

Address for Ruth Simmons Portrait Unveiling

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The Miracle of Ruth Simmons

If one were to trace the life and career of Ruth Simmons, one may be fooled into believing that they culminate in a linear way. In her remarkable telling, President Simmons descended from slaves, from parents who were sharecroppers, and from a family that persevered through great misfortune on a cotton farm in Grapeland, Texas, and, later, 130 miles south, in the city of Houston. With a resolute compass ingrained by her parents and through the power of education, she overcame the perils of a racially segregated South that delimited her physical freedom during her early schooling and impeded the economic opportunities of her family. In the face of this reality, she proved that Jim Crow racism could not constrain the strength of her courage and the scope of her imagination.

By the time she pursued higher education, the humanities oriented her academic life. At Dillard University, she graduated in 1967 with a major in Romance Languages, despite still coping with the repercussions of poverty. At Harvard University, where she earned in 1973 her doctorate in Romance Languages and Literatures, one would think that this degree from an Ivy League institution embodied the pinnacle of personal and educational success as it has for many people across history.

After all, the scholarly intelligence and professional expertise of Ruth Simmons fueled an academic career on which countless colleagues would gladly rest their laurels. In the couple of decades since earning her doctorate, she served as associate dean of the graduate school at the University of Southern California;

as associate dean of the faculty and as associate provost at our own University; and as provost at Spelman College. Few colleagues, past and present, could match the breadth of administrative knowledge and the versatility of her leadership skills that she demonstrated during this time.

One also cannot ignore her impact on higher education as a president. For close to a quarter of a century, covering a geographical stretch from New England to the South, she has led three different kinds of institutions toward remarkable success: Smith College from 1995 to 2001; Brown University from 2001 to 2012; and Prairie View A&M University from 2017 to the present.

Not enough time exists this evening, much less in the next couple of minutes, for me to unfurl the reams of Ruth Simmons's accomplishments across these institutions. To cite only a few, these accomplishments include her increasing the sizes and improving the quality of faculties at these institutions; her leading them through bold campaigns for academic enrichment; her bolstering of their existing facilities or establishing new ones; her expansion of their global vision of education; her strengthening of their strategic ties to local communities and businesses; and her improvement of the financial health of their students. For success she has won awards from learned societies and honorary degrees from universities—and one could go on and on in pointing to these actual measures of academic and professional success.

As we anticipate the well-deserved unveiling of her portrait today, we celebrate the life and legacy of Ruth Simmons not at the precise conclusion to her presidency at an Ivy League, but rather at the close of her presidency of a public, historically black university. More than the academic credentials and accolades I have mentioned so far, this specific presidency at this point in her life—at a time when, in her initial acceptance of interim role, she had called herself “old and retired”—reveals the relentless energy and ambition that have described her ever

since she grew up in Texas, and that still captures the very essence of her being as she completes her presidency in this same state.

Deep in the story of her life and legacy, if I may, is her unwavering sense of self and her higher purpose. When she began as president at Smith College, she said that one of her goals was to interest more black women in that liberal arts college. “If it is not a good place for African American students,” she remarked, “it’s not a good place for me.” When she served as president of Brown University, she established the Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice, which set a high bar, adopted by some peer institutions, on how to account for a university’s historical origins or complicity in slavery and the transatlantic slave trade, and how to build an educational future despite and because of them.

As she serves as president of Prairie View A&M University, she has circled back to that founding enterprise of higher education not only for the best interest of African Americans but also in the best interest of the world. She is now leading an institution founded during that generation of colleges and universities born on behalf of the emancipation of slaves.

Freed slaves at that time were reckoning with newfound civic freedom and franchise in modern America. The promise and predicament of Reconstruction—the paradoxical fate of a country still on the mend after the Civil War—clouded the horizon of educational opportunity for African Americans. But historically black colleges and universities pierced through this uncertainty: this group of institutions classified Dillard University, whose establishment in New Orleans as Union Normal School in 1868 turned out to be where Ruth Simmons earned her own baccalaureate degree; and Prairie View A&M University, whose founding in Prairie View, Texas, by the Texas Constitution of 1876 may be where she confers the very last baccalaureate degree in her life.

The story of historically black colleges and universities is indeed that miraculous story of the power of higher education to elevate a once enslaved people to the heights of academic achievement and leadership alike for the advancement of knowledge and the betterment of humanity.

The journey of Ruth Simmons's life and career, therefore, has enabled us to trace firsthand that remarkable line from the miracle of a special generation to the mission of its descendants: from what was an uncommon feat to what should be a common opportunity available to all people today in pursuit of higher education and in the service of humanity.

When and where Ruth Simmons entered the academy, generations of us entered with her: we marveled at her integrity, we basked in her generosity, we heeded her compass. Nothing less than a miracle is the fact that she, after all of these years, still had the resolve and vision to lead her current university through conditions of remarkable proportions: a societal reckoning with racism, a historic flood in Texas, and a pandemic notorious for its destruction of life.

I did not pull the word "miracle" out of thin air. In a 1995 interview, when Ruth Simmons was set to begin her presidency of Smith College, the late great Toni Morrison, her very best friend and my own former professor at Princeton, said of her: "She's still a bit of a miracle as far as I'm concerned. She has an unusual combination of real politics and integrity, and this very keen sense of morals which does not interfere with her generosity and here wide spiritedness."

Against this canvas I myself have illustrated, I congratulate you, Ruth Simmons, on the unveiling of your new portrait, which, I am certain, will represent a source of inspiration for us today and for future generations. But this portrait, if I may also say, can only at best approximate your sublime impact on the world: a world that, despite those very reams of accomplishments of yours, will still lack the capacity to imagine the full expanse of your wisdom, the complete scale of

your legacy, the total measure of how much you have meant to the entire world—indeed, how much you have meant to all of us you see here and, even more, to all of those yet unseen.