

## **Dr. Ruth J. Simmons: Precedent-setting president**

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Ruth, Ruth, Ruth!... Ruth, Ruth, Ruth! . . .”

The clamorous voices are Smith College students at their opening convocation in Northampton, Mass. They have just seen, marching at the end of the procession, their president, Dr. Ruth J. Simmons. They chant until she reaches the stage at the largest privately endowed college for women in the country.

But she won't be there next fall. Simmons is leaving Smith College, where in 1995 she became the first African American in the U.S. to head a college or university in the upper tier of national rankings. Since she became Smith's ninth president in 1995, the Houston-grown educator has made a number of significant changes that solidified her standing as not only one of the country's top college presidents, but also one of the most admired.

Now, on a sunny, wintry Northampton afternoon, she is leaning and turning and adjusting on a living room sofa in her president's mansion.

Her blue suit is smart and crisp, the kind she might wear to her board meetings at Pfizer, Metropolitan Life, Texas Instruments, the Carnegie Corporation, or the Goldman Sachs Group.

She takes directions from a photographer as if she were an ordinary great-great-grandchild of slaves, and not the sought-after Simmons interviewed on “60 Minutes,” “CBS Weekend News” and in *People* magazine. “Good Morning America” wanted a segment too, but that Monday was inconvenient for her. In 1996 Simmons received a bevy of honors: CBS Woman of the Year, “NBC Nightly News” Most Inspiring Woman, and *Glamour Magazine* Woman of the Year. And she was among those chosen for a 1998 *Vanity Fair* photographic portfolio, *Women of America: A Portrait of Influence and Achievement*.

“This is uncomfortable,” she says to the cameraman—but with a smile—when told to lean forward. She is facing more lights than Dorothy Dandridge at her audition for “Carmen Jones.”

On July 1, 2001, Simmons will take over the helm at Brown University in Providence, R.I.—its 18<sup>th</sup> leader since its founding in 1764. She will set more precedents—the first woman and first African American to head one of the eight Ivy League institutions. She must chuckle to herself when she remembers the mentor who

told her that she would go far, but the presidency of an Ivy League college was out of the question.

To put the presidency in perspective, consider this: of the roughly 3,200 colleges and universities in the United States, only six are older than Brown, and only 28 have endowments greater than Brown's \$1.2 billion. Brown's connection to the so-called establishment can be traced to alumni like John D. Rockefeller Jr., son of the first billionaire in our nation's history. The school's founder, John Nicholas Brown, amassed a fortune through the slave trade. In fact, Rhode Island traffickers controlled between 60 and 90 percent of the American trade in African slaves throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is ironic that a descendant of perhaps one of those slaves will become president of the university the slave trader built.

Up College Hill just above the Providence downtown advances Dr. Ruth J. Simmons, youngest of 12 children raised in Texas by a sharecropper father and a mother who took in laundry.

The crowd does not invoke the "Ruth" shout, but does interrupt her speech with standing ovations on four occasions during her introduction to the Brown community in November 2000. In venerable Sayles Hall, its oak walls lined with oil portraits of mostly old white men and one woman, Simmons declares, "I stand here before you today both mystified and elated," and then tells them something they have long suspected: "Brown students are said to be the happiest and the most balanced in the Ivy League."

Simmons' chronicle of personal achievements, like that of so many other African Americans, is a mystifying complex of dedication and fate. It started in the 1950s with the terrifying trek to elementary school in Houston, Texas, where the word *nigger* was hurled at her from passing cars. But she was thrilled with the value of education, and her parents instilled in her the importance of devoted hard work.

"My sister thought that something was wrong with me because I read all the time," she recalls. "She brought my odd behavior to the attention of my mother, who assured her that I was okay."

Teachers in the segregated schools inspired and coached her, and led her down a philosophical road that had the sign, "Education Can Take You Places." Books, languages, other students from different backgrounds—these were the influential building blocks of a career that has brought her to this point in her life.

In 1963, a suitcase of donated clothes in one hand and a scholarship in the other, Ruth Jean Stubblefield arrived at Dillard University in New Orleans where she majored in French. She graduated summa cum laude, spent an academic year in France on a Fulbright scholarship, and then went to Harvard to earn her master's and doctorate degrees in Romance languages. In fact, she has studied five languages and speaks French fluently.

Language has always fascinated her, and when she explains why Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* is her favorite book, her reasoning is based on the Nobel Prize writer's being a specialist too in language. "I was swept away—not so much by plot and theme—but by evocation," she declares. "The sheer beauty and magnificence of her language means so much to me."

Simmons' first teaching assignment was in 1973 at the University of New Orleans where she was an assistant professor of French. Within two years, she was an assistant dean in the liberal arts college. "I didn't really decide to go into administration," she explains. "I'm always trying to tell people what to do," she says with a laugh, "and I'm an inveterate problem solver." She thought that French was esoteric, not taught very well, and the department not well organized.

So Simmons replaced a dean on leave and began to develop the qualities that distinguish her from the common rank of college administrators.

Since then, the wind has been at her back.

One engine that drives her is the need to contribute, to be a real asset. She once told a youngster in a NASA-sponsored Internet chat room: "My goal in life is to be helpful to other people. I hope you will also have that goal." Her first teaching assignment was perhaps the beginning of her drive to help other people. She recognized—being the only African American faculty member in the department—that not many black students were enrolled in French classes. "As an administrator, I would encounter more students of color," Simmons explains.

