment and make my own way."

By the spring of her freshman year, she decided that she needed some way to distinguish herself. She asked her homeroom teacher if she could recite "Invictus," a poem by English poet William Ernest Henley.

"After I recited the poem, I became somebody at the school," she said. "Kids would walk around behind me, quoting from the poem:

Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul."

From there she went on to compete in and win debate competitions. "I found a place that I could tap into at the age of 13 that would give me some purpose," she said.

Throughout high school, she knew that she would go on to college. She just didn't know how. The answer came in her sophomore year when she was cleaning bathrooms at St. Therese Hospital. One of the patients, an ill, elderly woman, took an interest in Harris. "One day she called me over, and said, 'You seem like a very intelligent colored girl. Are you going to college?' I said, 'Yes.' She said, 'How are you going?' I said, 'I don't know.'"

The woman told Harris that her auxiliary group, which consisted of wives of local doctors, gave scholarships to "promising colored girls." For the next two years, Harris sent the woman her quarterly grades. When it was time for the interview with 10 white women, she was well prepared.

"My father died a week later," she said. "Then a week after my father died, I got the call that I was the recipient of the scholarship." She earned her Bachelor of Science degree from Prairie View A&M University, and her Master of Science and Doctorate of Education degrees from the University of Kansas.

### **Sidesteps to success**

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Harris has not taken a completely linear career path. She has sidestepped along the way, especially as a professional who ended up a divorcee with three children.

"You are left to make it on your own. Since I had been doing that all my life, I developed new friendships," she said.

Harris moved from Kansas City to Las Cruces, New Mexico to take a teaching job while she worked on her doctorate. She also worked nightly as a waitress at an upscale establishment, which had never hired a black waitress before Harris. The owner warned her that people say inappropriate things, and she had to handle it.

"I thought, 'Well, I've been handling it all my life,'" she said.

Harris soon became the top tip-earner, never taking home less than \$100 a night – which was more than she earned teaching. Her children would wait up for her to come home and democratically divide up her tip money.

"We would decide what we needed in the home, and they would help me count it and divvy it up," she said.

"I became very close to my kids during that time. That's why I feel so close to them now because they have been with me through all of that, and they are just wonderful adults."

### **'An exemplary leader'**

When Harris came to St. Louis Community College, she had three guiding principles, said Carla Chance, vice chancellor for finance and business services: The institution had to be financially healthy, organized effectively and high-performing.

For the past three years under Harris' leadership, the college has taken five percent of the college's \$160 million budget (about \$8 million) and put it into a cash reserve, Chance said.

"Her advice has guided us," Chance said. "And we have improved our financial picture."

Denise Chachere, chair of the college's Board of Trustees, said Harris has led the college system to many achievements. One is the completion of the Harrison Educational Center, a certified "green" building, after more than a decade of discussing plans for such a facility. It sits a block away from Vashon High School, more than a symbol of opportunity for public high school students.

"In the board's experience working with Dr. Harris, she has been an exemplary leader and role model for the STLCC community," Chachere said.

"Dr. Harris seeks the opinions of others when a decision is needed, but when the time comes for action, she does not delay or waffle. Dr. Harris is a master of the art of giving people credit, making her team look good and downplaying her own significant contribution."

Harris asserts that St. Louis Community College plays a major role to the economic viability of the St. Louis area. Pointing to the health care industry, she said many area nurses graduate from STLCC's program.

"A majority of our students are first generation college-going students," she said.

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“If we can impact one student and get that student through college, the impact that has on families is enormous. I am committed to doing everything I can to get people into the door and to ensure they have the opportunity to be successful.”

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