After New Orleans, she spent six years on the West Coast—at the California State University System in Northridge and at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. At Northridge, she coordinated a National Endowment for the Humanities liberal studies project and taught in the Pan-African Studies program. Simmons' academic specialty has been literature of Francophone Africa and the Caribbean—an interest sparked by Mercer Cook, author of *The Militant Black Writer in Africa and America* and a visiting professor at Harvard during her years as a graduate student there. At USC, she rose to become assistant dean of the graduate school.

Back to the East, she spent 10 years at Princeton, broken by a two-year stint as provost at Spelman College in 1990. Counseling students at Princeton, Simmons encountered a common misgiving. "They all had this sense that they didn't belong, that the university had made a mistake in admitting them," she said. "It wasn't just a minority issue," she explains. "Somehow, they were stuck with this powerful ideal that we must be perfect." Simmons spent many hours explaining to students that education can take place at different rates and that maturation and achievement can vary with the individual.

During the 1980s, a firestorm of issues related to minority students fueled debates on hundreds of American college campuses. Princeton, historically considered the Ivy school most attractive to the Southern aristocracy, had not exactly been on the cutting

edge of the debate about multiculturalism. Ruth Simmons' propensity for identifying and solving problems, however, rendered a radical change to the school's demeanor.

As acting director of Afro-American studies, she brought to the faculty luminaries like as Toni Morrison, Cornel West, Arnold Rampersad and Nell Irvin Painter. Her approach was twofold. First, she convened an interdisciplinary search committee, and second, she sought scholars who would attract and sustain each other.

"I had to lay the groundwork so that the departments would welcome black scholars," she recalls. "Their concept of African American studies was that it was something strange. They had to be shown that it was a method of legitimate inquiry, that black scholars did the same things as other professors."

Given the chance to understand and to disperse their stereotypes, the Princeton faculty became keenly interested in the initiative.

Simmons' other concern—identifying scholars who can offer each other intellectual sustenance—relies on the advantages of synergy. "No scholar should be isolated; each should benefit from the other's work so that there is increased status... and a critical mass of influence is taking place," she declares. As an example, a scholar like Arnold Rampersad, author of a Langston Hughes biography, could benefit from his contact with novelist Toni Morrison, while philosopher and religious studies authority Cornel West (now at Harvard) could connect with like-minded specialists.

Can Brown, whose resources don't match those of Harvard, Yale and Princeton—where endowment levels are at \$14 billion, \$7 billion and \$6 billion, respectively—expect to undertake similar challenges?

"Complex institutions always mouth a refrain about there is no money and 'we can't do it,' " she responds. "But there are ways to obtain the means. You can allocate existing resources, or you can raise funds. You have to take different approaches. But Brown can have a first-class department of African American studies."

Another notable contribution at Princeton was her 1993 document detailing how to improve race relations. It became known as the Simmons Report, setting the bar nationally for improving tolerance on college campuses. A couple of recommendations are especially memorable.

"First, we make these assumptions that interracial accord is easy and that if you only try, everybody will be able to negotiate the terrain," she maintains. "But, in fact, we need expert guidance."

Accordingly, she recommended that the university use an ombudsman to help them solve and manage difficulties by using processes such as conflict resolution.

At the same time, argues Simmons, a forum is required for different groups to communicate with each other. "Positions become hardened," she contends, "so we need a neutral place where different conversations can occur."

Tapped by Smith College for the presidency in 1995, Simmons quickly propelled the women's college into a centerswirl of change. She established the nation's first engineering program at a women's college; started *Meridians*, a journal for minority women; and introduced Praxis, a program that gives every Smith student the chance to get an internship funded by the college. She raised the school's endowment from \$400 million to \$900 million and reduced faculty teaching loads from five to four courses.

To increase minority applications at Smith, Simmons has visited inner-city schools from Springfield, Mass., to Los Angeles to encourage girls to consider higher education. In 1997 she created, with a New York City high school, a partnership known as the Young Women's Leadership School of East Harlem. It conducts visits not only for Harlem high school students to the Smith campus, but also for Smith students to the school. Minority students make up about 17 percent of Smith's student body, and they also enjoy retention rates above 80 percent.

A strong dotted line connects Simmons' push for collegiate diversity to what she sees as a moral imperative. "I think it is the duty of education at every level to care about the opportunity for children of limited resources to establish an intimate relationship with ideas and high ideals," she said in that first address at Brown.

Called a big thinker, not limited by categories, Simmons is quick to fire afresh attitudes on topics that other campus leaders either don't touch or just ignore. Should colleges eliminate the SAT exam, since minority students' scores lag behind that of whites?

"I am not religious about them" she responds. "They have their value when combined with additional information, but I favor looking at the secondary school record as a better reflection of success in college."

A divorced mother of two (a son, Khari, and a daughter, Maya), Simmons is certain that if it were the color line at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, then improving the health and happiness of African American families is the riddle to be solved in the 21st century. "It has been a long struggle toward equal access, and the struggle is still in front of us," she assesses. "But we must focus on showing our youth how to survive."

She sees an area that needs fixing: hugely disproportionate incarceration rates of African-American males have a massive negative effect on the black family. "The prison situation is the main issue," she declares, "and I don't know why it hasn't caught the imagination of the African-American community."

It is an appropriate Simmons query, the kind her mother, who passed away when Simmons was 15, would spark. In the hospital on the evening of her mother's dying,

Simmons was noticeably nervous about staying in the room all night. Her mother sensed her uneasiness and suggested, "You can go home if you want to; you don't have to stay."

But, of course, Simmons remained, remembering a favorite mantra of her mother's: "My only concern is to live long enough to see that all of my children are okay"